



QUESTIONING GENDER ROLES IN THE AWAKENING: A BEAUVOIRIAN STUDY

Uyanış Romanında Cinsiyet Sorunu: Beauvoir'ın Düşüncesine Dayalı Bir Çalışma

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ABSTRACT

The Awakening (1899) by Kate Chopin is a prototype American novel that provoked readers and critics and focused on female issues as the turning point of feminism. The novel has advanced modern American literature by combining a realistic story with a social interpretation and psychological complexity. The protagonist, a young and dissatisfied wife and mother, explores her desires, verges an awakening and disillusionment of the world, and challenges accepted social standards towards women. The protagonist questions Victorian feminine values in the realm of doubts, explorations, intellectual freedom, emotional maturity and finally selects symbolic liberation through her death. This study focuses on Simone de Beauvoir's perspective in *The Second Sex* for interpreting gender inequality in a male-dominated society to analyze gender oppressions, motherhood, marriage, and the reasons behind the protagonists' suicide. While society finds women's occupation chiefly restricted to household duties as mothers and wives, the protagonist fails to liberate herself from patriarchal society's presuppositions to obtain her rights, and she opts for committing suicide as a means of salvation.

Keywords: Kate Chopin, The Awakening, Simone de Beauvoir, Gender, Motherhood

ÖZET

Kate Chopin tarafından yazılan Uyanış, Feminizmin odak noktası olan kadın sorunlarına yönelerek, okuyucuları ve eleştirmenlerin dikkatini çeken bir Amerikan romanıdır. Roman, gerçekçi bir hikâyeyi, psikolojik ve sosyal konularla harmanlayıp ve diğer yorumlala birleştirerek, modern Amerikan edebiyatına uygulamaktadır. Genç ve tatminsiz bir eş ve anne olan başkahraman, arzularını araştırırken, hayal kırıklığına uğramasının eşliğinde, kadınlara yönelik kabul edilen sosyal standartlara meydan okumaktadır. Kahraman, Victoria dönemi kadını değerlerini şüpheler, keşifler, entelektüel özgürlük ve duygusal olgunluk bazında sorgulayıp, nihayetinde ölümüyle sembolik kurtuluşu seçmektedir. Bu çalışma, Simone de Beauvoir'ın İkinci Cinsiyet eserine bağlı olarak erkek egemen bir toplumda, cinsiyet eşitsizliğini yorumlamayan bir bakış açısına odaklanarak, toplumsal cinsiyet baskılarını, anneliği, evliliği ve kahramanın intiharının arkasındaki nedenleri analiz etmektedir. Toplum, kadının mesleğini esas olarak annelik, eş olma ve ev işleriyle sınırlı bulurken, başkahraman haklarını elde etmek için kendini ataerkil toplumun ön kabullerinden kurtarmama sonucunda, bir kurtuluş yolu olarak, intiharı tercih etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kate Chopin, Uyanış, Simone de Beauvoir, Cinsiyet, Annelik

1. INTRODUCTION

The Awakening (1899) by Kate Chopin discusses the female role in the late nineteenth century. The protagonist, twenty-eight-year-old Edna Pontellier, is a young woman who questions her role in the patriarchal society, bounded by motherhood and marriage constraints. She has an unhappy marriage after the narrow conservative path dictated by the Creole community. Edna suffers from social class abuses and the mother-woman role imposed by the patriarchal system, while her husband, Léonce Pontellier, exploits her in the social realm and home—which children and housework represent. Edna is expected to abide by the motherly role; however, she dreams of being an independent woman, uncommon during the nineteenth century. Through Edna's representation, Chopin implies that women desire more than being evaluated as angels by taking care of their children. Edna challenges the patriarchal culture and gender inequality and shifts drastically from a dedicated woman and mother to detect her identity and satisfy her emotions and sexual desires. Finally, having

had many experiences, she gains independence, lives alone without her kids and husband, and pursues her desires (Ariparno, 2016, p. 4).

