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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A SILENT REBELLION: EDNA PONTELLIER AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FEMALE AUTONOMY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Ela Ocak Yeltekin

1. Van Yuzuncu Yıl Universitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Van, Türkiye.

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Abstract

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) stands as one of the earliest feminist works in American literature, portraying a woman's struggle to free herself from the restrictive norms of nineteenth-century society. Through the character of Edna Pontellier, Chopin reveals the silent rebellion of women who were confined to the roles of wife and mother and deprived of individuality and freedom. The novel reflects the transformation of Edna's inner world as she awakens to her own desires and identity, challenging the patriarchal codes that limit her existence. The recurring image of the sea becomes a powerful metaphor for liberation and self-discovery, representing Edna's desire to transcend societal expectations. By illustrating her protagonist's conflict between conformity and autonomy, Chopin exposes the moral and social hypocrisy of her era. *The Awakening* thus emerges as both a personal and collective cry for emancipation—an articulation of the repressed voices of nineteenth-century women who longed for independence and self-expression.

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Introduction:-

The process of gaining women's social, economic, and cultural rights has roots as old as human history; however, this struggle gained particular momentum in the 18th and 19th centuries. While the changing social structure following the Industrial Revolution increased women's presence in the public sphere, women were still confined to the role of "angel of the home" and deprived of the right to express their individual identities. This period also marked the burgeoning of feminist thought and the rise of women's demands for recognition as equals to men. However, social pressure, traditional morality, and patriarchal norms largely hindered women's self-actualization.

Within this oppressive atmosphere, literature became one of the most influential fields that made visible women's inner worlds, longings, and conflicts. Even writing in the 19th century was seen as a male-dominated field, and many women writers were forced to publish their works under male pseudonyms. Writing under these conditions, Kate Chopin attracted attention with her bold narratives that explored women's quest for freedom and their repressed selves. Although *The Awakening*, published in 1899, provoked considerable criticism at the time, it was again recognized in the 1950s as a pioneering feminist work addressing women's individuality and struggle for freedom. The novel's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, is a woman struggling to find her true self against the roles of wife

Corresponding Author:- Ela Ocak Yeltekin

Address:- Van Yuzuncu Yıl Universitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Van, Türkiye.

and mother imposed upon her by society. Edna's story represents not only an individual's inner transformation but also the existential awakening of a 19th-century woman. In narrating Edna's process of liberation, Chopin questions the moral norms of the time and paints a portrait that rejects the "submissive" identity of women. In this respect, *The Awakening* can be considered the "awakening" of both an individual and a generation.

The Social Position of Women in the 19th Century:-

While the 19th century was a time of economic and technological advances in Western societies, it also represented a period of significant inequality in terms of women's social standing. During this period, men were considered both physically and mentally powerful; this perception was prevalent not only in everyday life but also in areas such as literature, politics, and art. Women were confined to the socially prescribed roles of "obedient wife" and "self-sacrificing mother," excluded from the public sphere and confined to the private sphere.

Kate Chopin is one of the few female writers writing in such a male-dominated era. She challenged the Victorian morality and social order that dominated the late 19th century, boldly expressing women's inner worlds, repressed desires, and quests for freedom in her works. Chopin's *The Awakening*, published in 1899, stands out as a novel of "women's awakening." The work represents the silent cry not only of its protagonist, Edna Pontellier, but also of 19th-century women. The novel received considerable criticism at the time, being labeled a "female rebellion." According to the society of the time, a woman's sole duty was to stay home, serve her husband, and care for her children. Society defined a woman's existence through the constraints of being a "good mother" and a "good wife." The sole identities assigned to a woman during this period were cooking in the kitchen, doing the laundry for her husband, and raising her children. In Chopin's words, women were not only "guardians of the home" but also invisible prisoners of society. This patriarchal order prevailed not only in America but also in Europe. Women's efforts to exist in the public sphere were almost universally viewed as "dangerous" or "inappropriate." Therefore, *The Awakening* became a symbol not only of individual rebellion but also of the suppressed desire for freedom of women throughout an entire century. Chopin's silent rebellion was not only a critique of the social order of the time, but also an early step toward redefining female identity.

According to the prevailing understanding of the time, a woman's sole duty was to remain within the home, serve her husband, and care for her children. A woman's life was shaped within the confines of the home, and her individuality could not extend beyond these boundaries. Chopin vividly conveys this situation in his novel through the words of Léonce Pontellier to his wife: "“He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?” (Chopin, 1994, p.9). This quote clearly demonstrates that a woman's identity is defined solely through motherhood and wifehood. Edna's silent response to her husband's warnings reflects her emotional repression. A woman's individuality is sacrificed to society's ideals of the "sacred mother" and the "obedient wife." Chopin symbolizes this understanding with the following words: "“They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.” (p.12). These lines clearly reveal the ideal identity the era assigned to women.

