The Awakening of Edna’s Female Consciousness in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* from the Perspective of Relationship

Youmin Feng

MUC School of Foreign Studies, Minzu University of China, Beijing 100081, China

Abstract: *The Awakening*, written by American woman writer Kate Chopin and published in 1899, tells the story of Edna Pontellier’s breaking the shackles of traditional women and the moral rules of the time to achieve self-awareness in the Victoria period. The awakening of her self-consciousness is formed in the relationships with her husband, children and lovers, and at the same time, it is inspired and limited by the external world, which eventually leads to her death. Analysis of the awakening of Edna’s female consciousness from the perspective of the relationship between her and others systematically can give the readers a better understanding of the underlying cause—the patriarchy of the Victorian era, leading to her final tragedy. Moreover, it can also let the readers better understand the suppression and fetter towards women in the patriarchal society in the Victorian period.

Keywords: The Awakening, Edna, Relationship, Female consciousness.

1. Introduction

1.1 Kate Chopin and *The Awakening*

Kate Chopin (1851-1904) was a famous southern American writer of local literature in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. She wrote a lot of short stories and several novels based on her own experiences within towns she lived. She was best known in her life time as “a writer of regional or local color tales” (Beer 145), but her fiction was cosmopolitan and sophisticated in its form, structure and content. The critics, in her times, thought Chopin was psychologically “morbid”, because she depicted evil things in *The Awakening*, to no apparent purpose. Because of this, Chopin as writer and the book were both boycotted in the literary circles. But now, her writing motive is regarded as virtues, and her treatment of sexuality in writing is looked upon “sane” (Tompkins 22). Therefore, Chopin has been regarded as the pioneer of American feminist movement since the 1960s. Her book, *The Awakening*, is also considered as the classic work of the first generation of American feminist literature, and even as a classic work in the American literature.

1.2 Research Review

*The Awakening* is Chopin’s representative work, and also one of the classics of feminist literature. As George Arms points out in his discussion of the book, it is often seen in terms of the question of sexual freedom (216), and it is also read as strongly feminist novel. Moreover, some critics, like Per Seyersted, recognize that the novel has broader implications than these (183). Most researches about this novel pay attention to the feminism theme or the analysis of Edna’s awakening of self-awareness, free will, subject awareness and the sexuality. Some also study the construction and deconstruction of the awakening of Edna’s female consciousness. Although almost every scholar notices the awakening of female awareness in this novel, no one takes a further step to study the female awareness of Edna from her relationships with others systematically. So this article analyzes the formation of Edna’s awakening of female consciousness from the perspective of her relationships with three kinds of people. They are Edna’s husband, children and lovers.

2. *The Awakening* in the Relationship with Her Husband

In the Victorian era, strict social ethics and rules defined the duties that women should perform in society, requiring them to be “angels of the family”. They should make the home a safe haven for their husbands, where they could spiritually fortify themselves before resuming the daily struggles of the workplace (Tyson 90). However, in the southern society of the United States, such rules were more significant and they severely restricted women’s awakening and self-development. The novel was set in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the south of the United States, where women were subordinate to their husbands and regarded as their husbands’ property. According to the law of the time, women and everything they owned belonged to their husbands, especially middle-class white women (Guan Jing 161). Moreover, the Victorian division of labor between men and women was still dominant in American culture. However, the United States also experienced many important social changes in the 19th century. On the one hand, after the Civil War, women had more access to higher education than ever before. Some women moved out of the traditional social circle and into fields that had traditionally been dominated by men. On the other hand, this prompted some women to re-understand their way of life and the meaning of existence (Jin Li, Qin Yaqing 61). More importantly, when the novel was written, it was in the climax of the first women’s movement in the United States, and women’s consciousness was liberated to some extent. Edna, who lived in this environment, also began to think over her relationship with her husband.

2.1 Invisible Rebellion

Edna’s awakening in the relationship with her husband was first embodied by her invisible rebellion. Mr. Pontellier fell in love with Edna at first sight early on, and “his absolute
devotion flattered her” (Chopin 21). Living in the fantasy relationship she had created for herself, she married Mr. Pontellier despite religious differences and family objections. In the Creole region, husbands were absolutely loyal to their wives and worshiped their wives. For Edna, “as the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place in with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (Chopin 21). Since then, she took her wife’s role seriously, hosting guests and their family members, who were related to her husband’s business, in her house on Tuesdays. All kinds of demands and orders to her husband would be fulfilled in a compliant manner. But in the patriarchal society of the Victorian period, Mr. Pontellier did not regard Edna as his equal. When he saw Edna swimming with Robert in the sun, he said they were doing mischief, and looked at his wife “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 2). This undoubtedly reflected Chopin’s concern and reflection on the situation of women’s dependence on men in the patriarchal society at that time.

