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TO CONFORM OR NOT TO CONFORM: CONFLICTS OF MOTHERHOOD IN KATE CHOPIN'S SELECTED FICTION

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Abstract

Kate Chopin was the first genuinely modern American woman writer who aspired to transcend the provincial themes that most women writers of her time employed. Her works are the salient reflections of historical and social context of late 1890s in which she finds the rigid conventions of Creole culture as oppressive and confining women through marriage. She is an avant-garde author who dares to depict the bohemian lifestyle of 'New Woman' ideals in her fiction. This article tries to show that the protagonists' quest for self-determination and self-fulfillment in Chopin's selected fiction are similar with the 'New Woman's' visions of the nineteenth century. This study aims to explore the protagonists' conflicts between individual autonomy and social conformity and shows that each protagonist is torn between her social and familial responsibility and her declaration for needs to fulfill her own emerging desires. It also highlights protagonists' attitude toward the concept of motherhood and wifehood obligations, freedom, female sense of selfhood and sexuality. In the present study her masterpiece *The Awakening*, "The Story of an Hour" and "A Pair of Silk Stockings" are to be analysed using feminist perspective. As her stories portray dissatisfied women trapped in unhappy marriages and restricted position as mothers and caretakers of home, my study tries to examine the protagonists' yearning and struggles to elevate their lot, to fulfill personal desires, to question the institution of marriage, and Victorian motherly responsibilities. This study plans to compare how the protagonists' struggle for self-fulfillment are manifested through their pursuit of romantic love, freedom and leisure of possession respectively.

Keywords: Awakening, Individuality, Motherhood, New Woman, Self-Fulfillment, Self-Ownership.

1. Introduction

Nineteenth century America witnessed the rise of social women reformers who questioned the practice of social inequalities between sexes especially within the institution of marriage. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin were those literary activists who lived in the era when the notion of the 'New Woman' emerged. They portrayed the 'New Woman' characters who "reject traditional stereotypes of woman as delicate, passive and domestic" (Beer & Nolan, 2004, p. 5). The term 'New Woman' was coined by British feminist Sarah Grand who described an independent woman who seeks achievement and self-fulfillment beyond the realm of marriage and family. 'New Woman' marks a sense of "modern discontent with the traditional stay-at-home life of marriage and motherhood deemed appropriate for middle-class women" (Gamble, 2006, p. 259). Such woman is determined to make choices about the conduct of her own life and Chopin's stories declaring this ground breaking slogan challenged the cherished patriarchal assumptions about woman's role and matrimonial relationship.

In the context of 1890's fin-de-siècle of American feminism, *The Awakening* broke new thematic ground at a time when few women writers dare to explore female's sexual desire and

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aspiration for independence. In addition to *The Awakening*, Chopin's other short fiction, written in the 1890s deal with women's struggle to maintain or achieve a social position from which their needs and desires might be fulfilled.

Although previous studies on Chopin explored some aspects of the 'New Woman's rebellion in *The Awakening* there is a gap in the sense that all dimensions of the 'New Woman' evolution or rebellion have not been compared in these selected works. I want to argue that like *The Awakening's* heroine, the heroines in these selected short stories share some other features of the 'New Woman's quest. Therefore the present study seeks to integrate the ideals of 'New Woman' reflected in *The Awakening*, "The Story of an Hour" and "A Pair of Silk Stockings" and to examine how these protagonists reach these ideals. Chopin by writing the experiences of female characters and their struggles to better their lot in their particular society tries to manifest her deep concerns about the limited lives of women trapped in the institution of marriage. Chopin wrote when the concept of Southern womanhood and particularly Creole's attitude towards women demanded them to engage themselves to the private sphere of domestic life. Sexual intercourse within the realm of marriage was more meant to reproduce young generation and "proper women were not perceived as having sexual needs or as being capable of experiencing erotic pleasures. For a respectable woman, the sex act was one of self-sacrifice; the true woman was passionless" (Martin, 1988, p. 16). The Victorian etiquette expected mothers to sacrifice themselves for their husbands and children. These patriarchal expectations become the barrier for Chopin's women who wish to assert their selfhood apart from institution of marriage and wife's domestic duties. Edna Pontellier is an embodiment of the 'New Woman' who shows that women's sexual desires are not confined to motherhood and procreation but rather she invalidates the Victorian social mores and supports the idea of joyful female sexuality even out of wedlock. In line with Edna the protagonists in the short stories also disregard some of the four cardinal virtues of the True Woman which are piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.