By destroying themselves, women become sacred, erasing their individual identity and becoming "angelic mothers." This situation represents a kind of spiritual imprisonment in Chopin's novel. Women become invisible prisoners within the home. In a society where men move freely and exist in public, women are condemned to silence within walled, private spaces. The relaxed demeanor of Edna's husband, Léonce, embodies this contrast: "“Then he got up, saying he had half a mind to go over to Klein's hotel and play a game of billiards” (p.3). This statement depicts a world where men can socialize freely while women are confined to the home. Chopin's critique is not merely individual but systemic; it exposes the confinement of women to the home as a social ideology. This oppression is not unique to America; the same mindset prevailed in Europe as well. Women's efforts to be visible in public spaces were often deemed "improper" or "immoral." Under these circumstances, *The Awakening* becomes a symbol of women's search for their own selves. Edna Pontellier's story represents not only one woman's inner transformation but also the struggle of women of an era to break free from their shackles. Chopin's courageous narrative represents a major turning point in redefining female identity and establishing a place for individual freedom in literature.

Edna Pontellier's Awakening: Femininity, Freedom, and Resistance:-

In Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier represents the quest for individual freedom against the rigid social rules of the 19th century. Edna's "awakening" is not merely a personal awakening, but also a holistic rebellion against the repressed selves of women of the time. Throughout the novel, Edna begins to question the imposed roles

of "wife" and "mother," and this questioning pushes her to the margins of society. Chopin depicts Edna's inner transformation through her relationships with her environment, and particularly through her symbolic connection to the sea. Society expects Edna to live a life devoted to her children and husband. However, Edna realizes that these roles obscure her true self. Chopin expresses her character's inner awakening with these words: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (p.19). This quote is the first indication that Edna begins to see herself not merely as a wife or mother, but as an "individual." Her self-awareness deepens her conflict with society. Chopin constructs this awareness as a kind of intellectual "rebirth"; Edna is no longer guided by the outside world, but by her inner voice. One of Edna's most powerful moments of awakening is seen in her symbolic relationship with the sea. For Chopin, the sea is a metaphor for the female body and freedom. The sea gives her the courage to transcend her own limitations: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (p.19). With this statement, she clearly demonstrates that the sea is a space of both physical and spiritual liberation. For Edna, the sea is not merely a physical space but a haven where spiritual and social chains are broken.

Contrary to the social control placed on women's bodies, the sea liberates the body; the phrase "touch of the sea is sensuous" symbolizes the woman's unabashed acceptance of her own corporeality. Edna's internal and sudden transformation becomes even more evident in her conflicts with the institution of marriage. Her description of her marriage as an "accident" reflects Chopin's critique of the contemporary understanding of marriage: "Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (p.24). This statement depicts Edna's marriage as a result of social necessity, not love or fate. For women, marriage is the beginning not of liberation, but of existential captivity. Edna's phrase, "marriage masquerading as fate," demonstrates how women's free will is usurped by society. In the novel, Edna's resistance becomes concrete. Previously a quiet, obedient wife, Edna no longer submits to her husband's demands: "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than deny and resist" (p.42). These sentences symbolize Edna's transformation from a passive figure to an active subject. Here, Chopin emphasizes that a woman's "will" is perceived as a threat to the social order. Edna now rejects the role of the "docile woman" assigned to her. She now represents a character who expresses herself and breaks free from social norms. Another important aspect of Edna's liberation process is her interest in art. Painting is not merely a hobby for her; it is a way of expressing herself and creating "a room of her own."

However, according to the prevailing understanding of the time, it was considered "irresponsible" for a woman to devote time to art: "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (p.73). This criticism demonstrates that women's right to exist even in creative fields is judged by society. Chopin demonstrates that women, even from an intellectual perspective, are perceived as a threat within the patriarchal order. As Edna's search for freedom progresses, the act of getting rid of the "ring," the symbol of marriage, becomes a symbol of her individual rebellion: "Once she stopped, and taking 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" (p.68). The ring symbolically represents a woman's purification from the values held sacred by marriage and society. Chopin's mastery, however, lies in revealing Edna's tragedy without romanticizing her quest. Edna's desire for liberation leads her to a solitude that casts her outside of society. At the end of the novel, Edna achieves "absolute freedom" by uniting with the sea she loves so much: "She went on and on... She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end" (p.148). Edna's death, becoming one with the sea, is not a defeat, but the ultimate completion of her quest for freedom. Through this scene, Chopin demonstrates the heavy price a woman's struggle to find herself carries in patriarchal society. Edna's death becomes an act of liberation, both individually and symbolically; while her body dies, her soul is finally freed. Thus, *The Awakening* concludes the woman's realization of her own existence with a silent yet profound act of rebellion.

