

Oceanic Consciousness in Chopin's *The Awakening*

Churamoni Kandel, PhD 

Abstract

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Corresponding Author

Churamoni Kandel, PhD

Email

churamoni39@gmail.com

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Department of English Education
Faculty of Education, P. N. Campus,
Tribhuvan University, Nepal
Email: enged@pncampus.edu.np
URL: www.pncampus.edu.np

*This paper examined and analyzed how the sea functions as a decisive force in shaping Edna Pontellier's self-discovery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. This study employs the theoretical lens of Blue Humanities to explore Edna's transformation. It employs the dynamics of the qualitative approach, with an interpretive research design to examine how ocean itself plays an active and agentive role in her evolving consciousness. It draws concepts from numerous sources like oceanic studies, phenomenology, vibrant materialism, and affect theory, to examine Edna's sensory encounters with the sea -its sound, touch, rhythms, and expansiveness. These sources demonstrate how Edna searches for identity and autonomy through her intimacy with water. She swims due to her emotional attachment to the Gulf and shorelines she often visits them. It analyzes her oceanic consciousness and her attachment with water. Critics around the globe become fascinate to her attitude and explore her possibilities of her immersion to the sea. Though they term her act as a tragedy, they also label her act as a means of her search for a self, free from the societal bondages. This study also contributes to the ecological study to a greater benefit within the framework of Blue Humanities.*

Keywords: Agency, Blue Humanities, consciousness, eco-criticism, oceanic

Introduction

This research explored oceanic consciousness in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (TA) to examine how sea acts as a force to shape Edna Pontellier's identity. This novel introduced women of the late 19th century, with societal restrictions; and their struggle for their identity, liberty, and fulfillment of sentiments. TA portrayed sea as a motif that influences Edna, the effects on her cognition, sentiments, senses, and metanoia. The ocean in the narrative not only acted as a symbol, but also a dynamic force to bring reformations in Edna's introspection. This perspective exemplified this novel as what afterwards psychoanalytic discourse terms "oceanic consciousness," a state associated with emotional

boundlessness and the dissolution of rigid boundaries. Thus, Chopin introduced Edna's confronts with the sea, and explored her coming out from the captivity of wifeliness and parenthood, and moved toward oneself.

This researcher employed 'Blue Humanities' theory in this study to explore an ocean as a source of realizing the selfhood of Edna. This theory analyzed how the human relationship with water drew from environmental humanities, social sciences, history, literature, and the arts. It examined cultural, social, historical, and ethical interactions with oceans, rivers, and other water bodies. It incorporated scientific data and acknowledges water's vital role in the planet's ecosystems and human culture. Numerous critics analyzed this novel through this concept. In this regard Robinson (2004) adduced, "*The Awakening* is a novel of atmospheres as much as actions, where environment shapes inwardness with quiet insistence" (p. 14). He explored how *TA* operated through subtle environmental influences rather than overt plot movements. The surrounding atmosphere, especially the sea quietly shaped Edna's inner life. It guided her emotional awakening powerfully than social events do. Freud (1961) too introduced the idea of oceanic consciousness and postulated a sensation of boundlessness in *TA*. He found "a feeling of being one with the external world as a whole" (p. 12). This structure portrayed Edna's relationship with the sea deeper than it used as a symbol. Such a structure illuminated Edna's relationship with the sea more than it merely a symbol. Its mental and sensorial force realigned her sentiments. Goullet (2012) reverberated this opinion and postulated, "Chopin's sea is not ornament; it is agency-it acts, invites, and transforms" (p. 72). He adduced how the sea turned as an active force rather than merely decorative scenery. It shaped Edna's sentiments, resolutions, and developing recognition. These factors functioned as an alteration to set in motion her awakening. Likewise, Bate (2000) explored the forces of nature that often "shape the imaginative life of characters more deeply than social pressures alone" (p. 53). Edna was moved by the power of sea and self-recognition deeply than by the provocation of the society.