Chopin's fiction mainly revolves around the issue of marriage, motherhood, women's desire for a separate identity, female autonomy and the degree to which the female characters can ask for self possession within the realm of marriage. 'Self-ownership', when it applies to women, has a specifically sexual meaning, connoting ownership of the body as well as of material possession. 'Self-ownership' in the second half of the nineteenth century, "signified a wife's right to refuse marital sex or to choose when to be pregnant" (Stange, 1999, p. 203), namely the right for voluntary motherhood.

2. Discussion

The story of *The Awakening* commences at a resort on Grand Isle. Edna Pontellier and her two young sons are spending summer there. The resort is an "oasis of women's culture" and a female colony that is run and owned by women. Although Edna Pontellier is both an alien in terms of her religious and ethnical background she initiates the first step of her sensual voyage of self-discovery there. In the beginning of *The Awakening*, Léonce Pontellier a New Orleans businessman observes his wife Edna as she walks from the beach to their cottage resort. Léonce is irritated that she has defied the convention and bathed during the heat of the day and looks at his wife and says "you are burnt beyond recognition, looking at his wife as one looks at one's valuable piece of personal property which has suffered from some damage" (Chopin, 1969, p. 882). Several critics like Margit Stange have responded to Leonce's treatment as materialistic one that he objectifies his wife value as his commodity or business stock. However, I believe that due to Leonce's regular absence and travel, his character is not fully developed to be judged as a patriarchal and selfish person based on that particular matrimonial conversation. On the same night an "aura of marital tension" escalates when an inebriated Léonce upbraids her for being inattentive to their son's health, but Edna in response to Leonce's unreasonable anxiety bursts into tears and refuses to come back to bed with him. When Léonce declares that he "can't permit" Edna to remain outside, she decides to defy him so as to avoid submission or obedience. Léonce believes his demands to be normal and reasonable. Edna believes her response to his behavior to make her obey his wishes is a personal problem and never analyses

the subordinate role assigned to wives. Edna's problem is that she views motherhood as a moral responsibility rather than a social obligation. It is suggested that when Edna disregards the expected maternal duties and withholds herself from conjugal sexual performance, she attempts to assert one of the New Woman's credos that demand the right for self-ownership. She no longer performs marital sexual intercourse with her husband, instead she accompanies Robert Lebrun who serves as the vehicle of her awakening into her sexuality and in order to assuage her unaccountable dissatisfaction with her current state of life she extends her relationships with him. However, Léonce finds Robert's mild flirtation harmless and as a Creole husband he does not harbor jealousies toward his wife's male acquaintances. Because in the Creole circles of his day a woman's betrayal of her husband was considered unthinkable, he unwittingly lets her free to extend her latent awakening into passion.

Edna's burgeoning romantic love with Robert enables her to examine the first phase of the realisation of her individuality and refusal to be possessed by her husband. She learns how to violate the rules and principles of Victorian society that men uphold them. At the end of the novel as their romantic fusion develops Edna strongly declares to Robert that she doesn't want to be treated as men's object of possession which plays a hindrance to the development of her individuality. She admonishes Robert not to waste his time "dreaming impossible things". She says "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (992). Edna reminds Robert of the significance of her realization.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a serious feminist of Chopin's time declared in 1892 "in discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual" (qtd in Beer, 2008, p. 93). What Edna struggles to claim as her property is, first, her body and her sexual exchange value and most importantly are her hands as "surplus source" of earning, wealth and creativity. Edna surveys her hands critically in two states, the one that is naked and sunburned and second, a hand which is entangled with a wedding ring. In her first state her hand would diminish her commodity-like status as Léonce's wealth because her sunburned hands are the indicators of some sort of outdoor labour and exercise. There is a scene that Edna in her desperate mood and in a fit of violent dissatisfaction with her life took off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When "she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture" (Chopin, 1969, p. 934). However her inability in crushing her wedding ring foreshadows her fate that she cannot be liberated from the vigilant Victorian moral codes and strictures. But her fingers without wearing the ring enable her to paint, make sketches, bet and make a living for her newly liberated self. Edna's hand without her wedding ring not only strengthens her individual integrity but also symbolically dismantles the conventional belief that she belongs to Léonce's possessions.