2. GENDER AND OPPRESSION IN THE AWAKENING

Victorian society materializes gender roles in a particular setting. Edna, the protagonist of *The Awakening*, cannot fit herself in the gender role attributed to Victorian culture, in which the gender constructions of society are legitimized by the natural law that defines biology as a woman's destiny in the hierarchical system. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1956), women are found as lesser and 'the other' within a man-dominant culture; thus, they become less subjective and creative. Eventually, their existence gets somewhere between immanence and transcendence, characterized in terms of the realm of their relation to men. Beauvoir (1956) claims that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 301), and Chodorow (1994) purports, "women in most societies are defined relationally as someone's wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law; even a nun becomes the Bride of Christ" (p. 58).

Many critics' reviews seem fitting to a new expostulatory reading of *The Awakening*. For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is accused of deliberately echoing the native voice that she hears and attributing the hegemonic discourse to absolute power (as cited in Parry, 1987, p. 211) her criticism is respondent to the idea that women lack a voice, representing patriarchal violence. She is indicating that the novel cannot recover/hear the subaltern or the marginalized speech. Chopin's protagonist is presented to readers as Mrs. Pontellier, not as Edna, and the male institution rejects female sexual personality by denying Edna's name—who by degrees reconstructs her character. Gradually, after dozens of pages, the narrator addresses Edna by her name while she becomes more aware of her inner self. The reason is experienced by her lover until Robert says, "you have not been free; you are the wife of Léonce Pontellier," which deprives Edna only as a man's wife, and Edna replies, "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (Chopin, 1899, p. 113). Though, Edna is conscious that she must liberate herself to establish a male model of selfhood when normative cultural standards for women sharply diverge (Schweitzer, 1990, p. 168).

As the novel starts, women are seen in constant interaction with various intricacies of cultural and social dialogues—and they cannot escape from it (Chopin, 1899, p.8). The idea that Edna puts effort into learning how to swim is quite a significant sample in the realm of her will to deal with the sea, although she fails and drowns in the final scene. The sea is a phallic sign; the seductive male sea engages in sexual intercourse and consumes Edna. This is how society exerts pressure on non-masculine language, intolerant to resistance. The power of Edna wasted into the sea—where she is silenced at sea and cannot tell her story—and fear substituted. (Hildebrand, 2016). Edna's final effort only leads to self-effacement, and her self-representation is erased in the sea, where the privilege of manhood over femininity is visible. Chopin associates the sea with the sun—femininity with darkness: "the sun is low in the west, and the soft and languorous breeze came up from the south, charged with the seductive odor of the sea" (Chopin, 1899, p. 16). Edna hears "the hum of bees" and "the smells musky odor of pinks" (Chopin, 1899, p. 157), and a bird indicates trapping when the sea is mentioned. The motif of caged birds demonstrates that patriarchal discourses have not given Edna strong wings to move beyond the convention. At the end of the novel, there is "a bird with a broken wing that was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin, 1899, p. 156). Besides, Chopin's (1899) words at the beginning of the novel represent the similar situation of drowning: "A green and yellow parrot, hung in a cage outside the door, keeps repeating over and over: "Allez Vous-en! Allez Vous-en! Sapristi! He can speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understands" (p. 1). Identifying the bird indicates that the female language is insufficient, and it is challenging to communicate in a patriarchal-dominated society.

For Beauvoir (1956), Male humanity defines woman, not in herself, but correspondingly to him. A woman is not independent but rather an incidental and inessential being. He is the subject; he is absolute, and she is the Other (p. 16). Similarly, Butler (2007) claims that women are classified as the other and therefore disadvantaged against men. In this sense, there should not be a normative social system where women's value judgment is not taken into consideration (p.13). Chopin, in *The Awakening*, presents Edna as someone not welcomed by society. Through the depiction of Edna's death, Chopin reveals that women are not free to change their socially constructed situation in the face of men's rule. *The Awakening* realizes the differences between the social class and the problems of gender inequality, which leads to conflict and oppression in a woman's lives.

