

Edna's Struggle Against Oppressions in *The Awakening*

Tara Prasad Adhikari*

Abstract

This study explores Edna Pontellier's struggle against societal oppressions in Kate Chopin's novel, The Awakening. Edna's quest for self-discovery and liberation from the constraints of late 19th-century societal norms is analyzed through the lens of feminist perspectives. This paper argues that Edna's unconventional behavior signifies a profound challenge to patriarchal norms, emphasizing her pursuit of identity and autonomy. Edna emerges as a symbol of resistance against societal expectations, seeking personal freedom amidst oppressive forces. Furthermore, the study explores the influence of characters like Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz on Edna's journey, highlighting contrasting paths of womanhood and autonomy.

Keywords: Emancipation, Feminist, Autonomy

This study digs into the complicated world of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, as she tries her best to free herself from the formidable oppressions inflicted upon her by the prevailing societal norms of the late 19th century. Edna's story is one of a woman's pursuit of self-discovery, independence, and liberation. The questions that guide this investigation are twofold--How do the unequal social class and pervasive gender discrimination manifest as oppressive forces in Edna's life? How does Edna Pontellier, the central character, emancipate herself from the clutches of these oppressive societal norms? The research is driven by two primary objectives. Firstly, it aims to unveil the multifaceted forms of oppression that Edna Pontellier experiences as a result of the social hierarchy and gender discrimination perpetuated by her husband and the upper echelons of Creole society. Secondly, it endeavors to explore the various avenues through which Edna seeks liberation after enduring the weight of these oppressive forces.

Critics like Tas view Edna as a dangerous female. Regarding Edna Pontellier's actions in *The Awakening*, Tas offers a critical perspective on her rebellion. Tas contends that Edna's behavior, particularly her pursuit of multiple lovers and disregard for her familial and societal obligations, is driven by her Id. According to Tas, Edna's actions stem from her impulsive desires rather than a deliberate challenge to patriarchy. Tas writes, she "rather marks efforts to fulfill her amoral desires. She is enthusiastic to push away all her matrimonial, familiar and societal bounds for the sake of her impulsive feelings" (415).

* Asst. Professor of English,
Public Youth Campus, TU, Kathmandu, Nepal, Email: tarapadhikari@gmail.com

Tas suggests that Edna's willingness to break free from traditional roles and norms is not a conscious feminist act, but rather a manifestation of her unchecked desires. By engaging in extramarital affairs and neglecting her duties as a wife and mother, Edna prioritizes her own gratification over societal expectations, regardless of the consequences.

However, using feminist lens, this paper contends that Edna Pontellier's actions in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* can be viewed as a profound struggle for identity and autonomy against the oppressive forces of patriarchy. Edna's unconventional behavior, such as seeking different lovers and rejecting traditional familial roles, can be seen as acts of defiance against the patriarchal norms that confine women to prescribed roles and expectations. Rather than being driven solely by impulsive desires, Edna's actions reflect a deep-seated desire to assert her individuality and challenge the patriarchal constraints placed upon her. Edna grapples with conflicting societal expectations and her own yearning for self-discovery, ultimately rejecting the notion that her worth is defined by her roles as a wife and mother. Her pursuit of personal freedom and autonomy represents a courageous resistance to patriarchal oppression, as she strives to carve out her own identity in a society that seeks to suppress her desires and aspirations.

As noted by prominent feminist writer Elaine Showalter, in her insightful analysis of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, this literary work shattered conventional thematic boundaries. Chopin fearlessly ventured into new territory by highlighting the profound yearning of women for both sexual and personal emancipation. Edna Pontellier, the central character of the novel, stands as a compelling embodiment of this longing.

Showalter further underscores that Edna's explicit defiance of the established norms and values of nineteenth-century American society sent shockwaves through the contemporary literary landscape. This defiance, as illustrated in Edna's actions and choices, left a profound impact, eliciting vehement reactions from reviewers of that era. They condemned the novel, branding it as "morbid," "essentially vulgar," and even as "glided dirt" (Showalter 65).