The Trilogy of Sea, Art and Freedom: The Rediscovery of the Female Body:

In *The Awakening*, the sea is one of the most powerful symbols of freedom, self-discovery, and rebirth. Kate Chopin uses the sea not only as a natural element but also as a reflection of a woman's repressed desires and longing for freedom. The sea is the only space where Edna Pontellier can transcend both her physical and spiritual limitations. Chopin masterfully conveys to the reader the sea's both terrifying and redemptive aspects for women. At the beginning of the novel, the sea is an unknown territory for Edna, a kind of "forbidden freedom." It's a path she

takes to find herself. In the swimming scene, the sound of the sea beckons her, pushing her away from the confines of society: "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.19). This quote illustrates the transformative effect of the sea on a woman's psyche. The sea is a force of nature that breaks the patriarchal order's "control over the female body." As Susan Bordo argues in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), "the body is a surface upon which cultural power is inscribed." Chopin's sea, however, becomes a space where this surface is rewritten, a space where women reclaim their own body and identity. Edna's connection with the sea is a metaphor for her shedding the shame she feels for her body and desires and accepting her own essence. Similarly, Chopin's allegory of the sea resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's positioning as "others." For Beauvoir, women cannot be liberated unless they cease to be a being defined by men, unless they separate themselves from patriarchal logic. It is precisely this autonomy that Edna seeks at sea—a space of identity where she is not defined by her husband, her children, or society. The sea becomes a mirror in which she confronts her own "I."

Art, like the sea, plays a transformative role in Edna's process of liberation. Painting is both an escape and an expression of existence for her. The time Edna spends in the studio is considered "irresponsibility" by the patriarchal order. Engaging in art means opposing the patriarchal system and neglecting her responsibilities: "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (p.73). This judgment reveals the idea that women's productivity should be limited to domestic tasks. Chopin, on the other hand, believed and advocated for the enhancement of women's intellectual potential through art. Edna's turn to art is a literary echo of a woman's demand for "a room of one's own" (Virginia Woolf, 1929). This creative space is a space where women can transcend social roles and find their unique voice. The sea and art are two parallel realms through which Edna re-establishes her identity. Both are rare spaces where a woman is not defined by social roles and can return to her true self. By connecting these two elements, Chopin deepens the symbolic connection between the female body and nature.

The sea merges with the waves of her desires, while art merges with the colors of her stream of consciousness. Edna's union with the sea at the novel's end is not merely a death scene, but a rebirth. She does not refer to this departure as death. The phrase "She went on and on..." (p. 148) evokes both eternity and freedom. A woman's liberation from social chains is only possible through a return to nature, to her inner essence. By uniting with the sea, Edna leaves behind her social identities—wife, mother, housewife—and redefines her own existence. In this respect, *The Awakening* depicts the rediscovery of the female body and the discovery of herself. Chopin's Edna associates the body not with shame, but with freedom. Edna's union with the sea is a moment when physical pleasure and spiritual freedom merge in the same crucible. A woman's liberation from the "discipline of civilization" (Foucault, 1995) and return to her natural self is the most powerful resistance against patriarchal mechanisms of control. Ultimately, Chopin's allegory of the sea and art is an early feminist discourse championing women's independence, both physical and mental. The sea is Edna's manifesto of freedom; art is her desire to perpetuate this freedom. Even through her silence, Chopin's female character reveals the contradictions of the patriarchal order and succeeds in becoming the voice of 19th-century women.

Conclusion:-

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a pioneering feminist text, representing not only an individual's inner awakening but also the quiet yet profound quest for freedom for 19th-century women. It is a work that speaks to the social oppression experienced by women of that era, giving voice to their silence. The character of Edna Pontellier becomes a symbol of a woman struggling to re-establish her individual identity by challenging the socially imposed roles of wife, mother, and "angel woman." In this respect, Edna's story becomes an expression of women's repressed desires, thoughts, and identities within the patriarchal system.

Through themes of the sea, art, and freedom, Chopin creates an alternative space where the female body can be redefined. While the sea represents a woman's liberation from physical and spiritual shackles, art becomes a tool of intellectual liberation through which she finds her own voice. Edna's quest for freedom deepens as she clashes with the roles imposed by society, ultimately resulting in an individual awareness. However, this awareness is not a freedom that can be experienced within the social conditions of the time, but a liberation that is fulfilled through death. Edna's death, as she merges with the sea, carries a simultaneously tragic and sublime meaning. This death is not a surrender, but the ultimate act of rediscovering one's own self. Through this scene, Chopin emphasizes that a woman's desire for freedom cannot be suppressed, and that even in a world bound by social rules, a woman's inner

awakening is inevitable. It has become a cry for all women who experience this oppression. When read through the lens of feminist critique, Edna's death is a symbolic expression of a woman's "right to be herself." Ultimately, *The Awakening* is not just Edna's "awakening," but the "awakening" of an entire generation. Kate Chopin, through literature, made visible the emergence of female consciousness against the patriarchal order of the time, creating one of the first examples of reclaiming the female body and soul. In this respect, the work has earned an enduring place in literary history as an early manifesto of both women's liberation and modern feminist consciousness.

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