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A Deathly Rebirth: The Quest for Individuality and the Birth of the Female Artist in *The Awakening*

Tara Senanayake
English Language Teaching Unit
University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
tara.senanayake@gmail.com

Abstract

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* can be read as a courageous piece of fiction as it promoted values that conflicted with standards of accepted "lady-like" behavior. The novel rejected social conventions and contradicted many 19th century expectations of women and their "supposed roles." Chopin wrote at the height of the first wave of the women's movement struggle, a time in which the demand for "rights" for women was still in its infancy. *The Awakening* is radical in its treatment of motherhood as it questions the assumptions that childbirth and childcare are a woman's principal vocation. By shattering the illusion that giving birth is a glorious experience, Chopin attacks the patriarchal structure which denies women control over their bodies. *The Awakening* can thus be classified as a "feminist" novel written by an author who is considered to be a forerunner of the feminist authors of today. The protagonist, Edna Pontellier's rejection of the institution of motherhood and family signal moments of aporia in the novel, and highlights the status of the female individualist who tries to break free of entrapping society. Thus the present paper is an endeavor to study *The Awakening* as a *bildungsroman*, and examine how the myth of individualism accommodates the aspirations of women. This paper will attempt to interrogate issues of this emerging female (feminist) individuality and self-definition. An attempt will be made to redefine the birth motif as a metaphor for the "rebirth" of Edna Pontellier (and by extension Kate Chopin) as an artist, who is progressing towards a new self-definition.

Keywords: Births, Artists, Women, Individuality

"One can exercise a real right, only by thinking one is alone in the world, without reference to other (wo)men" – Emile Durkehiem

"A word dropped careless on a Page...Infection in the sentence breeds" – Emily Dickinson
"I simple felt like going out and I went out" – Edna Pontellier

When it was published in 1899, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was judged as a book "that should be labeled poison" as it was "too strong a drink for moral babes". Yet critical reevaluation has shown how progressive the author has been in charting "the life of a sensuous woman who follows her inclinations". The plot centers on Edna Pontellier and the struggle between her increasingly unorthodox view on femininity and motherhood with the prevailing social attitudes of the turn-of-the-century American South. *The Awakening* is now being hailed as a landmark of early feminism which blends a realistic narrative and an incisive social commentary with great psychological complexity.

Indeed Kate Chopin wielded her pen at a time when women apparently had "no ontological reality" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000) and were "expected" to be "Cyphers (nullities or vacancies)" who according to Anne Finch "existed merely and punningly to increase male

“Numbers” (either poems or persons) by pleasuring men’s bodies or their minds, their penises or their pens” (p.10).

Literary history suggests that the ideal woman male authors dreamt of generating was always an angel; an idea which prompted Virginia Woolf to comment that “the angel in the house is the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed on literary women” (as cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.20). Patriarchal structures dictated that this angel should have the “eternal feminine” virtues of modesty, gracefulness, beauty, purity, chastity, delicacy and selflessness, yet she has no story of her own. History after all is (*his*) story and there is no place for (*her*) story [*emphasis mine*]. Hence it was believed that the purpose of a woman’s life was to be the Object who pleases men as “him to please/Is women’s pleasure” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.23).

The absence of (*her*) story can be read as a serious lack in literary history where women were viewed only as corpo(reality) in relation to men. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, most upper and middle class women of the 19th century experienced confinement in their daily life. Their confinement was both literal and figurative, as most women of these classes were imprisoned in men’s houses as well as their texts. The notion of “anxieties of space” was identified by Gilbert and Gubar as being very important to the women/writers of the time, confined as they were, it would have been natural for the angels of the house to become “repressed angels” in no time. Yet patriarchal culture was so hypocritical that “female speech and female presumption, any revolt against male dominance was viewed as being daemonic” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.35). Viewing this situation in retrospect, it is indeed a very callous and sexist portrayal of women in the literary canon. Any attempt at emerging as a “female individualist” only resulted in the woman being labeled as being of “dis/eased” mind and body, such women were considered to be a danger to society and were relegated to the attics as madwomen. This was the price women had to pay for the patriarchal statusquo to be maintained, as it was believed that if a woman does not remain as the angel in the house she is then an undeniably grotesque witch.