Chopin's audacious exploration of women's desires for sexual and personal liberation, as embodied by Edna's character, disrupted the established narrative norms and evoked a strong response from the then society. Showalter's recognition of this groundbreaking approach acknowledges the novel's significance in challenging the status quo and pioneering discussions of female autonomy and emancipation.

Sandra M. Gilbert, a prominent feminist critic, offers a compelling perspective on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in her article titled "The Second Coming of Aphrodite." In her interpretation, Gilbert portrays Edna Pontellier as Chopin's ingenious creation, a feminist reimagining of the second coming of Aphrodite. She argues that Edna, the novel's protagonist, embodies a feminist and woman-centered rendition of the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite.

In Gilbert's reading, this interpretation diverges from the conventional emphasis on romantic love associated with Aphrodite. Instead, it underscores Edna's evolution and empowerment as a woman, a journey that begins when she is symbolically "baptized" during a moonlight swim (274). This transformation culminates in Edna's triumphant and unencumbered return to the sea, following her "last supper" on her twenty-ninth birthday (272). Gilbert's thesis asserts that Edna serves as a model for a woman who, despite patriarchal constraints, embarks on a path of autonomy and a desire for freedom. Edna's pursuit of a younger man and her eventual liberation leads her from a vast patriarchal mansion to a smaller, more personal female cottage and, finally, across the boundary that demarcates cultural attire from the rawness of nature (281).

Gilbert's interpretation reimagines Edna Pontellier as a feminist icon, transcending the conventional role of women in literature and society. Through her thesis, Gilbert not only highlights Edna's journey toward independence and self-realization but also underscores the subversion of traditional gender roles and expectations—a theme that resonates deeply within the context of *The Awakening* and its portrayal of female autonomy and emancipation. In the following sections, we will explore how Edna's experiences in the novel reflect these themes, shedding light on her struggles and triumphs against societal norms.

Megan P. Kaplon's perspective on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* also highlights the central theme of the novel as a profound struggle against both societal norms and the constraints of nature. In the context of its time, Chopin's work was considered daring and Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, a highly controversial character who defied many of the established expectations for women in the nineteenth century. Edna's actions, notably her refusal to adhere to the roles of mother and wife, stood out as particularly shocking.

The rejection of motherhood, though gradual, is a recurring and significant theme throughout the novel. Edna's defiance is a rebellion against the societal and natural constructs that dictate that she must primarily be defined by her title as the wife of Leonce Pontellier and the mother of Raoul and Etienne Pontellier. Instead of conforming to these roles, Edna's journey is marked by her quest to become her own self-defined individual.

Kate Chopin's narrative effectively captures Edna's struggle against the oppressive structures of motherhood, which seek to confine and define her. By examining the choices and lives of two other female characters in the story, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, Chopin offers contrasting paths and options for Edna. These female characters serve as poignant contrasts to Edna's own trajectory, reflecting different facets of womanhood, motherhood, and individuality (Kaplon 7). The themes of motherhood, individuality, and the limitations imposed by society and nature are woven intricately throughout the narrative, making Edna Pontellier's story a powerful exploration of these multifaceted issues.

Standing in the similar line, Emily Toth lauds Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as a groundbreaking work that challenged societal norms. Despite harsh criticism upon its release, the novel's portrayal of Edna Pontellier's defiance of traditional gender roles resonated deeply. Toth emphasizes Chopin's boldness in depicting female sensuality and Edna's rejection of prescribed roles as wife and mother in 19th-century New Orleans. Through Edna's struggle for identity, Chopin prompts a reevaluation of societal expectations, inspiring subsequent generations to assert their agency. Toth's insights underscore the enduring relevance of *The Awakening* as a catalyst for feminist discourse and literary innovation (Toth, Emily, Interview by Kathleen Dunn).

While women had to wait until 1920 to secure their right to vote, the early efforts of women's suffrage activists were instrumental in ensuring that their voices reverberated throughout society. The actions of Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* resonate with the sentiments and aspirations of countless women who yearned for personal and economic freedom during that transformative era.