Edna realises that "what she wants is not to feel the pride of ownership herself but to escape Léonce's ownership of herself, to leave behind forever her place among his possession" (Skaggs, 1985, p. 105) and to achieve her true goal she has to encounter the prudish and inflexible system of her society. Chopin characterizes two different examples of mothers. Adele Ratignolle and Edna embody two poles of motherhood. Adele is the embodiment of domesticity and "fecund maternity". She is the epitome of the "mother-woman", a devoted wife and an attentive mother who is a foil to Edna who disregards voluntary motherhood. Edna is depicted as a self-assertive heroine and in contrast Adele is a self-forgetting foil.

In a heated argument Edna explains to Adele "I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin, 1969, p. 929). In refusing to be a mother-woman she absents herself from her motherly roles and entrusts the care of her children to the quadroon servant. To perform motherly duties, society expects to be selflessness and relinquishes her quests for self-fulfillment. Margo Culley argues that women of this era have awakened to the fact that they have been overdoing the motherhood self sacrifice business (1994, p. 128). Likewise Edna does not see the marriage of the Ratignolles as perfect union based on mutual love, unconditional devotion and equal responsibility on both sides of husband and wife. Edna faces motherhood with two different attitudes. She is sometimes convinced that nature and her

fate had not fitted her for the role of motherhood. She is a mother by chance and her motherhood is a by-product of an "accidental marriage". Edna as a mother "has a dual life, the outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin, 1969, p. 893). Her outward existence is that of social roles such as the roles of mother and wife and her inner life, is that of her vision for romantic love, gaining autonomy and self-fulfillment. Edna after contemplation in her solitude arrives at a conclusion that a woman will not be able to possess her own self-sovereignty unless she abstains herself both from performing motherly roles and from being the source of sexual pleasure for her husband.

Apart from Robert, Mademoiselle Reisz also plays an important role in Edna's awakening. Edna is stirred and moved by the fervid piano performance of Mademoiselle Reisz, a reclusive bohemian woman who seldom mingles with city folk and usually disregards the social norm of the society. As a mentor she develops and motivates Edna's artistic skill and enflames Edna's unattainable love for Robert. Another role that allows the autonomy Edna desires, is to be an "artist woman". Through the sale of her paintings she gains economic autonomy but later she chooses to abandon the role of "artist woman" for experimentation of "free-woman" role. It seems the role of "free woman" is more fulfilling for her as she comes to own property in her purchase of the pigeon house. And there as a "free-woman" she chooses her sexual partner and answers only to her individual consciousness. But the epiphany that changes Edna is "the realisation that individuality is more important to her than marriage or motherhood. She differentiates between her own personality and that of the mother-women" (Snodgrass, 2006, para 4) who are expected to rear their children in an "idolized manner", to adore and abide their husbands' command, and to "esteem it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals" (Chopin, 1969, p. 888). Her attempt to be free from maternal's responsibility is facilitated through Léonce and children regular absence which gives Edna enough freedom to mull over "her position in the universe as human being, and to recognise her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (893).

Nature plays an important role in thwarting Edna's aspiration towards fulfilling her desires. The biological aspects of womanhood has already determined some choices and roles for Edna who naively ignores them assuming that her choices about life will not affect other people. There are several models available for Edna that contributes to build or thwart her process of individuation. A charismatic Robert Lebrun's mild flirtation and his swimming lesson awaken her to define her self as sexual entity that she can indulge free from her wedlock obligations. In addition to her newly found freedom from social restrictions, Edna also awakens to her desire to express physical sensuality. Schweitzer (1990) notes "that Edna has awakened slowly over the course of the novel to her physical nature, her sensuality, and her right to enjoy them" (p. 183). In her attempt to realise her individuality and to assert her right to abstain or choose sexual partner Edna decides: "I give myself where I choose" (Chopin, 1969, p. 992) and in the absence of Robert she is emotionally and sexually repressed but the ultimate irony is that Edna in order to satisfy her sexual urge has to experience a passion separate from love. She gives herself physically to someone who can respond to her libidinous compulsions of the moment.

Edna is determined to continue her self-exploration of body and personal freedom and she is temporarily successful in making her yearnings true. Edna creates an "I" and she becomes an independent woman who lives on her own, makes a living from sale of her arts, betting and the legacy she inherited from her mother. Being financially secure and confident enough to step out of her husband home space she comes to realisation of her own capabilities. She leaves Leonce's renovated mansion to a small pigeon house that she hires to spend her solitude. In this sense she has fulfilled one of the basic quests of the 'New Woman's. To assert her independence and possession of her own dwelling she commits adultery with the notorious womaniser of city, Alcee Arobin, who doesn't trigger her passionate love she desires for Robert. Edna's sexual intercourse with Arobin is another manifestation of the 'New Woman' credo of free love that woman can seek sexual pleasure without marriage or love.