TA explored the expository value of environmental consciousness. Its plot panorama often functioned as "psychic terrains through which the protagonist's interior crises are refracted" (Gupto, 2001, p. 87). The wilderness operated as metaphorical landscapes that mirrored and intensified the protagonist's inner sentimental conflicts. American creative writing often used plot panorama to "register emotional turbulence that characters cannot articulate verbally" (Lohani, 2010, p. 112). The habitat conveyed the characters' unspoken psychological distress more flamboyantly than their own words ever could. Edna immersed in the sea to express her sentimental tumults. One could understand the natural environment in arts through "interactive energies that pass between environment and emotion" (Poudel, 2019, p. 59). The environment and human feelings belonged to same spheres and acted as reciprocally swaying forces. Edna's inner life evolved through a relationship between human and nonhuman world. They elucidated how the sea impersonated her complex desires of her liberation and resolutions.

TA introduced the sea as a sensorial and emotive agency. Edna contracted with it for her loneliness, fulfillment of her wants, and enveloping her identities. Blue Humanities was employed as a lens to study how ocean played an active role to read Edna's cognition and sentimental evolution. The text not only expanded Chopin's work of art, but equally it integrated environmental literary criticism to portray Edna's revival of ground-breaking, sabotaged, and finally socking power of the oceanic

world. This study also explored Edna's revivals of feminism and cognition, shaped by her harmonious relation with the sea. Her final journey to the sea demonstrated her dissolution of her ego and unity with the universe.

Edna's revival depended on oceanic avocation. She liberated her cognitive bondages by marching to the oceanic world. Her immersion into the sea was also studied from the point of view of feminist, cognitive, or naturalist structure. Therefore, this study found the sea not only as a symbol but a transformative agent that shaped Edna's recognition, sentiments, and free from societal bondages.

TA introduced in forefront the dimensions like women's rights activist, psychiatry, and ethno-cultural interpretations to expose Edna's struggle against male dominated detention. However, the novel missed to explore the concept of sea that liberated Edna from the liberation. The predominated issue of this study lied in the absence of recurrent, principally forefront description of oceanic consciousness in *TA*. The extant studies missed how Edna's sensorial, emotive, and experiential affiance with the sea shaped her awakening. As a result, the ocean remained unexplored as an effective power. This research attempted to fill that gap by illuminating the sea not only as a symbol of liberty or expiration, but also as a means of cadence, profundity, and smoothness. This research formulated the following research questions:

- (a) How did the sea affect Edna Pontellier's consciousness and introspection in *TA*?
- (b) How did a Blue Humanities outlook intensify our understanding of Edna's awakening?

This research drew the following objectives:

- (a) To analyze how the sea affected Edna Pontellier's consciousness, sentiments, and introspection in *TA*.
- (b) To examine how a Blue Humanities outlook reinterpreted Edna's awakening and her interactions with the ocean.

This research held importance as it found the sea as a driving force to shape Edna's life for her awakening, and not only as a symbolic backdrop. In contrast to traditional feminist and psychoanalytic readings of the novel, this study applied a Blue Humanities lens to portray the sea as an agent that mediates Edna's self-discovery, autonomy, and rationality. It offers a theoretically grounded, eco-critical perspective that explores the transformative role of the ocean in Edna's awakening and broadens the horizons of literary criticism. It explores how *TA* anticipates contemporary concerns about the relationship between humans and marine environments. Thus, it makes the text newly relevant in light of current ocean-centered humanities studies.

This study limits by its focus on a single theoretical lens, Blue Humanities. However, it does not account for all possible interpretations of *TA*. It concentrates primarily on the ocean's role in shaping Edna's consciousness. It does not explore other themes like class, race, regional culture, or motherhood in depth. Additionally, the research relies exclusively on qualitative textual analysis without incorporating historical archives, biographical documents, or quantitative approaches. It limits its secondary sources to published criticisms on the text, and excludes recondite. However, its limitations require analyses within the selected structure.

Review of Literature

Numerous scholars studied *TA* by making feminism, psychoanalysis, culture, etc. as major

themes of their study. Critics like Friedan and Gilbert & Gubar focused on Edna's rebellious attitudes towards patriarchal hegemony, domestic violence, and social barriers. Friedan (1963) analyzed Edna's rebellion against societal norms, the dependency on males, and cultural issues that restricted females from receiving rights and duties. Those female related issues Edna revolted reflected the 19th century American society (p.42). Likewise, Gilbert and Gubar (1979) introduced Edna's confliction on societal interruptions, and how she opposed it through swimming as a symbol of rebellion. Edna's fights against those evil practices represented a feminist awakening (p.126). The sea in the story was metaphorical rather than an active force.