The novel confronts the limitations of Southern society in acknowledging women as a diverse group of individuals, each with their own unique perspectives on what constitutes a fulfilling and meaningful life. Set in the late nineteenth century at Grand Isle, a prestigious summer retreat favored by the affluent residents of nearby New Orleans, particularly the Creoles, the story introduces us to the central character, Edna Pontellier. Edna arrives at the resort with her family, which includes her husband, Léonce, and their two sons. It is during this togetherness that Edna embarks on a journey of self-discovery, embracing her emotional and sexual desires.

Kate Chopin explores the rich tapestry of womanhood through the creation of three distinct female characters: Edna, her close friend Adele Ratignolle, a married Creole who embodies traditional womanly elegance and charm, epitomizing the ideal of the "mother-woman." In contrast, there's Mademoiselle Reisz, a gifted pianist and a spinster who leads an independent life, unbound by societal conventions due to her unmarried status, thus standing outside the boundaries of the Creole community.

Edna, residing somewhere between these two women, hails from Kentucky and was raised in a Presbyterian family before moving to Mississippi with her own family. She is, in a sense, an outsider in the Creole society, despite her husband's Creole background. As the narrative notes, "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles; never before had she been thrown so intimately among them" (22). Mademoiselle Reisz, on the other hand, is a white woman, older and characterized by her ironic disposition, distinct from the Creole milieu.

The positioning of these three female characters within the narrative serves as powerful portrayal of the multifaceted dimensions of womanhood. It's within this context

that Edna's journey unfolds, echoing the challenges and aspirations of women who, like her, sought to define their own identities and assert their desires for autonomy.

Edna's associations with both Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz play pivotal roles in her profound journey of self-discovery and liberation, encapsulating the primary themes of *The Awakening*. Within the context of Creole society, her bond with Adele reveals a unique facet of freedom of expression that initially startles her. Creole women, in their forthright and unrestrained manner, freely engaged in discussions encompassing family matters, children, and casual gossip. While this openness was circumscribed to specific topics, it acted as a catalyst for Edna, liberating her from her previously restrained behavior and suppressed emotions and desires.

Edna's initiation into this world of unreserved discourse is marked by a memorable encounter. She is taken aback when she overhears Madame Ratignolle recounting the intensely personal and vivid details of one of her childbirth experiences to the elderly Monsieur Farival. Although Edna is initially shocked by such intimate revelations, she gradually adapts to this distinctive mode of interaction, one starkly different from her accustomed propriety.

This pivotal relationship with Adele symbolizes the inception of Edna's awakening and the journey toward self-discovery. Subsequently, Edna's transformation continues through her connection with Mademoiselle Reisz, who introduces her to the realm of art and creative expression.

Patriarchal standards often entail playing the roles of devoted wife and doting mother, adhering to regular hours of entertaining visitors to further her husband's business prospects, and conforming to the established religious practices of the era. Initially, Edna complies unquestioningly with these expectations. However, as the novel progresses, she progressively rebels against them, ultimately rejecting them entirely in a poignant transformation that serves as a central motif within *The Awakening*.

It is evident that from an early age, Edna was unable to conform to the prescribed virtues of true womanhood. Even as a child, her behavior did not align with societal expectations. While piety might have seemed like a virtue that wouldn't pose a challenge for her, it turns out to be the first one she deviates from. Edna finds religious duties to be tedious and bothersome. She recalls a particular childhood memory when her sun-bonnet obscured her view as she walked diagonally across a vast field. In that moment, she felt as though she must walk endlessly, without reaching an endpoint. When asked about it, she hesitates, but it's revealed that she was running away from her father's somber Presbyterian service on a likely Sunday. Her recollection of those days is tinged with amusement, as she recalls herself as a little, unthinking child following impulsive decisions without question. However, Edna's relationship with religion evolves over time. She admits that, during a

certain period in her life, religion held a firm grip on her, particularly from the age of twelve onward. It continued as a mere habit, and her faith wasn't something she contemplated deeply (42).