There are other factors that thwart Edna's endeavor towards independence, fulfillment of inner self and forming new identity according to her own plan. Edna has been brought up under her father rigid Protestant doctrines but when she is married to a Creole husband she experiences her moment of self discovery in a new environment which contrasts to her Presbyterian background. A change of setting from urban restraints offers her an opportunity to explore a new self. There she enjoys the female refuge on Grand Isle and the vacation on the Gulf resort have made Edna realise that "she herself _ her present self _ was in some ways different from the other self" (Chopin, 1969, p. 921). It is the ambience of the Creole summer colony and lack of prudery among married women that "invites her to loosen her mantle of reserve" but Edna doesn't understand the double standard of New Orleans societal rules that allow women the language of personal freedom but at the same time demand them to conform to strict propriety codes as respected in Louisiana.

I want to argue that Grand Isle, as an island is the right setting that awakened Edna's true needs. It is the place that is cut off from the mainland bastion of societal rules, thus it enables Edna to express and realise her latent powers and passions, but her progress towards finding her true identity is obstructed when she knows she has to return to the main setting of the novel, New Orleans culture, that confine women to a predetermined "woman's sphere" as wives, hostesses, and mothers. She is victimized by Creole society that has awakened her true desires but now cannot tolerate her romantic vision and the new language she acquired. She comes to an awareness of her new condition that she cannot articulate her story to an uncompromising Creole culture and in order to live with them she must silence herself. This she rejects.

Another Edna's predicament is that she has adopted a masculine language and view that asserts her identity and autonomy. In such society one of Edna's problems is her "linguistic inadequacy": unable to articulate her own story, her social position and her access to the dominant discourse she is the "victim of the stricture" that is imposed on her by patriarchal domination. "Edna's problem is never simply one of the achieving the freedom to make sexuality possible or to forsake paternalistic conventions: it is rather a question of how a woman who has achieved a self and has become an "I" can live in the world" (Treichler, 1993, p. 319). She has mastered her own speech of using the pronoun "I" in demanding what she opts for. But at the point of her final movement, she speaks and embodies 'a language which nobody understood', a language which cannot be spoken because her voice is a kind of unfit communication into the conservative culture of Creole.

She notices that in such an uncomprehending society nobody will listen to her new feminine and maternal language that exists outside of patriarchal inhabitations. Suicide is the last option for her as there is no other way to reconcile or compromise with the obstinate patriarchal societal norms that were present in almost every domain of her life. Chopin's heroine faces demise at the cost of being different from the mass. In the same manner Mary Papke both "informs and warns that self-oblivion and death may be the result for a woman who dares to be different" (Papke, 1990, p. 76). The notion of death or punishment for fallen heroines was well established to please the audience of the mid-eighteenth century and the nineteenth. But Edna's self-inflicted death challenges this notion that she does not want to be categorized under this narrative convention. What makes Edna profoundly a 'New Woman' is her act of suicide as the only way to defy "the selfless absorption in husband and children that was expected of the Victorian True Woman" (Rich, 1998, p. 131).

"The Story of an Hour" and "A Pair of Silk Stockings" reveal Chopin's preoccupation with the themes of female agency, independence, marriage and motherhood that were the touchstones of 'New Woman's credos and visions. These two short stories portray women who acknowledge needs of the self, though these are not erotic needs as Edna wants. "The Story of an Hour" is set in the late nineteenth century in Louise Mallard's home. Louise receives shocking news of the reported death of her husband in a train accident. She is distraught at first and weeps with "wild abandonment" and then retires alone to her upstairs bedroom. In her own solitude, while she is grieving over the death of her husband she is attracted to the new

spring life through the window of her room. The twittering of sparrows and the smell of rain exposed to her, symbolically convey new life or rebirth of a liberated self that is not obliged to stick to womanly codes and wifely duties of the Victorian society of America. Louise glimpses herself as an individual that has found her new possibility of leading her life as "she kept whispering Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin, 1969, p. 354). She is imbued with "monstrous joy" that she is now free and can plan a future life thanks to her victorious independence which allows her to live for herself and "there would be no powerful will bending hers" (p. 353). After having revelation in her own private sphere she comes down like "a goddess of victory" clasping her sister's waist but her new found self is soon ended when she receives another shock, a reversal, which proves lethal. To her surprise she sees her husband on the door step and alive, instantly she collapses and doctors ironically attribute her death of heart attack. An attack that the doctors call "of joy that kills" (p. 354). The doctors' diagnoses imply that a woman would undoubtedly be so happy at the unexpected reunion with her husband that she would die of shock. Chopin implicitly questions the suppressive nature of marriage in late nineteenth century society. Mrs. Mallard's fatal heart stop is not because of her overwhelming happiness at seeing her husband alive but ironically it is due to the erasure of the joy of her new self hood and return of old self who has to keep conforming with previous codes and beliefs.