Tong (2009) states that women's oppression to be evaluated as a woman is hard to interpret (p. 49). She believes that women have been the first-ever to be marginalized historically. Women's oppression has been

commonly used and existed in every culture; it is the most challenging to eradicate, and even cultural shift in a society is not a clear response. Women suffer from horrendous victim misery because of pressure and oppression, which sets the foundation for other models of oppression. Beauvoir argues that domestic labor stands as a form of slavery and oppression. *The Second Sex* explains how women are continually shown engaged in trivial practices because they are obliged to supervise household duties. Domestic work perpetuates and imprisons women's status quo, while men are free to move, progress, and become. In other words, they have transcendence by expressing and witnessing their human subjectivity. Building on *The Second Sex*—also opposing it—Irigaray (1993) argues how a woman hands over her home to the man without actually disposing of it; her function is to manage the household and not decide what happens. Men desire women to be at home without motivation to experience life entirely. While the man establishes and runs the house for his family, the woman's main job is to reflect, retain, and reinforce the husband's identity. The development of his subjectivity at the woman's expense is evident in *The Awakening*: Edna does not want to act just like any woman, particularly like her friend Madame Adèle Ratignolle (p. 887).

Two factors cause Edna's social oppression: her husband and the upper-class Creole society. However, the first one is more detrimental to Edna's suppression than the latter. Léonce is a busy businessman who lives in the upper class with a money-driven personality in constant interaction with his customers. He is too carried away with running his own business without giving any priority to his wife's needs. Léonce exemplifies the upper class's representer by buying gifts and spending money in exchange for happiness, kindness, and the care his wife needs. He keeps a good relationship with his customers because financial matters come first for upper-class people. Here, Edna's husband goes for business to Klien's hotel. He leaves his family alone to dine at the hotel with his customer because the money comes for him first. Edna's implicit goal is expressing her desire to ask her husband to return for dinner, but understands her husband's mentality grudgingly. However, Léonce does not notice his family while focusing on earnings more and offers his wife money to satisfy her:

Coming back to dinner?" his wife called after him. He halted a moment and shrugged his shoulders. He felt in his vest pocket; there was a ten-dollar bill there. He did not know; perhaps he would return for the early dinner, and maybe he would not. It all depended upon the company he found over at Klein's and the size of "the game." He did not say this, but she understood it and laughed, nodding good-by to him. (Chopin, 1899, p.7)

A few days later, a box arrived for Mrs. Pontellier from New Orleans. It was from her husband. It was filled with friandises, with luscious and toothsome bits—the finest of fruits, pates, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance. Mrs. Pontellier was always very generous with the contents of such a box; she was quite used to receiving them when away from home. The pates and fruit were brought to the dining-room; the bonbons were passed around. And the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better. (Chopin, 1899, pp.11-12).

When Léonce goes on a business trip, he keeps sending Edna gifts. He makes up for his absence from his wife by offering a present as an alternative for his love, affection, and time. When Léonce sends an enormous box of expensive sweets to his wife, women often find him an ideal husband. Edna's society expects her to have high regard for her husband, but Edna is not thinking likewise. Edna is experiencing another oppression while waiting for her husband to bring her home; she waits outside when Léonce arrives, but contrary to what she expects, he offers her a glass of wine instead of kind words. Since her husband represents the upper class, he expects clichés from his wife by taking the glass of wine when offered, but she rejects it (Chopin, 1899, p. 36). So, she leaves her husband, moves into a small building to feel more secure. (Chopin, 1899, p. 89). When Léonce discovers that his wife and children have already left home, he writes Edna a letter to "not acted upon her rash impulse, and he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say" because "[he] was simply thinking of his financial integrity" as "[it] might do incalculable mischief to his business prospects." (Chopin, 1899, p.98) For Léonce, a good reputation and other financial engagements are essential.

