

## **Examining the Female Presence in Chopin's 'The Awakening'**

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**Abstract:**

*Is there only one kind of woman? Can the women be clubbed under one category? Do race and class affect the stance and freedom of women ? Do women understand solidarity ? What happens when a woman is pitted against another woman ? Doesn't the world get ugly and lonely ? The following paper deals with such questions. It interrogates a world of women written by a woman.*

**Keywords**

*Feminism, Female, Femininity, Subjectivity, Sisterhood, Awakening, Emancipation*

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This paper attempts to probe into the representation of women in *The Awakening*. The novel depicts women of different kinds, class and race. The text deals with the throttling issues and uncloaks what all a woman goes through. There are many pressing factors that impact and shape the fate of women. Their lives are never left unconsumed.

The examination of the women represented becomes all the more interesting because *The Awakening* is written by a woman, to be more specific, a white woman. Author's own gender, and social milieu of his/ her age and what kind of vantage points are enabled/available to them color the narrative. *The Awakening* through the narrative not only gives us a glimpse of lives led by different kinds of women but also of women who have to be different as in they are bound to be different because of their social standing and orientation. The only common thread that runs through all of them is of sex that is biologically they all happen to be women. The careful examination allows the readers to deduce from the representation that they cannot be clubbed under one category because they don't lead synonymous lives. They not only have different destinies but also are unaware of the struggles they face. This is the consequence of their choice and their social division. This makes them quite unfamiliar to each other, not just unfamiliar but also hampers their mutual understanding. Their mutual differences that arise from how they are placed in the society and the society does not allow them to become one and share a mutually acquired identity.

Other than Edna, the text has Mademoiselle Reisz, Adele Ratignolle, the Quadroon nurse as its major women characters. Mademoiselle Reisz is a unique absent presence in the narrative. She seems to inhabit the world captured by Chopin but she as a character doesn't belong to the world of novel. She belongs to an independent spirit and is unlike any other woman portrayed by Chopin. It so appears that she is an alternative to every other woman that finds a voice in Chopin's universe.

Being an independent woman she not only opens a window to a new world for Edna but also shows that her kind of freedom is attainable given their society. She upholds a femininity that comes across as a subtle shock and a mild attack on the concept of motherhood. Motherhood is a role that almost every woman is expected to play. Reisz is miles away from the very idea of motherhood.

Reisz has been represented in a way that she appears to be a secluded artist woman. Reisz is away from the clutches of mothering and she becomes an idol for Edna. She stands for the world of flair and talent to Edna. It is through her only Edna learns that a woman can exist without being a mother. This thought twitches Edna's soul and thought process and subverts her idea of being a woman

Reisz as a character therefore becomes an anomaly and compels the readers to view her as someone who doesn't conform to the traditional view of woman. She doesn't have in her the grace of the feminine and is thoroughly unmaternal. Chopin's representation of Reisz gives birth to a series of important questions.

It breeds concerns like can a woman challenge motherhood and exist happily in an American society? In the then American society it would have come as a jolt because they couldn't have seen motherhood as an option. In a famous work, Glenn voices her concern and says, "A patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction, and denies them identities and selfhood outside mothering." (1994, P-7)

Chopin, to her credit, has a rare, exceptional character who is not a mother by choice and is an integral part of the society. It is remarkable on Chopin's part to depict a woman like that also bestow acceptance on her.

The music that Reisz stands for leaves Edna unstable. It makes Edna ponder that even art can be a woman's occupation. It can be an area of engagement for the woman and that motherhood can be a choice and not the decree.

Reisz is a female character and yet is not described in sexual manner. Her body is not the pivotal point of her characterization. In other words, it could be explained that unlike Adele who will be discussed in a short while, Reisz's outer appearance is overpowered by her music. Her virtue and talent overshadows her corporeal exterior which is rare even today.

Reisz comes as a fresh breeze as she is free from the questions, traps and obligations of whom the body is the root cause. The body ends up becoming the site which nurtures the ideas of morality, fidelity and belongingness. Body, especially the female is either seen as a trophy that is contested for or is viewed as a holy site because it serves as the womb. It has a twin value. Reisz prefers her talent and individuality over motherhood. In the context of motherhood, Kakar says, "the public discourse of all patriarchal societies stresses motherhood as the primary, if not the sole reason of woman's existence." (1989, P- 143) Reisz defies this expectation of the patriarchal society.