Chopin depicts another example of the shackle of American marriage that wife is fettered by the powerful male wills bending and shaping the desires and actions of wives, "stealing away" their freedom and any chance for complete self-fulfillment. In the moment of this realisation of freedom, Louise contemplates her two selves and how the new one can fulfill her own needs, wants, and desires with no husband or family to worry about first. It is within that hour of dreamy thought that she has the chance to discover her true self that was hidden under the constraint of marriage. Even though she knows that Brently loved her, she realises that his kind intentions were nonetheless cruel because they restricted her independence and identity.

Chopin uses symbolism to develop the theme of women's identity and freedom. Chopin uses symbolic separator to show her protagonist's need to assert her independent self and individuality by separating herself from a closed door of her upstairs bed room. Mrs. Mallard enters her first stage of self-discovery by locking herself into her room and she stubbornly claims her self-assertion, as "she would have no one follow her" (p. 352). Mrs. Mallard is free from her sister and social surrounding only within the locked door of her bedroom and she can imagine the 'New Woman's visions and aspirations for freedom and self-fulfillment as long as she is locked into the room and not exposed to her outer world and the reality awaits her outside. Another symbolic instance that contributes to the protagonist's development towards her individuality and freedom is when the narrator frees Mrs. Mallard from her husband's possession by giving an identity and name aside from her husband's family name. The narrator changes Mrs. Mallard's name into Louise when she comes down like "a goddess of victory".

The setting of short story is in late nineteenth century when the right of property ownership was still in effect and favouring male inheritor, however there is no evidence in the text that the Mallards has a boy offspring. It seems Mrs. Mallard's "monstrous joy" is not just limited to the possible freedom of future but she enjoys possessing all her husband's house items, belongings and wealth as well as hers and most importantly she become the sole owner of her body that there will be no bending responsibilities of wifhood or motherhood.

"A Pair of Silk Stockings" tells the story of another widow, the poverty-stricken Mrs. Sommers, who unexpectedly found herself possessor of fifteen dollars windfall. Mrs. Sommers is extremely happy and obsessed with the calculation and speculation of investing this large amount of money to outfit her four children in new clothes. She meticulously estimates the needs of boys and girls and mentally imagines how to apportion all this money for the good of her children. Initially Mrs. Sommers thinks of her children as her habit and it seems that she is the woman who adheres to the codes of motherly self-sacrifice but she "clearly feels a conflict in

what appears to be her dutiful performance of daily responsibilities" (Wagner-Martin, 2009, para. 1). But on a whim Mrs. Sommers unexpectedly changed her direction and begins buying things for herself. She experiences an awakening need to treat herself and on her shopping spree she spends the entire money on frivolous items and personal luxuries.

The propriety codes of the current time demands Mrs. Sommers to struggle for the survival and well-being of her children with no thought on herself but the reader soon recognises one of the paradoxes of human existence when "Mrs. Sommers' permanent obligation, her duty to her children, contrasts with her momentary freedom when she spends money on herself" (Byrd, 1999, p. 3). Through purchasing of the stockings, Mrs. Sommers is able to put away her thoughts and responsibilities for a moment and indulge her own desires by buying stylish boot, luxurious gloves, two expensive magazines and having lunch in a fine restaurant and the final leisure she can afford is to watch a matinee theatrical performance where she can see herself on a par with upper class women who are free from domestic burden and motherly worries. Self-fulfillment and pleasure of buying material goods soon gets over as she remembers her speculations and motherly obligations. Mrs. Sommers's epiphany about the reality of self-possession is the moment she is returning home on cable car. She is seized on her way home by "poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever" (504). Her poignant wish indicates that her attempt for self-fulfillment was transitory and she does not desire to return to the reality of her life, but she wishes the freedom, happiness, and leisure she felt on the day of her shopping time could continue into the future.