Edna's phenomenal changes to her life were evidenced from her swimming and immersion in the water. As she learnt to swim, Chopin (1899) postulated, "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul" (p. 33). Her first swim awakened her inner power. It also marked her beginning of her emotional and spiritual liberation. Bate (2000) found the influences of natural forces in literature, characters therein, and their imaginative and emotional lives. Such influences kept values more in life than the societal and cultural pressures (p. 53). This approach led to the foundation of interpretation of the sea not only as a metaphorical figure of freedom or death but as an active force to awake Edna.

Critics worked on emotional, sensory, and philosophical dimensions beyond the feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations in *TA*. For instance, Baym (1993) made analyses on Chopin's work that "foregrounds the interplay between interior life and external spaces, suggesting that place is inseparable from selfhood" (p. 78). Her analyses juxtaposed to of Edna, her fondness to sea stood not only symbolic but also searching of her lost identity. Similarly, Ammons (2000) found Chopin's natural settings functioning as "affective landscapes, where the emotional and moral energies of characters are continuously mediated by the surrounding environment" (p. 104). The environment in *TA* shapes the characters' inner states, reveals how nature, especially the sea mediates and intensifies Edna's emotional and moral transformations. Thus, one needs to study the sea in *TA* as a dynamic, interactive presence rather than a static symbol.

Some other critics explore ecological and elemental dimensions in *TA*. German critic Knauf (2009) adduced, "Chopin's prose embodies a phenomenology of the senses, where water, wind, and sun structure perception and guide psychological transformation" (p. 56). Chopin employed sensory elements, especially those of the natural world to shape Edna's perceptions. For instance, water, wind, and sunlight guide her psychological awakening. Likewise, Italian critic Stefano (2012) explored the interconnection between Edna and her environment, and thus, postulated, "Chopin's narrative technique immerses the reader in the protagonist's sensory field, making the sea a co-participant in the narrative" (p. 89). Chopin's storytelling draws readers directly into Edna's sensory experience. It allows the sea to function not just as setting but as an active presence shaping the narrative's emotional and psychological movement. Thus, these perspectives reinforce the idea that the ocean acts as an active force in Edna's awakening. It shapes her bodily and emotional experiences in ways that complement or challenge purely social or feminist readings.

Numerous Nepali critics examine *TA* from ecological and affective perspectives though often in the context of broader literary studies. In this context, Adhikari (2015) asserted, "the interaction between human consciousness and natural elements reveals not only psychological depth but also

the socio-cultural constraints that shape emotional expression” (p. 42). She finds the employment of environment and identity in modern literature. Likewise, Shrestha (2017) examined how literary landscapes often function as “dynamic arenas where characters negotiate selfhood, freedom, and desire” (p. 61). He makes a study how natural settings operate as active spaces in which characters confront and reshape their identities. These suggest Edna’s encountering with the sea becoming crucial moments for negotiating her freedom and desires. Thus, these explorations support the application of a ‘Blue Humanities’ approach to *TA*. It situates Edna’s encounters with the sea as both transformative and mediated by broader socio-cultural contexts.

Critics on eco-criticism and oceanic consciousness portrayed nonhuman forces as agents in narrative construction. In this regard, Bennett’s (2010) concept of “vibrant matter” (p. 45) included nonhuman entities like the sea which held capacity to influence human action and perception. To analyze it from Chopin’s perspective, Edna’s immersion in the Gulf waters stood not only as a metaphor of escape but acted as a force to shape her desires, emotions, and existential decisions. Likewise, Buell (1995) explored how eco-critical readings revealed “interactions between consciousness and environment that traditional human-centered criticism overlooks” (p. 72). His eco-critical approaches uncovered the natural ways difficult to grasp, and the natural world that shaped a character’s inner life. These theoretical insights provided a foundation to introduce Edna’s awakening as a product of her oceanic encounters.