Through the portrayal of a woman like Reisz Chopin raises the question of essential femininity. *The Awakening* seems to be a project on what all add up to constitute or characterize as an essential feminine subjectivity.

Another female character of the novel is Adele Ratignolle. She, an unsullied and an absolute feminine beauty is a figure that stands for the idea of female body in the novel. Unlike Reisz, she is the mother woman and is not ashamed of being

identified only through her body. She has nothing to her credit but a corporeal, identity. Her external beauty is her overriding feature and she unabashedly owns this part of her identity. Biology is operative here rather than the intellect.

Edna's bonding with Adele is solely based on a superficial level and is far away from the ideological connection. This tells a lot about Chopin's then American society where men to their own advantage would not want women to develop an ideological kinship because it is a threat to patriarchy. Edna is unable to identify with Adele because as Baldwin argues, "Edna comes to see her children as threats to her identity, not because of their personalities or specific demands but because they limit her freedom." (1986, P-5)

Adele being a mother woman is a different kind of role model for Edna. It so occurs that Adele and Reisz too strong an influence on Edna but are polar opposite in nature and the pull and push they give to Edna.

The portrayal of Chopin puts forth Adele and Reisz as binaries. Being binaries takes away the scope of sisterhood. The two ideologies being different are quite suggestive of the fact that there is no singular, essential female identity.

It Reisz is the isolated artist woman then Adele is the unquestionable, uncompromising guard of domesticity. The beautiful Adele is also the holy, unpolluted mother in the novel.

Motherhood is a cultural and social stamp of the society on the women's body. A woman who can't be or doesn't want to be a mother is stigmatized forever. She either becomes barren and sterile or she is too sexually available for men. Either way she loses respect and is showered disgrace. A woman who chooses not to be a mother is not even seen as a woman.

Motherhood is a soft pressure and an invisible bondage to most women if not all. It comes with the whole baggage of morality and righteousness. Adele is nothing but an extension of the ideal household. Motherhood is nothing except taking control of the female body According to Donald Pizer, "women's biological role as mothers can serve in a male dominated society not only as a means of over glorification of the role but also, more covertly as a means of maintaining male power and dominance." (2001, P-7) The tragedy is that patriarchy leaves nothing for the female. Even her own body betrays her and become a site for choice of having children or not. In this context argues Joyce, "Motherhood and selfhood were incompatible in Edna's century." (1993, P-103)

Through the layered representation of Adele and Reisz, Chopin presents before the readers two alternate woman mentors and leaves on Edna to choose between the

two and perhaps become like either.

Both Reisz and Adele suffer on different tangents. This explains easily that a woman's survival independent of any other engagement is not too impossible given the American society of late nineteenth century. In the words of Peter Ramos, "Reisz and Adele certainly face limitations- economic, social, political – because of the gender; each has a limited set of socially acceptable identities to choose from mother woman, artists." (2010, P-148)

The text is so rich in the representation of women that it pulls in women of color also. Chopin doesn't confine her characters to just one type of femininity. This is clearly evident because a 'black' presence lurks in the background of narrative and there is also a quadroon nurse. She is faceless, even voiceless and exists only as a mere role, a function in the story. Race is another form of domination and human confinement. It allows a subservience of another kind which is subtle in the eye but equally detrimental for the society. Chopin by using the very word 'quadroon' or 'Black' brings home the idea of racial identity. Chopin's choice of words deprives the quadroon nurse of personhood.

When Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier goes out, he leaves kids to Edna's care and what Edna does invites her thoughtful probing. She leaves them to quadroon nurse's care and custody. Edna could leave her kids to nurses because there is a hierarchy at play that drives the whole equation. Glenn says, "The racial division of mothering labour simultaneously buttresses gender and race privilege: it permits white, middle class women to enjoy the benefits and elevates them to position of mother- managers." (1994, P-7) Edna clearly is the privileged white upper class woman who is able to exercise her dominant ideology over the poor black female.

