

## FEMINIST DILEMMA IN KATE CHOPIN'S SHORT STORIES

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### Abstract

Kate Chopin is considered as one of the earliest feminist authors who delved deep into the chaotic souls of females. Her short stories present pictures of a perennial battle which goes on in the minds of women of all times. The images of conformists and non-conformists get crowded in her fictional world where the New Woman struggles to assert her essentially feminine identity. Here, a few of Chopin's short stories are analysed with a view to unearth the various aspects of the timeless crisis endured by the female souls.

**Key words:** Feminism, New Woman, Conformists, Non-conformists

If the history of humanity is analysed and reread with a view to spot the various progressions and regressions underwent by the animal called human being, it is definite that such a long winding study will stumble at one point which marks the primary inevitable schism of our species. That landmark phase in the chronicle of the origins of our species would pertain to the classification of the human community into two separate beings who differed in their morphological as well as anatomical aspects. And they were baptized as the male and the female.

The story of the primordial fission into the binaries of gender is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, the effect of this primitive bifurcation of the human population is irrevocably imprinted on the culture and discourse of our species. Right from the pre-agricultural period itself, the men and the women had sensed the invisible yet powerful line of demarcation, which was drawn between them chiefly owing to the physiological differences they exhibited. During those nomadic times, physical strength and muscular vigour were of utmost importance as the human beings were pursuing a tough battle to tame the wild nature. Women's unique biological status in the reproductive hierarchy had enslaved her to the dark walls of her crude caverns. "Pregnancy, childbirth, and menstruation reduced their capacity for work and made them at times wholly dependent upon the man for protection and food" (Beauvoir 94). The task of frequent procreation curtailed her possibilities to participate in the wild battle for survival and unknowingly she got herself confined within the limits of domesticity.

This tradition of the domestic woman and the wild man has transcended the barriers of time and place, and in almost all the cultures on earth, one finds the stereotypes of a virile active male and a passive cold female. Apart from the mythical matriarchal states of ancient Bedouin and a handful of other primitive peoples, woman's place was always in the household. Another seemingly good yet inherently dangerous tendency which was shared by many ancient cultures was to superhumanise women by constructing images of female gods. By denying the basic human traits of woman, the essentially patriarchal religions succeeded in formulating an 'othered' female identity. "To say that woman was the 'Other' is to say that there did not exist between the sexes a reciprocal relation: Earth, Mother, Goddess- she was no fellow creature in man's eyes; it was beyond the human realm that her power was affirmed, and she was therefore outside of that realm (Beauvoir 102).

With the advancements in the disciplines of religion, science, philosophy and literature, the idea of being a female attained new dimensions. The notion of 'woman' was re-examined and by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, notable philosophers and men of letters started paying attention to the question of female. "Rousseau dedicated woman to husband and to maternity, thus speaking for the middle class" (Beauvoir 139), while others like Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu, being inspired by the democratic ideals of the age, stood for the cause of women. The emergence of the feminist movement for the social and political rights of women found its literary expressions in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* which was published in 1792. The feminist voice was later strengthened through John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). These works delved deep into the antagonistic patriarchal socio- cultural milieu of the West that has been preventing the female entities from achieving self- realisation.

The apparent transformation undergone by the female community of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the numerous progressive feminist movements and legislations resulted in the creation of a new strata of females whom Sarah Grand called 'New Woman' in her article *The New Aspect of the Woman Question* (1894). In the literary circles, the concept of 'New Woman' was further popularized by the writer Henry James through his heroines in *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *Portrait of a Lady* (1880-81).

The advent of the concept of the 'New Woman' had its most powerful manifestations in women's writings. According to Sally Ledger, "The New Woman was a very fin-de-siècle phenomenon. Contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism, she was part of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880s and 1890s (Ledger 1). The socio- cultural construct of New Woman gave rise to a new form of fiction called New Woman fiction. "The New Woman fiction consists mainly of works which fit W.T. Stead's description of the novel of the modern woman; they are novels by a woman about women from the standpoint of women" (Pykett 5). The New Woman fiction bloomed in the novels of prominent female novelists like Olive Schreiner (1855- 1920), Sarah Grand (1854-1943), Mona Caird (1854?- 1932), George Egerton (1859- 1945) etc. On the whole, the New Woman fiction was a rebellion against the notion of the Ideal Womanhood epitomised in the writings of Victorian novelists like William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens.