The reference of water in literature portrays the concept of Blue Humanities approach. Pratt (1992) made a study of 19th century women’s narratives and found how water often functioned as “a medium for negotiating freedom, emotion, and corporeal awareness” (p. 39). She analyzed water as an agent to renegotiate women’s liberty, sentiments, and interoception. Therefore, the above reviews demonstrated the relationship of sea to Edna for numerous reasons. It helped Edna’s self-discovery. It became an agent of consciousness. However, this study couldn’t explore Edna’s transformation through the lens of oceanic consciousness. It left to explore how sea brought transformation in her inner awakening. Thus, there laid the gap for which this researcher chose to make this study.

Methodology

As a part of close textual analysis, this research employed a qualitative, interpretive research design. It made *TA* as a primary source of study to analyze Edna’s emotional and psychological attachment to the sea which required a text where water functions not merely as setting but as a recurring experiential and transformative medium. This research incorporated published commentaries; critiques, literary works on feminist writings, ecological phenomenon, theories based on Blue Humanities, ecological phenomenon, etc. as its secondary sources.

The researcher made a textual approach as a part of an analytical study of the article. It chose descriptions from the novel related to sound, touch, movement, depth, etc. These descriptions were converted to codes and put into categories related to sensory experience, emotional response, self-awareness; sea agency, etc. These codes helped for the identification of patterns to recognize Edna’s meditation of her inner life.

The study of sensory-textual analysis of the text analyzed how the language created ocean as a field of experiences. It demonstrated imagery, rhythm, and tone. On a thematic interpretation level, Edna’s approaches to the sea resembled to her evolving emotional states. To interpret these findings,

this study selected theoretical frameworks based on affect theory, and vibrant materialism. These concepts represent sea as an agent to shape Edna's consciousness.

The analytical procedures like selection, coding, categorization, theoretical interpretation, etc. ensured methodological transparency and coherence. This process produced results and discussion as a part of main study of this research.

Results and Discussion

The data are analyzed and discussed under seven themes.

Oceanic Awakening and Selfhood

Edna's individuality emerged after her encountered with the sea. The sea functioned as an energetic power and shaped her awareness. Chopin (1899) depicted the ocean as pleasurable and influential, as she asserted "the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude" (p. 25). These attributive factors of the sea awakened Edna, not by the social dialogue she often heard. This sea sound spelled magic power on Edna so much, she became completely lost herself by the harmonious sound of the sea. Thus, this sea became a medium of bringing changes in Edna's life. It brought out her from the social conventions. From the very beginning, the sea broke open between Edna's socially prescribed roles and her emerging consciousness. This change came into her life after her swimming episode. The sea acted as an agency to bring reformation to her life. Chopin (1899) adduced, "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul" (p. 33). This moment aligned with Ponty's (1962) concept of personified perceptions, where self-recognition emerged directly from her sensory engagement with the environment (p. 114). The sea not only symbolized her emotional, physical and existential freedom; but it became a source to generate them. Bennett (2010) employed the concept of "vibrant matter" to regard non-human forces like the sea to shape human feeling (p. 46). So, the sea became an assistant to Edna, and assisted her to achieve liberty, autonomy. She often visited shore to get relief from psychic strain, "she felt no restraint, no repression" (Chopin, 1899, p. 57). It confirmed the ocean role as a sustaining force to Edna. She longed for cognitive liberty, as Baym's (1993) analysis postulated, "experiences place as intimately connected to psychic freedom" (p. 79). Poudel's (2018) regard towards nature became a "dynamic force that releases emotional tensions characters cannot verbalize" (p. 60). Both corroborated how Edna found sea's centrality fitted to her internal evolution. She further sought plainness, liberty, asylum, and psychic release to fight against odd factors. The ocean became a means to her self-discovery.