In the context of Edna's character, religion holds limited importance. Despite hailing from a Presbyterian family, she makes a bold choice by marrying a Creole man from a Catholic background. This act of rebellion creates considerable tension between Edna and her father, given her family's strong opposition to the union. As noted, her father's vehement objection, combined with her sister Margaret's disapproval, underscore the complexities that led Edna to defy their wishes and marry Monsieur Pontellier (46). This decision represents a pivotal moment in Edna's life, where her pursuit of individual desires and freedom sets the stage for her transformative journey, a key theme explored in *The Awakening*.

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier's awakening to her desire for personal freedom and independence clashes with the expectations of her husband, Léonce. He firmly believes that a wife's primary role is to serve her husband, tend to their children, and fulfill social obligations. While he struggles to define her shortcomings as a mother, Edna's unconventional approach to motherhood is evident. She allows her sons to be more independent, encouraging them to pick themselves up when they fall, in stark contrast to the conventional norm that encourages mothers to be the sole source of comfort. The community of the Grand Isle resort is primarily composed of women and children, with husbands and fathers visiting only on weekends. This all-women environment highlights the restrictive nature of Edna's social role and accentuates her growing frustration.

Edna's journey of awakening commences not with a romantic relationship but with her friendship with Adele Ratignolle, who is celebrated for her exceptional motherhood. However, Kathleen M. Streater proposes that Adele can be seen as a subtle feminist within the constraints of patriarchal ideology. Adele manipulates societal norms from within masculine-defined boundaries, challenging the male-defined roles of wife and mother. Adele's portrayal in the novel, with its ironic overtones and hints of manipulation, suggests that she may not be the perfect woman she appears to be. Even Edna, her close friend, is aware of Adele's occasionally manipulative behavior, as seen in the scene where Adele feigns faintness, raising questions about the authenticity of her actions.

Adele Ratignolle is a woman who embodies grace and maternal devotion as she tends to her children. Adele is the epitome of feminine beauty and maternal care, yet she defies medical advice by carrying her child. Edna's attraction to Adele is evident, stemming from both her physical allure and her vivacious personality. Elaine Showalter suggests an element of erotic attraction in Edna's feelings, citing her sensuous susceptibility to beauty. However, it can also be viewed as a deep sympathy based on the natural appreciation of beauty. Their relationship is one of friendship, characterized by a profound bond and emotional support.

For Edna, this friendship is a unique and transformative experience, as she did not have a close relationship with her sisters. Adele becomes her best friend and confidante, offering a safe space for Edna to revisit her youthful dreams and desires that had long been concealed. Their conversations enable Edna to gradually unveil the desires she had repressed for many years, making her grow more self-assured and open. Adele's influence leads Edna to shed her reserve, allowing her to explore her newfound sense of self and personal liberation during the summer at Grand Isle.

As previously discussed, Adele Ratignolle serves as a representation of the mother-woman, a woman who wholeheartedly embraces and successfully conforms to society's conventions. Adele is not a passive victim of societal expectations but finds genuine fulfillment in her roles as a devoted wife, mother, and social hostess. While she is Edna's counterpart, she doesn't pretend to be the perfect wife; she genuinely embodies these roles as her mission and fulfillment. In the novel, Adele offers readers contrasting perceptions of femininity, allowing them to identify either with Edna or Adele. She acts as a foil to Edna, highlighting the stark differences between them. While Edna doesn't conform to the mother-woman archetype, Adele epitomizes the perfect woman, mother, and wife, as evident in her devotion to her family.

The setting of Grand Isle, where conventions are held in high regard, and where members of society exhibit direct and open behavior, provides a backdrop for Edna's decision to transform her life. The relaxed atmosphere of Grand Isle and the enveloping power of the sea play pivotal roles in initiating Edna's journey toward self-discovery.

Even during their holiday at Grand Isle, Léonce remains focused on his business and social engagements. His expectations regarding Edna's duties are evident in an evening scene when he returns home late. He is in high spirits and engages her with anecdotes, news, and gossip he's gathered during the day. Edna, overcome with sleep, responds with only half-utterances. Léonce finds her lack of interest in his conversation discouraging, desiring her to show more enthusiasm for his stories. While he expects her to exhibit the typical behavior of a wife, for Edna, this becomes increasingly unbearable. She simply wishes to sleep, knowing the importance of Léonce's experiences pales in comparison to her need for rest. Edna's transformation continues when the Pontelliers return to New Orleans from their holiday. Gradually Edna learns the truth as Showalter writes, "Edna Pontellier appears to reject the domestic empire of the mother and the sororal world of women's culture (71). She begins to reject the various social obligations and routines that had defined her life, such as their weekly reception day, regular visits to the opera and theatre, and precisely timed suppers. These seemingly minor acts of defiance are essential in reinforcing her newfound sense of self.