Edna and Quadroon nurses are both women but one woman enjoys more power over the other. This kind of subtle domination feeds over the lack of sisterhood. So the question that arises there is of women's freedom. Are all women free? Is the entire community free?

Chopin's idea of women's emancipation leaves out the colored women. Her feminism doesn't cover all. Joyce Dyer, maintains the same view and says, "Chopin has been praised for her courage to talk about female servitude. But racial servitude was at the heart of all issues of freedom, she clearly knew, and this subject she seems more afraid of." (2002, P-149) She is not open for people of different race and different class. Quadroon nurse is not just of different race but also of different class so she is on the receiving end of triple marginalization. She suffers on three fronts : Patriarchy, Race and Class.

She is not a person but a reductive existence. The text in a way at times challenges the racial and gender hierarchies and sediments the conventional identities; Chopin leaves it to reader's understanding. There characters find representation in a way which enables the reader to ask what constitutes identity.

Her text ends up showing exclusionist feminism. The other female character exhibit alternate femininities and do not come under one static monolithic idea of feminism. These deficiencies in the text make it an undemocratic text.

*The Awakening* presents before its readers the idea of unitary and universal awakening. They are naive, unaware and possessed either by privileges or by patriarchy. In Chopin's novel, there is a lack of a stance about women's liberation and on the other hand the married women in novel are shown quite satisfied. Why is Chopin unable to bring all her female characters under the umbrella of sisterhood? What kind of a feminist ideology then Chopin stands for?

Chopin presents a wide bandwidth of femininity. She showcases a woman who tries to tear away the orthodox cloaks imposed by male psyche and also a woman who is quiet and content with the established norms. One tries to challenge them by leading an art oriented life and the other does not even think of questioning. She accepts and allows the customary identities of the world to permeate through her. The different dimension of patriarchy is shown by Chopin and she also reveals the ugly fact that patriarchy is exhibited by the woman too. This might be due to the self and subtle process of internalization.

So what is being argued here is that one could be biologically a female but in the head she could give shelter to the male ideology. It is very much possible to be contained in a feminine same but think and act like a man. The quadroon nurse became subjected to this twisted behavior of Edna. Edna being a woman expects and commands servitude from the nurse. The fact is that Edna is because of her social identity. The nurse's subjection is a result of the social prejudice that the then American society was crippled with. In this equation Edna becomes the controller and dictating male and the nurse has no way out to be available and servile for the white Edna. The nurse's suppression happens at the hand of a female. This is so suggestive of the unbridgeable gap that not only exists between the two genders but also characters the segregation prevalent on the basis of the races. *The Awakening* as a text becomes a foundational narrative as it invites a critical study of politics that is exercised on the bases of race and it studies the identity and what constitutes it?

The text makes use of multiple female voices and invites the reader's inspection on Chopin's representation and misrepresentation. It calls for our deep, invested

analysis. How does she apply the prisms of race, class and gender to her narrative? In the end she learns open ended questions like does her idea of womanhood speak for all the women? Do all the women that find space in the narrative have a voice? Are they heard? It seems that their concerns are subtly silence. This brings both, the female characters and the author under scrutiny. Is not Chopin's American feminism faulty?

Chopin is pretty successful in showing the women placed on the fringes but it is not a static categorization. In the case of the black nurse and Edna, Edna is right at the centre, commanding and dictating the nurse who barely survives at the margins. Why doesn't the shift happen? The nucleus thought of the paper is that a harmonious unification is not possible. There can't be one single idea of womanhood that stands for all women and protect their rights like the quadroon nurse seeks the preservation of her rights and Edna seeks the preservation of her privilege.

Chopin's universe doesn't know of the female solidarity. It is uninformed of the camaraderie that could have saved women from being doomed in *The Awakening*. With respect to the women characters present in the text, Gray points out, "each role is either a singular and limited expression of identity or ultimately an impossibility beneath the pressures of hegemonic society." (2004, P-56) The tragedy lies in the fact that women are dispensed along the tangents of class and race and these roles are assigned by patriarchy. Patriarchy does so in order to enjoy the perennial power and unquestionable power. Woman not getting along with each eventually serves patriarchy. The women are not only pitted against the men but also against each other and that defeats the very idea of feminism. Therefore it can be concluded that Chopin's world doesn't know of female solidarity.

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