Edna is also oppressed due to her disparity of cultural values with the upper-class Creole society. Edna learns two distinct cultures and develops a socially accepted ideal for herself. As time passes, Léonce asks Edna to play an active role in his social life that represents the upper-class Creole society. Although Edna seeks to involve herself, she is discriminated against by the upper-class Creole society because "They all knew each other, and felt like one large family, among whom existed the most amicable relations" and "the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable." (Chopin, 1899, p.14) His husband's social environment does not respect Edna due to her middle-class background, and therefore they ignore her. Instead, the middle class of the Creole

community suits her as they regard Edna as a family, accept her into their community warmly, and expose Edna's authentic self without being marginalized.

The white skin is essential for class representation and gender privilege, and Edna's sun-burnt and damaged skin, coming back from the beach—in the first chapter—represents two meanings: Edna's class and her white and upper-middle-class woman identity. Chopin introduces Edna through the eyes of Léonce, the male perceptions, via class distinctions. Here, Edna's femininity is best illustrated in her interaction with her husband at the beginning of the novel. Seeing Edna return from the sea, "Mr. Pontellier says, 'you are burnt beyond recognition.' While he is looking at his wife as a valuable piece of personal property, which has suffered some damage" (Chopin, 1899, p. 7), Léonce treats Edna as a commodity, not an individual. Although Edna can restore her skin color and change her appearance, Léonce rejects her wish and demonstrates his dominance over her body. To Léonce, Edna is like a damaged property, and he thinks she ruins the very social status that she establishes through her clean and white skin, making her look like a lower, working-class member. Chopin's juxtaposition reflects the clear distinction between working-class women and those who embody leisure. The novel reveals the privileges of high-class society and demonstrates a prevalent practice: portraying anonymous black characters. All color-skinned characters in the text are unidentified or referred to according to the percentage of their black heritage—quadroons or mulattos. The black women are never named but strategically demonstrate class and race hierarchy. Black characters are put in scenes that contrast their work with the white, leisurely women that enhance the notion that white women have certain rights—such as recreation—consider it a social symbol. (Yeremia, 2018).

Chopin's linguistic choices explicitly suggest masculine superiority. The male gaze targets Edna and the debate on this phenomenon reflects oppression—especially when Victor Lebrun intentionally positions himself to command Edna's face. Edna never goes beyond the male characters' influence even after her awakening. When she quits her husband's subjugation and moves to the pigeon-house, her desires for Lebrun and Alcee Arobin overshadow her. Edna's wishes reflect an appreciation of her sexuality rather than a social and gender rebellion. She remains in the feminine social precepts, as evidenced by the value of her wedding ring. (Chopin, 1899, p.4). However, Edna is the only leader of her life searching for her freedom and carries out many liberating acts. She can no longer remain quiet after experiencing oppression by her husband and the higher-class Creole society, and when she has got the right time to release herself from the oppression, she frees herself from the constraints and oppressions of the class differences imposed on her gender and accomplishes whatever she wants. Edna decides not to obey her husband's order but rather to be a leading character.

Gender inequality leads Edna to refuse the oppression, and as Tyson (2011) argues, the rebellious woman is a shield against whom they exploit her (p. 83). She remains quiet at the beginning and situations her husband's needs; but mother-woman portray disabling her to love her family in abundance. She can no longer accept the pressure, and the more gender understanding she has, the more freedom she likes to attain from manly suppression. Miller argues that sexual discrimination results from male constructions; "... our culture creates women as repositories for a myriad of devalued and denied psychological qualities..." (as cited in Chodorow, 1976, p. 479). The objectification of women's sex induces a lack of self and causes women's isolation, making them believe that they are just objects, not free individuals. Thus, submitting oneself to the male conceptualization of manhood yields no positive outcome for the female identity. Gradually, women understand that they must go against a male ruling society to emancipate their personality because the struggle for a woman is to free herself from being an object is defined by others (Killeen, 2003, p. 419).