The Pontelliers hold a weekly reception day on Tuesdays, a formal event that Edna increasingly dreads. The vivid description of this oppressive atmosphere foreshadows Edna's

impending rebellion. One Tuesday, she decides to break with convention and leaves home without a message for the visitors. When Léonce discovers her actions, he reprimands her for disregarding the "les convenances" and stresses the importance of adhering to societal norms. However, for Edna, the rules and orders have lost their grip, and she's no longer willing to conform.

Despite her determination to defy convention, Edna realizes that public opinion matters. Léonce underscores this when he implores her to consider what people will say. Edna, in her newfound independence, begins to explore the streets of New Orleans, rediscovering the city and relishing her solitude. She finds joy in wandering into unfamiliar places, free to dream and be alone. This contrast between the city's strict rules and the serene atmosphere of the Grand Isle highlights Edna's evolving journey of awakening. While the holiday by the sea catalyzed changes in her innermost thoughts and feelings, the city demands a more profound challenge to the conventions she once accepted.

In *The Awakening*, the world of art is embodied by Mademoiselle Reisz, an elderly, unmarried, and unconventional woman. Edna's initial feelings toward her are mixed, but it's Mademoiselle Reisz's artistry that captivates her. The pianist's music resonates deeply with Edna, and she is the only guest who truly appreciates it. Mademoiselle Reisz, although eccentric and disliked by many for her solitary lifestyle, stands as a symbol of unwavering authenticity. She chooses to be herself, rejecting societal norms to pursue her art, even though it isolates her from the Creole community. Her character represents the path of independence and self-expression that Edna could follow.

Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz represent two contrasting possibilities for Edna's life. Adele epitomizes the devoted wife, excellent mother, and charming hostess, conforming to societal expectations for women. Mademoiselle Reisz, on the other hand, is self-assertive, outspoken, and unapologetically unconventional. These two women serve as influences on Edna, but as she undergoes a transformation, she increasingly gravitates towards the independent and passionate spirit of Mademoiselle Reisz. Despite the differences, both women inspire each other, and their dynamic reflects Edna's evolving journey.

Art plays a crucial role in the novel, symbolizing freedom and escape, not just for artists but for anyone who dares to embrace their true self. Edna's rediscovery of her artistic talents represents her pursuit of personal development and the art of being authentic. Kathleen Wheeler emphasizes that being an artist, in the broader sense, means achieving a level of self-realization that is the most demanding and highest form of personal development. This artistic pursuit is central to Edna's awakening and transformation, challenging societal norms and expectations.

In conclusion, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* serves as a powerful exploration of female emancipation and self-discovery. Edna Pontellier's transformation from a conforming wife and mother to an independent woman who pursues her passions and self-realization signals for the coming new era. Mademoiselle Reisz, despite her eccentricities and isolation, becomes a symbol of uncompromising authenticity, inspiring Edna to pursue her own artistic talents and personal growth. Their unconventional bond underscores the novel's central theme: that the path to true self-realization may require defiance of societal expectations.

The world of art, as represented by Mademoiselle Reisz, stands as a powerful metaphor for personal liberation and the pursuit of individuality. It encompasses not just artistic expression but also the art of becoming one's true self, a courageous journey that Edna undertakes. The novel challenges the conventional roles of women and encourages readers to question societal expectations and norms, inviting them to explore their own paths to self-discovery.

Through Edna's awakening and transformation, Chopin illuminates the struggles and triumphs of those who dare to defy expectations and seek their own authentic path. Chopin's exploration of female autonomy and individuality continues to resonate with contemporary readers. It reminds us of the ongoing relevance of the quest for self-realization and personal freedom, be it male or a female.

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