In such a context as this it would have been a Herculean task for women writers to even think of putting pen to paper. Contesting a literary tradition which was overwhelmingly male has resulted, according to Gilbert and Gubar (2000), “an anxiety of authorship” (p.5) which in turn has hampered the creativity of the female writer. Emily Dickinson states that the “sentence ‘breeds’ infection” (as cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.52) as patriarchal texts deny the female authority and autonomy. Furthermore the women writer’s search for motherly precursors will only result in infection and debilitation (as cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.52). Hence the emerging female writer has to engage in a battle for self-creation, a battle against her (male) precursor’s reading of *her*. (p.49.). Thus female writers faced the challenge of proving by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.

Thus Kate Chopin and her heroine Edna Pontellier were faced with the reality that it is debilitating to be *any woman* in a society in which women were warned that if they do not behave like angels, they must be monsters. In such a context, it was indeed very progressive and courageous of Kate Chopin to challenge this duality of angel in the house (in the house of literature as well) and the infectious monster-woman, to attempt to highlight that there is an alternative for women, apart from these extremes. Thus the trajectory of inquiry in this paper relates to the manner in which Chopin has presented her audience with an alternative model to the hitherto entrenched models of passive angel and active monster. I wish to argue that the author has subverted the traditional birth motif and has “re-birthed” a female individualist who is aware of her rights and who is also an accomplished artist capable of creating her own reality/destiny.

The Awakening is radical in its treatment of motherhood as it questions the assumptions that childbirth and childcare are a woman's principal vocation in addition to the belief that motherhood gives pleasure to all women. The protagonist Edna Pontellier fights against societal and natural structures that force her to be defined by her title as wife of Leonce Pontellier and mother of Raoul and Etienne Pontellier, instead of being her own self-defined individual. Significantly, the novel opens with Edna being subjected to the male gaze as Leonce chides his wife for being "burnt beyond recognition and looks at her as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin, 1899, p.651). As Wai-chee Dimock (1990) contends, "whereas the husband can own personal property simply by objectifying his wife, the wife can hardly return the favour" (p.29). Instead "she can satisfy her propriety instinct only by reifying her own thoughts and emotions, only by turning her very subjectivity into a kind of ownable object". (Dimock, 1990, p. 29). Indeed *The Awakening* is articulated by a language of rights and a language of gender and the successful coexistence of these "languages" has structured the novel so that Edna can seek a certain entitlement for herself.

Kate Chopin wrote in an era in which, as Carol Stone (1986) points out, "childbirth was considered a woman's primary vocation; to write of it otherwise was unacceptable" (p.1). As Dr. Mandelet tells Edna, "the trouble is that youth is give up to illusions, it seems to be a provision of Nature to *secure* mothers for the race" (p.731), alluding to the fact that women were seen as mere birthing or breeding machines [*emphasis mine*]. Yet Chopin and her protagonist are feminist as their rejection of the institutions of motherhood and family signal moments of aporia in the novel. In a novel in which childbirth is highlighted as being unique to the female experience, the author extends the birth motif as a metaphor for the "re-birth" of Edna as an individual and as an artist. Chopin's attempt has been to "awaken" Edna Pontellier as well as 19th century society to the reality that women too have feelings, that they should have a free will and that they should be valued as individuals and not be regarded as mere property of patriarchy.

Edna Pontellier's journey of self-realization and identity construction begins quite late in life, after marriage (This is in contrast to a traditional *bildungsroman*). Yet Edna's process of maturity is arduous and gradual and consists of repeated clashes between her needs and desires with the judgments enforced by an unbending social order. In the traditional *bildungsroman* genre, the spirit and value of the social order become manifest in the protagonist who is eventually accommodated within society. In *The Awakening* however, despite it being a 'novel of becoming', the question remains if Edna's new "self" is accommodated or accepted by society.