But all obedience in Edna began to change when she came to the Grand Isle for summer vacation, and her nature of youth began to be liberated. This was because of the open atmosphere of Creole life, which encouraged people to express themselves freely. Then Edna began a silent revolt. When her husband came back from the club late at night, he told Edna about what had happened, but Edna didn’t pay any attention to it. “He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him” (Chopin 5), so he began to criticize his wife from her lack of care for their children. After being scolded by her husband for not caring enough for their children, Edna did not respond, but went straight back to bed after seeing the children. And she was silently crying.

“Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the ambience of her husband’s kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understand.” (Chopin 7)

Here Edna’s silent reaction showed that she was no longer satisfied with the previous mode of getting along with her husband, and her self-awareness began to gradually awaken. She used silence to counter her husband’s unreasonable troubles. Moreover, when her husband questioned her reasons for not meeting guests, Edna didn’t explain, but after her husband left, “her face was flushed and her eyes flamed with some inward fire that lighted them” (Chopin 61). And she threw the ring on the floor, and stepped on it vigorously, but there was “not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (Chopin 64), and broke the vase. This showed that Edna had realized her husband’s unreasonable demands on her, and she tried to resist in a private way. These phenomena were also reflected in the author’s real life, and Chopin transplanted these phenomena into the novel, with the intention to show the oppression suffered by women and their consciousness of self-awakening.

Besides the dissatisfaction towards Mr. Pontellier, Edna’s invisible rebellion also embodied that Chopin was familiar with the social environment and rules women faced. Chopin knew that the reason why women like Edna were suppressed was the whole social environment controlled by patriarchal society. So she used the book to fight with the injustice women experienced in that time.

2.2 Visible Rebellion

At the same time of invisible resistance, Edna also took visible resistance. This made Edna’s female consciousness in the relationship with her husband totally awaken. She took open measures against her husband’s behaviors. Her husband could not understand Edna’s thoughts. When Edna encountered the fear of death in swimming, she did not tell her husband, and he did neither notice nor understand her. After returning from the sea, Mr. Pontellier asked Edna to come into the house, but Edna refused. “She perceived that her will had blazed up stubborn and resistant” (Chopin 36). This embodied the awakening of Edna’s own female consciousness and the protection of her own rights as an individual. A few weeks after returning to New Orleans from summer vacation, Edna no longer had her usual Tuesdays that treated guests. When Mr. Pontellier asked her why, Edna just blabbed. Since then, she had not resumed her “duties” of receiving visitors on Tuesday. This act symbolized Edna’s disappointment with her husband and her marriage, as well as her courageous search for self-awareness. In this context, the author described the dullness of the obligations that women had to fulfill, and the inability to express themselves. So, when women were exposed to anything that inspired them, they rose up and rebelled.

When the husband faced his wife’s rebellion, he thought his wife had a feminist idea in her head. He went to see Dr. Mandelet, feeling that Edna might have been in contact with female activists, and advised him not to restrain his wife. In the patriarchal society, as long as women did not conform to the conventional social norms, they would be considered by others as being infringed by feminist ideas. Edna did not attend her sister’s wedding though she planned to go before. While her husband was attending the wedding, Edna was preparing to move out of his house and rent a small house for herself. And the fact that she did not tell her husband in advance indicated that her sense of self had been awakened. She said the house of her husband was not hers, because “the money that provides for it, are not mine (Edna)” (Chopin 93). She had realized that she belonged to no one but herself since then. This showed that Chopin had realized the economic dependence of woman on man in her time, and in order to gain their own freedom, it was necessary for woman to remove the economic dependence upon man. Undoubtedly in the background of patriarchal society, her husband opposed his wife to move out, but he did not take any action to obstruct, and just issued an announcement that the house was under renovation, only to save his face. Since then, Edna relied on her father’s property, betting money on horse race and painting to rent the “pigeon house” to live by herself. But in the late 19th century, literature and art were still dominated by men, so women were still limited in this area. Chopin’s description of Edna’s efforts to make money by painting and get rid of her husband’s economic dependence revealed that Chopin began to consciously resist the oppression and
restriction of the patriarchal society on women in her work.