Oceanic Consciousness and the Dissolution of Boundaries

Edna's consciousness escalated with the expanded sea for her personal independence, genuineness, and immediate occurrence. She dreamt of her freedom, and the sea oriented her towards her freedom passionately and devoutly. She became closer to water with a hope to receive her long-awaited answer (Chopin 1899, p.82). She developed relationship with Robert Lebrun not with a hope to achieve consciousness. However, her sensorial experiences of the sea realigned for her wants. In this regard, Stefano (2012) found Chopin's narrative technique that "immerses the reader in Edna's sensory field, making the sea a co-presence rather than a symbol" (p. 90). This intuition threw light of why Edna's passionate truth came to the top clearly in scenes where she went close to the ocean: its

smoothness mirrored her cognitive shifts, its magnitudes matched her longing for broadness, and its rhythms guide her inner workings.

In regard to ocean, *TA* introduced a contentious ending. Some scholars read it through symbolic or moralistic lenses. Edna experienced a sensorial touch to her body, as Chopin adduced: “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin, 1899, p. 135). From a Blue Humanities point of view, Edna’s final act of oceanic awakening helped her overcoming issues existed around her. The novel expressed Edna’s dissolution, termination, and liberty. Thus, her immersion represented the culmination of comfortable relationship with the sea. It helped her receive awakening in her passionate life, and ultimately proving herself free from limitless horizon.

The Sea as a Sensorial Gateway of Awakening

Edna received aural invitation of the sea that left her depraved and unresolved. Chopin (1899) examined the ocean as it owned a “seductive voice that never ceases, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (p. 15). She found the sea sound having sensorial affect that helped Edna shaped her awareness. The sea was not only close by to Edna, but it reached into her innerness. It inspired her, what Mentz (2009) termed the ocean’s “hydro-affect,” a way in which water “pressures the human sensorium into new emotional and ethical sensitivities” (p. 62). The ocean influenced sensorial and righteous force on individuals. It compelled them to feel and responded in ways that exceeded familiar emotional structure.

Chopin explored how human’s body adjusted to the environment he / she lived in. The contact with the natural object left lasting impression and made humans adapt it for their long benefit. In the novel, Edna’s consciousness aligned to Ponty’s (1962) intentionality, especially the notion that the body recognized the world as a prolongation of itself. The sea’s tactile qualities awaken her to the possibilities of a self no longer constrains by patriarchal boundaries. Here, the sea becomes an intermediary between Edna’s current position and her capacity to become, a threshold space where a new mode of consciousness stirs.

Swimming as Agency: The Body Learns Its Freedom

TA introduces Edna’s ability to swim as one of the pivotal scenes. Until this moment, she possesses desire but not agency. When she finally succeeds, Chopin (1899) adduced: “a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul” (p. 27). It portrays her more than a physical triumph; her revelation of self-capacity. Bhattarai (2018) postulated, “Edna’s first strokes in the sea are the strokes of self-authorization” (p. 44). The sea gives her a new vocabulary of movement, one in which she feels both capable and autonomous. Showalter (1982) found the swimming scene as “a metaphor for female self-possession, a moment in which Edna briefly experiences an embodied autonomy denied by her culture” (p. 212). What makes a Blue Humanities reading distinctive, however, it emphasizes on the sea as an active collaborator in Edna’s agency. Jane Bennett’s (2010) concept of ‘vibrant matter’ reinforced this: the sea becomes an agential force, “a participant in Edna’s becoming, not merely a backdrop for it” (p. 31). Thus, Edna’s swim portrays not a solitary act of rebellion; it results in a co-produced moment of body and water, self and sea.

Oceanic Consciousness as Emotional Reorientation

Edna’s encountering with the sea resulted in an emotional recalibration. Chopin (1994)

introduced the psychological dimension: “The voice of the sea spoke to her soul, the touch of the sea was sensuous, enfolding her” (p. 15). This language expresses an emotional attunement in which she learns to feel through the rhythms of the sea. Edna’s attentiveness to coastal or maritime perspective matched to what Sielke (2016) termed the sea’s “ebb and flow of desire” (p. 98). It supported this study how Edna acquired an oceanic awareness, a physical and symbolic power of water. Edna’s enrooted to sea demonstrated her longing for freedom against the bondages she felt around. Her attachment toward sea aligned to Sara Ahmed’s (2004) affect theory which asserted “bodies move toward what they feel will increase their capacity to act” (p. 89). Her recurrent visit to the coastal turned into her emotive scope.