3. MOTHERHOOD

The subject of motherhood has acquired various viewpoints since the rise of the second wave of feminism when motherhood has been far more seriously debated than before. Motherhood is observed as a socially constructed responsibility for women. This idea challenges the traditional notion that motherhood is natural, an institution that powerfully controls women's position. During the 1960s, the concept of motherhood played a crucial role in defining women's role in society. Due to Beauvoir, the so-called natural motherly women's role is the principal cause for their injustice in society. An essay by Patterson on Beauvoir and the demystification of motherhood says that [the]women drag themselves into slavery by deciding to get married and have children (Patterson, 1986, p. 87). Male-dominated society has given women only the role of wives as sex objects, child-bearers, and commodities (Chodorow, 1994, pp. 44-45). Others who have the bravery to transcend the limits of this conventional definition of the concept of femininity have to withstand the result of their brave undertaking. Beauvoir sees maternity as an obstacle to acquiring liberation in society; that is why she has no children. (Patterson, 1986, p. 87) Chopin conveys that such a daring attempt made by Edna—who

is forced to dedicate her suffocating soul to marriage—makes her feel imprisoned. Her futile efforts to achieve liberation cause a tragic end when a woman's primary social role is described as a good wife and a mother. Any woman who does not possess these stereotypical characteristics is not defined as true womanhood (Schweitzer, 1990, p. 168).

There is a formidable hurdle between a man and a woman in a patriarchal system, in which different tasks weigh down to each gender. Women are expected to stay home to complete household chores daily, represent the emotional side, give their family all of their love, and put a woman in charge of the children by holding onto the patriarchal system. Léonce reproves Edna for neglecting her children while placing his business above his family and kids. Patriarchal men have long been expressing their wishes to women in two images: an angel and a monster: "Male dread of women, and specifically the infantile dread of maternal autonomy, has historically objectified itself in vilification of women, while male ambivalence about female charms underlies the traditional images of such terrible sorceress-goddesses" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 34). The women's representation is used to display the contrasting feelings of men to be close to women while they fear them either. Beauvoir (1956) says, "the Woman-Mother has a face of shadows: she is the chaos whence all have come and whither all must one day return; she is Nothingness "and" in all civilizations and still in our day woman inspires man with horror" (pp.166-167)

Here, men represent monsters and angels due to their fear and love towards women. Both monster and angel representations of women in Creole tradition are enforced by men—as power-building tools. Creole women are stereotypically represented by Madame Ratignolle, different from other women in Edna's community. In comparison to Edna, Madame Ratignolle's inner state is static and rigid; the patriarchy and Creole culture enforce her acts as a foil for white American women (Chopin, 1899, p. 88). The main objective of a patriarchal society is to make women submissive, and women exist only as women and as mothers. Meanwhile, men are the head of a family that should achieve economic prosperity for their families. Chopin depicts women who have assumed various female roles in this patriarchal society. Adèle Ratignolle is portrayed by Tyson (2015) as a woman who idolizes their children and worships her husband (p. 86). Besides, Mademoiselle Reisz is portrayed as an emancipated woman who does not comply with gender roles, living openly and independently (Seyersted, 1969, p. 103). Chopin's portrayal of Mademoiselle Reisz's clarity of mind versus Edna's quest exemplifies a clear distinction between the two characters. Madame Reisz is the only woman with a valid identity who does not need a man: "the only example of a free, independent woman whose hardiness Edna must emulate if she is to succeed and soar above 'tradition and prejudice.'" (Thornton, 1980, p.55)

While Edna is represented as the modern woman, striving for emancipation, independence by challenging contemporary standards and traditional expectations, Adèle Ratignolle, who is both a mother and a typical wife, on the other hand, is portrayed as the ideal woman in *The Awakening*. She makes winter clothes for her kids all summer long and seems to spend her life with her children and husband. Kearns (1991) describes her as "stereotypically 'feminine'" due to "sorting laundry, nurturing her husband, having her baby" (pp. 70-71). Due to this definition of motherhood, independence and self-identity are two rights that a woman cannot attain. According to the male lexicon, a proper mother-woman role is the one who devotes herself spiritually and physically to her husband and children. Edna's husband blames her for failing to take care of his kids properly without an apparent reason for how and why she fails. However, Edna is far from being labeled as a good mother-woman; she is different from any other Creole women, most of whom are mother women: "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles; never before had she been thrown so intimately among them" (Chopin, 1899, p. 12). Besides, in Chopin's terms, she does not look like a mother-woman, either:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women, who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and growing wings as ministering angels. (Chopin, 1899, p. 12)