But in the end, constrained by reality, Edna was unable to escape her husband’s “control” over her and cut off her relationship with him. This revealed that the author also understood that under the restriction of the specific patriarchal society at that time, Edna could not gain real freedom even after she gained consciousness. Besides Edna, other women like the author who lived at that time could not escape the “control” of their husbands or men. It could be seen that although the external environment and her own nature gave Edna external and internal conditions for her awakening in marriage, the solidified social rules in reality would not allow her to achieve real freedom while realizing her awakening. Because of awareness of this, Chopin wrote this novel as an indictment of the social environment of the time, as well as a sober awareness that women were unable to get rid of their husbands’ and patriarchal society’s control.

3. The Awakening in the Relationship with Her Children

The Victorian era required women not only to be “good wives” but also to be “good mothers”. At that time, women were expected as mothers to sacrifice everything for their children, whether it was their lives or their selves. In the patriarchal society, children should receive the moral guidance needed to eventually assume their own traditional roles in the adult world (Tyson 90). In New Orleans, which was the setting of the novel, women were required to sacrifice everything for their children, even their selves. Therefore, most women thought it was their duty to sacrifice themselves for their children. But Edna didn’t think so.

3.1 Loss of Maternal Responsibility

Children on Grand Isle were close to their mothers. But Edna’s children were not always around their mother, they were taken care of by their nanny, and they even felt that their mixed-race black nanny was a burden. When one of the two children fell while playing, “he was not apt to rush crying to his mother’s arms for comfort” (Chopin 8). They were able to help each other in their children’s struggles, completely different from other spoiled children. It also stemmed from Edna’s parenting philosophy—rationality and independence towards children, which was different from that of other Grand Isle mothers. At the same time, it reflected Chopin’s recognition of this method of child rearing in the real world.

Meanwhile, Edna was not very concerned about the material needs of her children. For example, when Adele brought her children’s winter drawers in the summer for Edna to cut out, Edna “could not see the use of anticipating and making winter night garments the subject of her summer meditations” (Chopin 10). In contrast to Edna, Adele was a typical angel in the family, the embodiment of maternal love. She was always busy with the needlework for her children. Moreover, she had to give birth to a baby every two years, and she was very gentle and considerate to her children. She didn’t treat her children as rationally as Edna did. We could see that Adele was a typical “patriarchal woman”, who played the traditional gender role in society and “internalized the norms and values of patriarchy” (Tyson 85). In reality, Chopin also had six children from her marriage until her husband’s death, which gave her an opportunity to reflect on her own life compared with Edna, or we could say that Edna may be Chopin in mind. The contrast between Edna and Adele in the novel highlighted that women’s lives revolved around their children at that time, and at the same time reflected that women should have lived for themselves. And Edna was ambivalent about her children, unlike the traditional Grand Isle mothers who gave their children full attention and care:

“She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them...... their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her.” (Chopin 21)

Edna saw taking care of her children as an unnecessary duty to be fulfilled here. She did not see it as her natural mission as other mothers did, and she did not have the ability to fulfill this duty. In the relationship with her children, she performed a kind of casualness. She closed with and stayed away with them all by her own mood. This reflected Edna’s awakening of self-consciousness in her relationship with her children, and Chopin was well aware of the rebelliousness of this idea in her own time, so it was reflected in her work.

Unlike other mothers’ unquestioning love toward their children, Edna didn’t lose herself in the relationship with her children, and refused to fulfill the so-called obligation as mother toward children, which was stipulated by patriarchy. However, all women were performers of this kind of obligation in that time. So as an outsider, Edna was attacked and censured by others beyond doubt. This was one of main reasons why Chopin was resisted by American literary circles and the book was banned in that time.

3.2 A Recovered Sense of Self from Motherhood

Besides lack of maternal responsibility, Edna also found herself in the relationship with her children. Edna told Adele that she would never sacrifice herself for her children or anyone else, leading to an argument between them. “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”, she said to Adele (Chopin 56). This undoubtedly reflected Edna’s self-awareness of female consciousness in her relationship with her children. The ideal incarnation of the good mother, Adele, declared, “a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that - your bible tells you so” (Chopin 56). This not only revealed that Adele was a woman who had no self in the traditional environment, but also highlighted the contrary evidence of Edna’s thorough awareness of her self-consciousness in relation to her children. Including at the end of the novel, Edna thought the children “were a part of her life, but they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (Chopin 137). This embodied that Edna was fully aware that she belonged to herself and did not belong to her children. Even in the relationship with her children, the ego always occupied an irreplaceable position.