The New Woman fiction had its own repercussions in American Women's writing too, which were evident in the works of writers like Kate Chopin, Ruth McEnery Stuart etc. The origins of American New Woman fiction can be traced back to the popular magazine fiction of the 1870s. Of these writers, Kate Chopin shows an incomparable execution of the ideology of New Woman in her works. Although best known for her novel *The Awakening* (1899) which

revolves around a female protagonist's self-discovery, her short fiction can be considered as carrying the potent germs of modern feminist literature which breathed fresh air through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

Chopin, who was born as Katherine O'Flaherty at St. Louis, Missouri in 1850, was the second child of an Irish father and French mother, and therefore was brought up in a bilingual and bicultural atmosphere. As a young girl, Kate lived in an all-woman atmosphere where she was mentored by her French grandmother and great grandmother. Later, she attended St. Louis Academy run by the Sacred Heart nuns which taught her the principles of feminine modesty. The early influence of her French grandmothers and the religious lessons of the nuns moulded an exquisitely feminine Kate who had by then garnered comparatively in-depth knowledge of the female psyche, which she had to use later in her literary career.

Kate, in 1870, found her soul mate in Oscar Chopin and according to Per Seyersted's biography of Chopin, she had a fulfilling marital life with six children till her husband's death in 1882. The New Woman in Kate Chopin got enervated after her husband's death when she turned to writing in order to support her family.

The gynocentric writings of Kate Chopin is often said to be inspired by the predominantly androcentric short fiction of the French writer, Guy de Maupassant. "If Maupassant inspired Chopin to be more daring in her subject matter than were many of her contemporaries, the resulting fiction deals more with challenges to social convention than with states of obsession and despair" (Walker 180). The genuinely female voice of Kate Chopin portrays the subjective experiences of women as opposed to her French literary mentor who objectified the female entity. In Maupassant's stories, women had chiefly two identities; one that was extremely angelic while the other was that of a killer woman who devours the flesh and soul of the innocent male. Chopin's writings tended to expose the femaleness of woman's experiences, liberating her from these fixed identities. Therefore Chopin's writings although, they bear tremendous influence of Maupassantian fiction, are said to have succeeded in demolishing the stereotypical images of women in literature.

It was in the early 1890s that Kate Chopin emerged as a notable figure in the literary circles of America, through her publication in many a popular literary magazines of the time. In the beginning, Chopin was branded as a 'domestic' writer who deals with the very common place domestic affairs of what Beauvoir calls the Second Sex. Her short stories were crowded with numerous female characters who spoke in the Southern dialects and the critics of the time often labelled her frankness as vulgar and crude. Later in 1899, when she published her most famous novel *The Awakening* which centered on the life of a female protagonist, Chopin received both bouquets and brickbats from her contemporaries, chiefly due to the unorthodox rendering of a woman's inner life.

By the late 1960s, when feminist criticism was inaugurated, Kate Chopin, the writer of cheap local tales underwent something of an apotheosis. Critics like Sandra Gilbert and Per Seyersted exhumed Chopin's genius in unearthing the essentially feminine experiences of 19<sup>th</sup> century women. Chopin's short stories, in general, carry an atmosphere of domesticity and one finds a perennial struggle in the minds and lives of her female characters. Her women are found to be oscillating in between the two points of conformity and non-conformity. They are caught in a space of unnatural vacuum where they struggle to play out their traditional roles of wives, daughters and sisters, on whom the magnificent male has absolute control. The conflict between the conformist and the non-conformist identities of Chopin's women are best portrayed in her short stories like *Regret* and *The Story of an Hour*.

*Regret* was first published in 1897 and it deals with the experience of a spinster called Mamzelle Aurlie who accidentally gets an opportunity to take care of her neighbour's four little children. Till that day, Aurlie had never thought of marriage or child rearing and she was perfectly happy in her lonely world. In the beginning, one finds Aurlie as someone who has triumphed to shatter the traditional myths of women. She had betrayed her gender roles and had never depended upon a masculine element for support. As Simone de Beauvoir says, she had escaped the torture of Sisyphus contained in housework with its endless repetition: "the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day" (Beauvoir 470).

But when Odile's children enter into her solitary universe, the non-conformist in Aurlie seems to melt away slowly. The 'inherent' mother in her comes out of its hiding and suddenly pours her milk of maternal love on someone else's children. Although at first she is terrified by the children's laughter and tears, soon the mother in Aurlie learns to accept them. At the end of the story, when the children are retrieved by their biological mother, one finds a broken hearted Aurlie, who feels regret about her decision to remain unmarried.