All definitions of the *bildungsroman* as a literary form hitherto presupposed a male education and experience. Yet it can be seen that Kate Chopin has deviated from the norm as she presents a heroine who goes through the process of self individuation. *The Awakening* signals a departure from the classic *bildungsroman* as the author attempts to present a discourse in which resistance to the identities imposed by patriarchy and the attempt to construct alternative identities is seen. (much like postcolonial literary creativity of a later age) Yet it is ironic that Chopin was chastised for focusing on the feelings of women as the monstrous system of patriarchy considered women only as "non-persons".

Edna's birth as an individual and as an artist is shown through the contrasting characters of two women, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Adele is the typical "angel in the house", she is the epitome of the male-defined wife and mother. She is a "mother-woman", a woman who "idolized (her) children, worshipped (her) husband and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (p.655). But Edna finds that the life of the mother-woman fails to satisfy

her. She pities Adele and finds herself unsuited for the lifestyle of mother-woman: “it was not a condition of life which fitted her, she could see in it but an appalling and helpless ennui; she was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle” (p. 691). Edna cannot bear the thought of being limited to the roles of wife and mother and she tries to explain these reservations about loss of identity to Adele: “I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself” (p.684). But Adele, who is comfortably ensconced within patriarchal structures, fails to understand Edna’s search for individuality. Thus Edna must look elsewhere for empathy.

The “madwoman” or the “monster-woman” in this novel is Mme Reisz. While she is not mad nor a monster, she has chosen to reject normative society and to live in exile, a situation which the male-chauvinist society of Chopin’s time would have viewed as “mad”. Indeed Mme. Reisz’s lifestyle is not easy nor is it the choice of many. Yet she is shown to have extreme courage in her choice and lives as a serious artist, who is unmarried and risks society’s taunts and labels. Mme Reisz thus exemplifies the status of a woman who wants to be an “individualist” in the 19th century as well as the solitary life of the dedicated artist. A woman devoid of motherly tendencies and sexuality, Mme. Reisz seems to have no romance in her life. She is defined by her extraordinary talent in music, which she, in contrast to Adele, cultivates only for herself. Edna confides in her a desire to be a painter, and Mme. Reisz cautions her about the nature of the artistic lifestyle: “The artist must possess the courageous soul” she says, “the soul that dares and defies” (p.696). Thus Mme. Reisz believes that it is only through a life of solitude and disregard for society that an artist can define her “self” and create art.

Edna enjoys a rewarding friendship with Mme. Reisz, yet she finds the lonely artistic lifestyle to be imperfect due to its lack of sexuality. The sensuous Adele Ratignolle awakens Edna to the sensuality of her own body (prompting critics like Wickremagamage to question if the relationship was lesbian or heteronormative?): “there may have been...influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways for [Edna] to [loosen a little her mantle of reserve]. But the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignolle” (p.659). Indeed it is through Adele’s intimate touch that Edna explores the possibilities of sexual arousal. Upon this revelation it is impossible for Edna to imagine an asexual, artistic lifestyle for herself, even if it might be a way to finding the individuality that she is searching for.

Thus Edna is faced with this conundrum in which she has to follow either the “ideal mother-woman adored by 19th century society or the “Other”, Mme. Reisz a feminist individualist in her own right, yet someone who is shunned by society. It seems that Edna is now faced with a Hobson’s choice. Yet it is at this point that Kate Chopin’s skill as an author can be highlighted as she adopts a specifically female (if not feminist) perspective in her writing in order to challenge stereotypical gender-blindness. Chopin’s Edna Pontellier does not submit to either extreme, she is not content to be a passive angel in the house nor is she willing to be labeled by society as a mad artist.