It is difficult for Edna to deal with the idea that everyone likens to her husband: "all declare that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world [...] Mr. Pontellier was a great favorite, and ladies, men, children, even nurses, were always on hand to say good-bye to him" (Chopin, 1899, p. 9). When Edna tells the guests around the dining table a story, she mentions a woman who paddles away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never comes back (Chopin, 1899, p. 75). The tale she speaks vividly illustrates her weariness in marriage and her life as a mother and wife, which society expects. Edna realizes that she must part ways with her children

and husband to recover her individuality. When Edna's sister invites her to the marriage ceremony, Edna refuses by saying that wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth (Chopin, 1899, p. 71). The protagonist here realizes that marriage inevitably steals the self-definition of the woman. Housework, primarily linked to marriage as an institution, burdens the female. The man becomes the invisible father because most of his work takes him out of the house, and his active presence decreases gradually in the household (Chodorow, 1994, p. 50). Thus, men do not bother about housework and childcare because of their sex—and nature defines each gender's duties. Killeen (2003) says, "because the burden of nature falls on one sex to a much greater extent than the other, women necessarily have to bear a heavier burden" (p. 418). Such oppression compounded by social roles and norms is collapsing marriage, which contributes to killing the woman's soul. Only at the weekend, Mr. Pontellier returns home; such an intense self-sacrificing wound of managing the family alone consumes Edna's womanly self.

Streater (2007) opines, "to become a wife and mother is, on some level, to capitulate oneself to patriarchal systems" (p. 406). According to Streater, women's sheer energy is acquired by a crude attempt to play the role of a mother and wife. Such an attempt unconsciously or unthinkably ruins women. They sacrifice their selfhood and identity for their husband's and children's sake. Moreover, being a concept constructed by men, maternity deconstructs the female personality; both reject their identity and constantly strengthen their inferior status (Streater, 2007, p. 407). Females are supposed to do their best blindfolded and give their all to be considered good mothers for the sake of motherhood. Chodorow (1994) affirms a strict relationship between men's and women's social roles, and the social status of women paralyzes the individual's identity and the woman's self. (p. 54). This social system is contained and limited to specific social roles under patriarchal norms, such as the devoted wife who worships her man (Chopin, 1899, p. 22).

Feminine personality and female identity judge women's capacity in the context of social roles. Instead of integrating women and the entirety of females' psyche, culture prioritizes only conventional sex roles. This suggests that according to the patriarchy, what traditional women demand is social conformity. Edna Pontellier tries these socially determined gender roles and gradually realizes that her autonomy and female identity is significantly threatened by social compliance. Edna's vision of children has changed drastically by refusing to subdue her life to society's desires and vision, describing her children as antagonistic (Chopin, 1899, p. 48). Schweitzer (1990) observes that Edna rejects her role as a mother to attain independence (p. 162). In Killeen's (2003) terms, "motherhood is dangerous and painfully rites of passage for women, against which they should fight" (p. 418). Thereby, Edna detaches herself from motherhood, the only way to acquire independence and autonomy. Even Edna's friend describes her as a child since she denies her destiny as a mother: "you seem like a child to me in a certain manner Edna" (Chopin, 1899, p. 106). Edna's irrational behavior, regardless of her family, is due to get solitude when she sends her children to their grandma. (Chopin, 1899, p. 21) The way she thinks and behaves is a visible imbalance; she sometimes loves them but sometimes finds them oppressors and a burden on her shoulders. Dix (1976) says, "chief and foremost among these oppressors are children. In her desire to be a good mother, and to do everything possible for her child's welfare, the average mother permits herself to be made a martyr before she realizes it" (p.128). Society expects women to be adapted to their husbands and children; otherwise, they are accused of selfishness when prioritizing their feelings and needs. Chopin (1899) says, "[in] all of the opinions the women express regarding the topic of motherhood, none of them blame the children themselves for any of the struggles they face" and continues, "biology determines such an important part of their lives without them having much of a choice." (p. 146)