*The Story of an Hour* (1894), presents a picture antithetical to that of *Regret*. Instead of the naïve Aurlie, one finds the protagonist of this story as moving from conformity to non-conformity which ultimately prove to be fatal to her own existence. In the beginning, Mrs Mallard, the heroine is an ordinary woman who has passively accepted the norms of the society. She is married to a rich man and possibly has children too. As an adornment to her vulnerability, she is afflicted with some heart trouble also. The plot of the story is set in motion, when Josephine, her sister and Richards, who is her husband's friend tell her about her husband's death. Instead of the stereotypical reaction of a woman who hears about her husband's death, Mrs. Mallard feels exhilarated in her inner soul. She goes into her private room and contemplates the freshness of the nature with an energized spirit. The sense of liberation gives rebirth to her female soul and she feels happy about her future in which she will be able to lead an autonomous life. The death of her husband has opened up numerous arenas of possibilities for her and along with him, the wife in her is also dead.

With the death of Mrs. Mallard's husband, the individual in her woman is set free. But, the shocking twist brought into the story deviates the course of events. Mr. Mallard appears alive and Mrs. Mallard dies of 'overjoy'. Evidently, Mrs. Mallard has died not out of joy but out of grief. The banishment from her temporary fancies about her free future knelled her death knell.

The conformist- non-conformist dilemma proves fatal to Mrs. Mallard as Chopin's dramatic ending of the story can be loaded with multiple meanings. Although it is not clear, whether Mrs. Mallard used to engage in such fancies prior to this incident, it is almost sure that she was at the peak of ecstasy when she was imagining her future life as an independent woman free from the rigid exercises of the masculine codes enforced on her by her immediate patriarchal representative, her husband. Chopin, indirectly hints at the fates of numerous New Women who pursued paths yet untrodden and ended up in social ostracism and loneliness, which was a lot akin to death.

*The Storm* (1898) and *A Pair of Silk Stockings* (1896) present the non-conformist spirit of Chopin at its zenith, while both the short stories put forward two varied images of New Woman. Chopin's *The Storm* literally took the literary circles of contemporary America by storm as it has an adulterer, Calixta who engages in a physical relationship with her ex-lover Alce Laballire as its protagonist. Calixta asserts her sexuality through her adultery and her act is conceived as a doubly hideous sin, chiefly due to two reasons. Firstly, she subverted her sexually fidel role of a faithful wife and secondly, her sin contaminated her role as a 'good' mother whose sole duty is



to take care of her family. Furthermore by her action, she reinforced the age old image of women as she- demons who seduce and kill the naïve men. Bobint, Calixta's innocent husband is supposed to be deprived of his manliness as his wife's adultery, if brought to public, is sure to emasculate his male self.

Calixta, through her action destabilised the institutions of marriage and motherhood. Another instance of demystification of female role as an epitome of sacrifice occurs in *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, in which the protagonist establishes her economic emancipation by buying her favourite articles with the fifteen dollars which she got. Mrs.Sommers, for at least one day, lives her life to the fullest by pushing her family out of her individual self. Apart from buying a pair of silk stockings and gloves, she goes to the expensive restaurant of the town and even goes to a theatre. The thirst with which she buys her favourite articles and the apparent sense of motion thwarts the stable role of a passive mother who is destined to live and die for her family.

The iconoclastic women characters of Chopin have their opponents too. In stories like *A Shameful Affair* and *A Respectable Woman*, Chopin presents women who are choked by their traditional female roles imposed on them by the patriarchal giants. In these stories, oppression of women at the hands of men is portrayed through the subjugation of her sexual self.

In *A Shameful Affair*, Chopin tells her readers about the demands made by the patriarchal society upon the young women who prepare themselves for the 'holy' institution of marriage. And these demands mostly revolve around the sexual self of females. In the story, Mildred Orme, the virgin protagonist had a shameful encounter with a young farmhand who kissed her on her lips. Mildred's soul was filled with shame and sinfulness and she wept throughout the night. Her grief lasted for a few days and later she is relieved of her agony on learning that the dirty farmhand was her would-be husband in disguise.