Instead Kate Chopin presents an alternative identity for the intelligent woman with feelings as Edna literally “awakens” to the reality which had hitherto eluded her:

A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her – the light which, showing the way, forbids it...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 (p.659).

Chopin uses the binary of sleep and wakefulness to present the “birth” of Edna Pontellier as an individual who “has a right to do what she ‘feels like’ because her subjectivity carries a moral and even a legal weight” (Dimock, 1990, p. 35) Herein lies the

feminist perception of Chopin as Edna uses her subjectivity as a vehicle for severing the contracts of wife and mother. One has to agree with Wai-chee Dimock's (1990) observation, "when Edna says 'I simply felt like going out' she is invoking her subjectivity not to uphold the terms of her wifely contract, but to nullify those claims" (Dimock, p.36).

With the birth of her new "self" Edna battles societal norms as she tries to detach herself from the duties expected from her. Not for her the Damask tableclothes and Cut Glass, neither Crimson Cocktails nor Golden Champagne. The family stifles her as she feels like "one who has entered and lingered within the portals of some forbidden temple in which a thousand muffled voices bode her begone" (p.712). Thus she yearns for a "room of her own" and will be content even with a "pigeon house". Leonce Pontellier fails to recognize that Edna "was becoming *herself* and daily casting aside that fictitious self which she assumed like a garment with which to appear before the world" (p.692) [*emphasis mine*].

It is Robert Lebrun, a young Creole man who proves to be the friend Leonce cannot be. Robert encourages her self-expression and arouses a sexual desire in her, which leads Edna to have an affair with another man, signaling a sense of sexual autonomy. Robert is sensuous and he teaches Edna to swim, furthering her independence. At the night swim proposed by Robert, Edna feels herself "reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (p.670). A loss of boundaries is suggested at this point in the text as Edna feels herself "pregnant with the first-felt throbbing of desire." (p.672).

Kate Chopin uses the sea as the central symbol for the birth of Edna's new self:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation...the voice of the sea speaks to the soul (p.659).

Edna tries to extend her birth as an "individual" by re-birthing herself as an artist as well. In this context the sea is symbolic both as a generative and destructive force; it is highlighted as a source of life facilitating re-birth, yet the sea also represents the danger of losing oneself in unlimited space, in search of artistic expression.

Edna is initially presented as a "dabbler in art, without any formal training. Yet Chopin confirms that she is talented for "she handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came not from a long and close acquaintance with them but from natural aptitude" (p.657). Edna is critical of her own work and in her struggle to become the artist she desires to be, it is Robert who serves as the source of imaginative power. Edna's creative development continues at the risk of her family "going to the devil" (p.670) and as an escape from the eternal roles of wife and mother.

As she continues to paint, Edna seeks validation for her work from her friends Mme. Reisz and Adele Ratignolle. Adele, true to her character as mother-woman, praises the immense talent and Edna is pleased although she recognizes "it's true worth" (p.690). Mme. Reisz in contrast, is very judgmental; she chides Edna for believing that she "is becoming an artist" (p.690) She warns that to be an artist includes much: "one must possess many gifts-absolute gifts...and moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul" (p.696). This situation highlights, among other things, the problems faced by female artists in a patriarchal society, the feelings of alienation and the lack of an audience.

Thus Edna expresses her individuality by "trying" to "become" an artist and it is observed that her work "grows in force and individuality" (p.670) with time. In a radical break from authority and convention, Edna buys Pigeon House using an inheritance and the money from the sale of her paintings. This small house is much like Virginia Woolf's "a room of [her] own", signaling the need of uninhabited free spaces and independence from

societal and natural roles for the creative development of female artists. At the end of the novel Edna has defined herself as an artist as she tells Mme. Reisz “you see that I have persistence; does that quality count for anything in art?” (p.696). Thus Edna continues to paint, even though she lacks the guidance that could help shape her art and despite the fact that she has no artistic foremothers or contemporaries who might understand the issues which impede female creativity.