A woman giving birth comes with responsibilities that restrict her freedom. Kearns (1991) puts Edna's mood as follows: "She is eaten up by them and regenerated day after day, making nihilism a perpetually reiterated torture. She can feel that she exists as long as her children" (p.77). As long as Edna's children need her, she cannot survive herself from society's demands. That is why Adèle warns Edna when she leaves: "think of the children" (Chopin, 1899, p. 146). According to Franklin (1984), Adèle "subconsciously" "reminds Edna of her duty" that "if she lives as a fully sexual woman, a state to which she has now awakened, she will likely have to think of some future children, a horrid idea to one struggling so desperately for her independence." (p. 525) However, later, she realizes that "they [should not think] they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin, 1899, p. 152). Edna is a character who never stops trying and finally realizes how she could escape from all of this. Her conversation with Adèle reflects critical thinking and thus surprises Madame Ratignolle by saying, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself." (Chopin, 1899, p. 92) Edna feels that a mother should do something extraordinary, until Robert, her summer love at Grand Isle, helps her by stimulating and activating her emotions such as passion, love, and

desire, and this interaction changes her. Thus, she can break the mindset that for years has engulfed her. She does not want to be the traditional woman of the time who gives up her life-and soul due to her children,

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (Chopin, 1899, p. 33)

After that summer weekend, she could not fit in the domestic life of a family: “glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her. She could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui” (Chopin, 1899, p. 63). For Edna, it becomes foolish to lead a life as an obedient wife devoted to her husband and children. It seems to be the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household and the mother of children to spend in days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family: “A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength.” (Chopin, 1899, p. 31) Now, she has the power to be in charge of her body and soul with self-autonomy: “Léonce, go to bed”, she said. ‘I mean to stay out here. I do not wish to go in, and I don’t intend to. Don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you” (Chopin, 1899, p. 53). She prefers to do things in her self-interest, without concern for others, such as leaving her house chores, going out alone, and coming home late: “She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked... She made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household” (Chopin, 1899, p. 63). Besides, Edna’s friend, Adèle, regularly reminds her duties, “Think of the children Edna, oh think of the children! Remember them!” (Chopin, 1899, p. 63) and makes pressure on him. Nevertheless, she tries to echo her changing feelings by telling Dr. Mandélet that

But I do not want anything but my way. That is enjoying a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others but no matter still, I should not want to trample on the little lives. (Chopin, 1899, p.99)

Edna asks not to blame her for anything; not because she fears his moral judgment or society, but because she recognizes that she has attitudes different from those around her. Western societies invariably stigmatize some mothers as being monstrous, emotionally stunted, or insufficient without granting them the right to autonomy. Edna remembers Adèle’s voice whispering, “‘Think of the children; think of them.’ She means to think of them; that determination had driven into her soul like a death wound—but not to-night. To-morrow would be time to think of everything” (Chopin, 1899, p. 124). “She had said over and over to herself, ‘To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me; it doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier, but Raoul and Etienne!’” (Chopin, 1899, p. 126). However, when Edna rethinks about her decisions repeatedly, she worries about her children’s future. Indeed, she feels that she is enclosed in the dominance of men: her lover and her husband. She does not regret gaining her autonomy and independence, but she feels concerned about how people would approach her children because of their mother’s attitude. She hates the feeling that her children will be looked down on by society for their mother’s behavior, which differs significantly from other mothers’ and women in that era. *The Awakening* demonstrates how her husband and children impeded her independence and autonomy. Freedom means freeing yourself from the household’s burden to be someone you have never been before. That is what Edna wants to be, happier without being manipulated by her responsibilities in her private life (children, husband, and the household).