The romantic notion of a woman's virginity is reinforced in the story as Mildred, the protagonist is ashamed of the touch of a man who isn't her husband. "A virgin body has the freshness of secret springs, the morning sheen of an unopened flower, the orient lustre of a pearl on which the sun has never shone" (Beauvoir 186). She believes that his touch has polluted her virgin body which she ought to have kept like a pearl for her future husband. Her sexual passions are to be nullified till she reaches her bridal bed where she will get deflowered by the erotic male. Till that moment, she has to safeguard her virginity, which is her husband's prerogative. The touch, here, is more problematic as it imbues class consciousness also. Mildred was worried by not only the fact that she was kissed by a male, but also that it was done by farmhand who stands below her in the social hierarchy. However, it seems that Chopin is less concerned about the nature of the kiss, whether it is proletarian or bourgeois. She, as well as her protagonist, is more concerned about the loss of purity resulting from the touch of a male.

In *A Respectable Woman* also, we find the limits of female sexuality being fixed by the arrogant male. The story deals with Mrs. Baroda, a married woman, who is sexually attracted towards her husband's friend. But she keeps the 'dignity' of her role by suppressing her carnal desires and one finds her restraining herself from adultery. As Beauvoir says, "Woman is not concerned to establish individual relations with a chosen mate but to carry on the feminine functions in their generality; she is to have sex pleasure only in a specified form and not individualized (Beauvoir 454). Wife's sexual activity is limited within her family and outside her marital bond. She has to unsex herself, thereby converting herself into an asexual being. Thus, through Mrs. Baroda, Chopin expresses sexual frustration experienced by married women who are forced to surrender their sexual identities before their male counterparts, whom the society

has allowed to enjoy ‘contingent pleasures’ before and after marriage owing to their special privilege as the mobile, active participants in the marital game.

Finally, in her short story *Beyond the Bayou* (1891), Chopin gives her readers another instance of conformity, where La Folle, the black maid servant finds herself being able to cross the bayou, which she had thought she could never, only when her maternal instincts are aroused by a young boy. La Folle, from her childhood onwards, had never crossed the bayou and she was always afraid of the outside world. But, when Cheri, the ten year old son of her master accidentally gets shot by himself, she crosses all the barriers and takes the boy to his home.

The mother in her strengthened her foot and heart and La Folle is liberated from her self-imposed confinement. The story tends to reinforce the Victorian ideals of motherhood which consider that “it is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural ‘calling’, since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species” (Beauvoir 501). The woman in the story attains perfection through the realisation of her maternal self. The invisible mother in La Folle helps her to defeat all her fears and anxieties concerning the bayou, which she had been nurturing since her childhood. Motherhood, though in an indirect way, equips her with psychological emancipation. Like Chopin’s *Regret*, *Beyond the Bayou* too glorifies woman’s role as mother and considers motherhood as the culmination of femininity.

The females in Chopin’s short fiction as shown above are caught between two worlds, an inner world which demands non-conformity towards the established feminine ideals and an outer world, which fetters the female imagination as well as action within the four walls of domesticity. Chopin’s characters can be leagued on both sides as her stories portray pictures of both conformist as well as non-conformist women. However, if one is to reread her fiction, it becomes quite clear that Chopin’s skill as a writer lies in the complexity of her characters. Although, an overt reading labels Calixta in *The Storm* and Mrs. Sommers in *A Pair of Silk Stockings* as New Women, they are in no less way conformists for they have conformed to the basic patriarchal institutions of marriage and childbirth. Similarly, Mildred Orme in *A Shameful Affair* and Mrs. Baroda in *A Respectable Woman* appear as idols of tradition and conformity, still they bear traces of New Woman in them, as they often transcend, although psychologically, the barriers of orthodoxy. *Regret* and *The Story of an Hour* also have as their protagonists, women of mixed identities. The heroine of the former, being renounced the institution of marriage, is a New Woman, while in the latter, the female protagonist feels herself liberated at least during her last hours. *Beyond the Bayou*, however, asserts in a stronger manner, the need for conformity to the gender roles. But, still it can be considered as an unnatural technique employed by Chopin for subverting the age old notions. For the world outside the bayou need not have anything good to offer to the innocent La Folle. The seemingly positive force of maternity might have trapped the poor black woman in the complexities of an unknown world.

The fictional environment that Chopin creates, witnesses a constant war being waged between two worlds. The outer and the inner worlds of the female self are in permanent tension and the author’s attempts to reconcile the hostile forces within the woman are manifested in her short stories. The battle between the divided selves of the New Woman makes her existence chaotic and pushes her into an abysmal chasm of dread and despair. Every now and then, she makes an attempt to rescue herself from this gloomy lot. At times, she conforms to the dictates of patriarchy but at other times she feels an inner pang which forces her to follow the commands of her own soul. Chopin’s literary universe echoes this irreconcilable dilemma within the female selves.

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