Chopin's relinquishment of the significance of mothering demonstrates a psychological depiction of woman in need of pleasure and luxury. However, Mrs. Sommers's willingness to give up her everyday maternal duty is more than just fulfilling the material needs that her marriage deprived her. Her ultimate wish is to "enhance her self esteem and confidence by the use of the power that money gives her" (Ewell, 1996, p. 141). Mrs. Sommers attempts to deconstruct her overburdened existence under which she has been labouring but her choice is a desperate, blind and impulsive drive towards "the consumer ethic that insists that one's true worth is determined by the quality and worth of one's possession and amusements" (Stein, 2004, p. 365). The story ends with somber reality of her very nature of being as a mother and subversive realisation that her domestic role will not allow her to enjoy her own contentment and self-fulfillment.

Critics tended to explore the 'New Woman' term in *The Awakening* but I believe Chopin short stories also genuinely incorporate the theme of the 'New Woman'. Charlotte Jennifer Rich argues that Chopin's short stories do not possess all New Woman's attributions. It seems she fails to offer deeper interpretation of two widely anthologized short stories as she believes that "neither Mrs. Sommers nor Mrs. Mallard possesses the stereotypical characteristics of the 'New Woman'; they do not smoke cigarettes, ride bicycles, or have college degrees and advanced ideas. However, their inner conflicts resemble real and fictional 'New Woman' encountered" (Rich, 1998, p. 113). I want to argue although both protagonists did not possess such attributions, their struggles for self-fulfillment and their recognition of the peril of marriage are clear manifestations of The New Woman's credos.

3. Conclusion

Wealth, social status, the economic security of marriage and the handy presence of Edna's quadroon servant allows her the time and the space for the "awakening of the 'New Woman' mentality". On the other hand Mrs. Mallard's short freedom does not grant her enough time to practice the ideals of 'New Woman' once she envisions. The return of Mr. Mallard is an obstacle in developing of her newly found self. Chopin subtly expresses that woman cannot think of freedom and other possibilities for herself as long as she is committed to the sanctity of marriage. It is through the death of Louise's husband and therefore the demise of their marriage bounds that she finds the opportunity to seek for her personal self-fulfillment and claim for her own body and material possession available to her alone.

"A Pair of Silk Stockings" not only debunks the notion that the care of children can be of great joy for mothers but also reveals a great limitation on a woman's freedom. It emphasizes the extent to which a woman must empty herself of personal preferences and desires in order to care for her children. For protagonists like Edna Pontellier and Mrs. Sommers, rearing children is not only pleasure but also a great limitation on a woman's freedom and self-fulfillment. Mrs. Sommers's short experience of personal leisure and her final temptation to be on par with women's audience of theater are her strong assertion of the 'New Woman's obsessions.

Overall Chopin creates an aberrant 'New Woman' figures whose struggles towards selfhood in an oppressive, uncomprehending society proved abortive. Edna's death, is the ultimate release from the imprisonment of a society that cannot accept a woman who is completely in tune with her own instinctual nature. Swimming into the Gulf with no intention of returning is Edna's final declaration of economic, sexual independence and her self-ownership. Edna reaches this understanding that her newly awakened self is misfit into Creole culture and she cannot assimilate herself into the mold that her husband and his society fashioned for her. She resolves that in the inhospitable Creole culture the masculine language she adopts to articulate and then to implement the 'New Woman's ideals are frowned upon by the dominant society.

Chopin addresses the conflict between motherhood and personal ambition and shows the tensions between a woman's role as an individual and mother. Not only are women expected to fulfill their roles as mothers, they are also expected to view motherhood as the vehicle to ultimate expression of personal desire. These views are contested by the protagonists.

The three protagonists share similar yearns, they do not wish to consume their whole being in marriage, motherhood obligation and home responsibility. They are associated with management of home but they are not the head or sole owner of the home materials. Chopin established women capable of decision and determination and thus achieving self-actualisation. Edna decides to take her life, Mrs. Sommers decides to indulge her pleasure of buying materials rather than performing her daily motherhood duties and Mrs. Mallard also decides to start a new life but her vision of future is temporary and collapsed. These heroines could not achieve total fulfillment and freedom as the society was not ready to change according to their wishes or tolerate them. The success or failure of these new women to achieve emotional and financial autonomy is not crucial what is important is their daring endeavor to "start on a journey towards a greater sense of self" (Worton, 2008, p. 108).

Each protagonist experiences some sort of spiritual epiphany and awakening expression towards achieving their own personality and each of them declares her reluctance in placing her sense of self inside their imposed domestic roles. The protagonists in each story who transgressed against the conventions of cult of true womanhood or at least recognized their limitations as mother and wife come to this realisation about the impossibility of coexisting with a society which frowns upon such 'New Woman's quests and defiance of social codes.

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