Edna, however, was the mother of two children and had duties
to take care of them. Even though she had gained a conscious awakening in her relationship with her children. But she was still bound by the rules of society, and she had to fulfill her ethical responsibilities as a role of mother. When other women in the same environment followed this rule, she became an anomaly. And her awakening was only limited to the level of consciousness, but she couldn’t realize her liberty in the reality. She knew that as long as she lived in the real world, she could not sever the bond with her children, nor could she break the bondage with her children. However, due to the social environment at that time, mothers were expected to sacrifice everything, including their whole selves, for their children. But Edna claimed that she could not sacrifice her ego for her children, which violated the social rules of the time and was bound to be condemned. So she drowned herself in the sea when her consciousness could not come to terms with the real society, because death could relieve her from the difficulties her mind led to. This was also one of the reasons why the novel had been criticized in real life since its publication in that time.

Chopin realized Edna’s contradiction between self-consciousness and reality in the Victorian period. So she knew that the sole way to resolve this issue was Edna’s death, which showed the misfortune of females in that background.

**4. The Awakening in the Relationship with Her Lovers**

The Victorian period was particularly strict in their relationship with women. Women were required to strictly abide by religious doctrines and moral norms, especially emphasizing that women should be loyal to their husbands and could not indulge their relationships with other men. Moreover, the good women had “to remain uninterested in sexual activity” in the patriarchal society (Tyson 90). In the Creole community Edna lived in, what she said was contrary to the religious and moral requirements in her real behaviors. Although they performed flippantly in appearance, Creole people were strict in following the religion doctrines and ethical rules. Edna, who came from a “pagan religion,” different from them, was always consistent with her words and deeds. So she was undoubtedly influenced by the Creole people in the relationship with other men outside the marriage.

**4.1 Breaking Religious Restraints**

The atmosphere of Creole community provided an open language atmosphere for women, which laid the foundation for Edna’s own love awakening. It should be mentioned that Chopin lived in such an atmosphere after marrying her husband. But the Creole only spoke freely about everything, and they acted in accordance with the religious tradition. In contrast to the habits Edna had learned in Kentucky, she began to act against the old religious norms following the free speaking. Edna was from Kentucky, and she was the daughter of a devout Christian father who adhered rigorously to religious doctrines. As the father’s daughter, Edna also sternly followed the kind of dogmas, words and deeds from religion before marriage. However, when she came to the Creole community and contacted with the open and giddy speaking atmosphere, she was greatly influenced and did what she heard and said then.

After Edna came to the Grand Isle, she was influenced by the religious atmosphere here, and began to release her repressed nature. Her words crossed the religious line in Kentucky and behaviors were consistent with the words she said. On the Isle, Edna was always accompanied by Robert, a young man, and there was a silent understanding between them during the summer vacation. Edna and Robert always had a lot to talk about, and Robert patiently listened to what Edna had to say. It could be seen from this that Robert could give Edna a certain equal identity in the dialogue, which Edna couldn’t get from her husband. This obviously broke the rules of the religion making for a married woman. Moreover, Edna’s talent for painting as a hobby was not appreciated by her husband, and Edna’s father admired it because he was proud of the talent he had bestowed on his daughter. But Robert, unlike them, genuinely admired Edna’s talent for painting. From this, we could know that Edna didn’t follow what the religion asked for woman in that time, for she stepped into the art area which was usually dominated by man. And when Edna swum far away and encountered the fear of death, Robert could understand her while her husband couldn’t, and Robert stayed with her to comfort her. All these gave Edna a sense of equality, which broke the religious norms for married woman, so that Edna’s female consciousness in love began to wake up.

Later, Robert fled to Mexico after realizing he was in love with Edna. Because he thought Edna was Mr. Pontellier’s wife, and, with the religion’s boundary, he could not make her his wife. Even after his return from Mexico, he tried to hold back his feelings for Edna. Instead, Edna had been brave enough to show him her love towards him. This certainly broke the religious insistence that a wife should be faithful to her husband. But Robert had been struggling with the identity of Edna as other’s wife, and finally left Edna again. Here it showed that Robert was one of men in the patriarchal society who believed that a woman should belong to a man according to the religion. Robert, however, could not really understand her mind. When Edna realized that Robert was ultimately a man like her husband in the patriarchal society. She said to Robert:

“You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours.’ I should laugh at you both.’” (Chopin 128)

Edna’s self-consciousness in the relationship with lovers was fully awakened in this paragraph. It definitely overthrew the image of woman made by the religion. First, she gained economic independence on her own, and then she realized that she belonged to herself and did not belong to others, which represented her attempt to break the fixed role for women controlled by the social and religious rules in that time. There was no doubt that Chopin was the forerunner of feminist thought and took the lead in showing it in her own work.