As elucidated above, it is clear that Edna Pontellier has been successful in escaping the manacles of patriarchy, but she returns to Grand Isle and walks to her death in the sea. Kate Chopin presents an alternative to socially-constructed female models yet is she suggesting that this alternative identity cannot survive? Edna’s bubble is burst when Robert leaves her, which results in her abandoning her search for artistic wholeness as well. Adele Ratignolle’s words, “think of the children” (p.731) reminds Edna of her role as a mother, which is now in conflict with her new found freedom. Thus the suicide of Edna Pontellier raises many questions. Is it due to the knowledge that it is futile to rebel against biology? Indeed as Dimock (1990) observes:

Edna is now in bondage, the chains of enslavement being firmly lodged in the hands of her children, from being a right holder, a self whose freedom resides in the absence of obligations, Edna has been transformed into a slave, a self that is nothing but obligations (p. 47).

Does she kill herself because Robert has left her? Or is it because she has failed to become the artist she desired to be? Edna drowns herself because she cannot live as a conventional wife and mother any longer and because society will not accept her real self. It can be argued then, that the myth of individualism fails to accommodate the aspirations of this woman. Edna will not sacrifice her new autonomy, so she sheds her “fictitious garments of gender” (Wickremagamage’s term), and freely goes to the sea, losing her life.

Edna stands naked on the beach feeling “like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (p.734), then in a moment of liberation, she “lifted her whole body and reached out with a long sweeping stroke” (p.735). It is important to note that as opposed to being “burnt beyond recognition” (p.653), Edna must remain white in death in order to earn the status of the feminist individualist. But Chopin uses one image of defeat, the “bird with the broken wing” (p.734) which Edna sees “reeling, fluttering, circling, disabled down, down to the water”(p.734), signaling, perhaps, Edna’s failure as an artist. As Carmen Wickremagamage (2014) points out, this might also signal the failure of the “Unencumbered Other”, who is not accommodated in society as well as in fiction. In her attempt to achieve clarity of self-consciousness Edna discards the burdensome fiction of her gender and rejects society and her children who “sought to drag her into soul’s slavery” (p.720).

Edna’s end has been read as being Utopian, that in an attempt at being the absolute self, she loses herself and “becomes” a ‘no-person’ (Wickremagamage, 2014, p.1). Furthermore her suicide has been criticized as being escapist. The claim of *The Awakening* to be an early celebration of feminism has been challenged by the fact that Edna leaves the statusquo intact by escaping through death. Indeed the ending of the novel does not present a collective vision of liberation for women. Yet in swimming out to embrace death, Edna asserts her individuality, and most importantly in choosing how to die, she has demonstrated extraordinary courage. Sandra Gilbert (1983) contends that *The Awakening* is a novel which presents Kate Chopin’s “distinctly feminist fantasy of the second coming of Aphrodite” (p.44) whilst critics like Willa Cather have claimed that Edna Pontellier “cannot be an artist because

she is desirous; art which requires courage and demands survival, must be left to the (male) Hedgers of the world. (as cited in Gilbert,1983, p.65)

Despite such criticism, a feminist reading of *The Awakening* reveals that Edna “becomes” an artist precisely because she is desirous. Thus Chopin presents Edna Pontellier standing representative of all 19th century middle class women who “desired” self individuation. The triumph of *The Awakening* lies in the fact that Kate Chopin as a woman/writer has presented an alternative to the angel in the house/madwoman binary. Although Chopin’s alternative model fails to live as an autonomous woman, the very attempt at creating an alternative and “awakening” society to this reality is laudable. Thus it can be concluded that, writing in the patriarchal society of 19th century, Kate Chopin (through the character of Edna Pontellier) has envisioned (even if they failed to achieve it at this point) a second coming for emerging female individualists and artists. Indeed Chopin highlights, echoing Sylvia Plath, that women/artists have “a self to recover, a queen” (as cited in Gilbert & Gubar,2000, p.92).

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