4. SPIRITUAL LIBERATION OF WOMEN

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1956) adopts existentialist terms in her writings to examine why a woman is seen as different from a man; the woman represents the inessential to the essential. As a philosophy, existentialism emphasizes the importance of an individual’s life as a conscious being before society’s position. Beauvoir, the revered promoter of existential feminism, discusses the notion of the other, which promotes women’s emancipation and economic freedom. In her pursuit of clarification of women’s suppression for centuries, she tries to discern the reason for women’s subordination from biological, historical, and psychological aspects—even in connection with the master-slave dialectic. Beauvoir (1956) states, “a woman is shut up in a kitchen or boudoir—so her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it’s found deplorable that she cannot fly” (p. 80). Besides, Moi (2009) believes “a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in world [...] she makes something of what the world makes of her...this process of making and being made is open-ended; it ends only with death” (pp. 189-198). Edna follows the steps of her awakened consciousness, but her futile life—compared to others—leads her to submerge herself in the sea. The awakening, eventually, leads her to death. She goes to the sea, Grand Isle, where she has never swum

before to be ensured that people do not see her death as a suicide, and hence she asks for dinner after swimming to look like an accident (Chopin, 1899, p. 126). She says this to Victor Lebrun and Mariequita and gives them no reason to think she is not returning. When she sees no escape except suicide, she is sure her kids should know that she is died accidentally, not through some sensational events. (Chopin, 1899, p. 127)

Edna is not willing to return to her husband due to keeping her independence and liberation. Edna does not have any other choice but to commit suicide. She has tried to build a sense of herself through a spiritual enlightenment restoration. She has been socially overwhelmed due to committing adultery, which is immoral for women to love another man, resulting in losing everything in her life: her husband, children, and lover. Edna is expected to show obedience to her husband and take care of her children, but she refuses to do so. Despite the suicide, Edna believes that her self-awareness and understanding mean a lot more than her previous dull life. She can realize her emotional and sexual identity on her wishes. The discovery of her inner self is likened to awakening from sleep, and then “suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life... There are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me. But I don’t want anything but my own way. (Chopin, 1899, p. 123) Here, self-awareness and acting upon her own are more critical for Edna than living in compliance with social constraints, social rules, and social standards, strictly adopted by her husband and her social community.

Edna’s last revolt is her suicide, which many critics have discussed. Opinions vary concerning death by mistake or suicide due to grief for Robert’s loss for a second time or a rebellion against nature. Yaeger (1987) argues that Edna feels forced to commit suicide because of a lack of communication anymore (p. 199). Yaeger describes how Edna still lacks the connection she needs despite all her attempts and efforts, and she knows the connection is not possible (p. 199). Many consider Edna’s attitude a failure, whereas others perceive it as a courageous act to reinforce her sovereignty toward society’s imprisonment. When dealing with love, a standard view after the disappearance of romantic imagination, she dies; without love, she could not bear the world. In “The Second Coming of the Aphrodite,” Gilbert and Gubar (1984) propose that Edna may not even die but is reborn as Venus/love Aphrodite’s goddess, which defies the patriarchal society (p. 33). The suicide of Edna is entirely faithful to the literary tradition of the nineteenth century. As Showalter (1986) points out, drowning is frequently used to punish women in the literature who go against new moral codes. Chopin (1899) goes beyond the tradition and conveys a complex message in her novel (p. 218).

5. CONCLUSION

Edna wants to stand as a woman and not be defined as a wife and mother. Her feminine approach raises questions on gender issues, such as equality, patriarchy, and feminism. Edna opposes the conventional patriarchal family structure by rejecting being a wife or a traditional mother in *The Awakening*. In all its forms, the main problem of feminism is that the patriarchal system uses all types of oppression against women to devalue them. Even though all genders are human beings, inequality between men and women is a central problem in patriarchal societies by ensuring females’ inferior status. Edna’s main struggles redefine marriage and motherhood; she wishes to avoid limitations and restrictions to accomplish her self-worth. Almost all middle-class women of the era faced the same struggles as Edna experienced throughout the novel in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus a woman’s struggles to escape her imprisonment—imposed by society—to find her identity in the patriarchal community is the question of gender in the realm of the Beauvorian concept of feminism discussed in this study.

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