Edna achieved a kind of romantic consciousness-awakening
in her relationship with Robert in religion sense, and she was also soberly aware that Robert did not understand her own sense of independence. She knew that she did not belong to anyone in the love relation, because they were equal to each other and they only belonged to themselves. She could only face and think about her own freedom alone, and no one could really understand her. And all these were close to the religious and social environment in the Victorian period.

4.2 Breaking Ethical Barriers

Besides disobeying of religious restraints, Edna also violated ethical barriers. After Robert’s departure, Edna’s awakening consciousness of love made her constantly seek out all the news of Robert through others. “She sought him everywhere - in others whom she induced to talk about him” (Chopin 54). In a conversation later, Edna reached out to touch the scar on Arobin’s wrist after meeting him at a horse race. “A quick impulse that was somewhat spasmodic impelled her fingers to close in a sort of clutch upon his hand”, and “the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness” (Chopin 90). It could be seen from here that Chopin focused on depicting Edna breaking the moral requirements of women in the society at that time, and highlighted the moral “degeneration” of Edna who pursued the physical desire as the wife of Mr. Pontellier. This was a violation of the norms of female behavior in the moral context of the time. And the book and Chopin were boycotted because of this reason to some extent.

Later, Edna held Arobin’s head tightly when he was about to kiss her and offered to kiss him back. “It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded.” (Chopin 98)

This scene disobeyed the moral norms of woman and violated ethical taboos in the Victorian time. After the event, she felt the reproach of her husband through all that he provided with, which showed she also knew about the moral requirements of her time as a wife, as well as the reproach of Robert’s love. Because she never got rid of the ethical identity of other people’s wife, and at the same time, she “betrayed” her own true love, which was also a kind of a violation of moral rules in a sense. She filled her lust for love with physical satisfaction, which was forbidden by the society for woman. For this reason, too, the author was severely censured in her own time. But when Edna actually moved out of her husband’s house and into a “pigeon house” on her own money, her guilt was gone, for she felt that she was beginning to be free financially and spiritually. But the “freedom” she felt here undoubtedly posed a severe challenge to the moral environment at that time.

Although Edna gradually realized the awakening of love in the relationship with her lovers and had a deeper understanding of love, she could not get rid of the restrictions of the social environment on women in reality. At that time, it was disloyal to her husband and intolerable to cheat spiritually. However, Edna not only cheated spiritually, but also descended to the level of physical desire as a woman, which could not be understood by people at that time. This was also one of the important reasons why the book was banned shortly after it was published.

5. Conclusion

Kate Chopin’s The Awakening was blocked in the decades after it was published, mainly because it was dominated by the specific male-dominated society of that time toward women in social environment and moral norms. After the 1960s, when the second women’s movement came to a climax, this work was rediscovered by feminists. The main reason was that the social environment had changed. At this time, the society was no longer so resistant to women talking about sex, it also separated sex from morality and women’s rights’ range was largely broadened, which provided an inclusive and accepting environment for this work. So Chopin has been considered to have portrayed sex in literature before D. H. Lawrence since then. The Awakening has also been compared to Madame Bovary by many critics. This proves the value of the novel in history and literature. The change of people’s attitude towards this novel in different periods explains that the social environment influences females’ lifestyle. This article towards the awakening of female consciousness of Edna from the perspective of her relationship with others, is not only beneficial for the readers to understand female consciousness at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century in America and misfortune and hardships women met, but also gives the readers a chance to know the specific situation of female consciousness under the specific historical environment.

To sum up, whether it’s in the relationship with her children, her husband, or lovers, the spirit of Edna achieved the real awakening of self-consciousness as a female, but she always failed to get rid of the fetters caused by the family responsibility, and the identity of the social and ethical environment constraints in reality. When she was clearly aware of this, she ultimately got her liberation physically and spiritually through the death in the sea. This was also what Chopin wanted to express in the book. Under the strict patriarchal society and ethical restrictions, only death could give women real liberation and freedom physically and mentally. Therefore, the fate of women in the Victorian era in America was controlled by the patriarchy. They couldn’t be themselves like men, but belonged to men as property and depended on men economically.

References


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