The Sea as Resistance: Rejecting Domestic Containment

Edna Pontellier violated the social boundary of confinement. It happened as a result of her oceanic awareness. Chopin (1899) postulated, “The mother-woman seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle” (p. 10). However, Edna turned against the outlook of women of her age. She preferred the open sea as a symbol of liberty from societal norms and bondages. Shrestha (2020) analyzed how “the sea allows Edna an alternative model of belonging, one that does not require subservience or sacrifice” (p. 57). Edna’s apathy towards homely duties and her longing for liberation matched to the unlimited boundaries of coastal shore. So, ocean became a metaphor for boundless liberation. It became a space for women who longed liberation against male dominated homes.

The Final Return to the Sea: Fusion, Freedom, or Self-Dissolution?

Edna’s final act of immersion into the sea was analyzed by Chopin (1899) with salient fondness: “The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun” (p. 109). It portrayed her annihilation, liberty, or going back to foundation. Her act demonstrated not a self-annihilation, but a step towards her self-recognition to universal connectedness. Mentz (2020) adduced, “oceanic endings resist the binaries of triumph or defeat, instead expressing a post human entanglement with watery environments” (p. 103). The act of immersion redefined Edna’s growth beyond the social structure. Moi (2002) made a study of Edna’s immersion into the sea as a protest against the long held belief of women shackled into the barriers. Moi asserted, “A longing for a mode of being that cannot coexist with the rigidities of patriarchal modernity” (p. 143). Edna’s preoccupation with the sea made her belief how it became authentic to dissolve rather than survival.

Conclusion and Implications

This study finds how Edna’s sea journey helps her self-recognition. The oceanic roles bring alteration to her life. This research also finds sea as a personified agent- speaking, escorting, and bringing consciousness to Edna’s life. Besides used as a symbol and a metaphor in the *TA*, the sea operates as a living environment that catalyzes Edna’s gradual shift from domestic confinement toward a more expansive and fluid sense of identity. Her encountering with the Gulf often brings harmony to her life. The ripples sound soothes her, the surf hugs her, and her enthusiasm to swim, all work together to free her from civic responsibility. She feels awaken from inside as these factors help gaining her self-recognition. Analysts find her self-awareness derived from women emancipation, sentiments, and symbolic purification. The Blue Humanities relates to Edna’s interaction with the sea for her self-recognition. Her immersion into the Gulf symbolizes her connectedness to the universe.

Her bonds with the sea help her gaining a vision of self-recognition. This relationship demonstrates the participation of nature to the greater cause of the human kind. Future scholars may explore ecological elements like architecture, bird, etc. that can cast spells to Edna's psychology.

This research introduces the pedagogical implications of oceanic consciousness that best suit to students of literature. It helps students know the importance of ecology and its value to the environment. It promotes perceptual experiences having relation with the environmental agencies. It encourages human –centered perspectives to holistic approaches, to merge the elements like environmental literary criticism, subjectivism, and the critical ocean studies. These strategies may help students to explore the environmental agents like the sea and ocean that makes positive impact on human life. They may explore them critically.

This research focuses on reading ecological factors that determine human consciousness. Students may consider aura, touch, and sound having effects on narrative meaning. They may compare their Nepali ecological worldviews with representations available in American literature. Such comparisons engage them to broaden literary interpretations, promote cross-cultural consciousness, and helps persuade complex ideas.

This study focuses on eco-consciousness. It inspires students / learners to be critique on ecological problems through literary art. They may go beyond their classroom activities to look at environment and become responsive to its preservation.

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Churamoni Kandel, PhD, works at the Department of English, Shree Vinduwasini Sanskrit Vidyapeeth (Campus), Pokhara, Nepal Sanskrit University, Nepal. He completed his M.A. (in English) from Rajiv Gandhi University (previously Arunachal University), Arunachal Pradesh, India, in 1998, and Doctor of Philosophy (in English Literature) from Nepal Sanskrit University, Nepal, in 2021. He has completed two mini researches, peer-reviewed manuscripts, and has written numerous research articles that have been published nationally and internationally.