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KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING* IN THE LIGHT OF FREUD'S STRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE PSYCHE

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Abstract

Although, at the time it was published, the novel and the author were severely condemned by the literary and religious circles due to its - as it was claimed - unconventional and immoral context, *The Awakening* was rediscovered in the 1960s (the period in which the feminist movement, known as the second wave, was in its heydays) by the feminist scholars and theorists who regarded Edna Pontellier, Chopin's protagonist, as a prototype of feminism. But, considering the period in which the novel was written, the author's biography, the feminist theory, and Sigmund Freud's 'structural model of the psyche', it is obvious that Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* and her protagonist Edna Pontellier have hardly anything to do with the theory of feminism and women's rights. It is rather a novel that has been 'strongly misread'.¹

Key Words: Chopin, feminism, Freud, Edna.

When Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was published in 1899, it immediately created controversies among the literary critics and scholars of the late Victorian period² who were outraged by her depiction of a woman protagonist with active sexual desires, who dares to leave her husband and her children, falls in love with a man younger than her, and has an affair with another man. Although, at the time when it was published, the novel and the author were severely condemned by the literary and religious circles due to its - as it was claimed - unconventional and immoral standpoint, *The Awakening* was rediscovered in the 1960s (the period in which the feminist movement, known as the second wave, was in its heydays) by the feminist scholars and theorists who regarded Edna Pontellier, Chopin's protagonist, as a prototype of feminism. She was claimed to be "a woman before her time" who questions the institution of marriage, has sexual desires of her own, and becomes completely independent of her husband. In this paper, considering the period in which the novel was written, the author's biography, the feminist theory, and Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche, I will argue that Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* and her protagonist Edna Pontellier have hardly anything to do with the theory of feminism and women's rights. It is rather a novel that has been 'strongly misread'.

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¹The term 'strong misreading' is a term coined by Harold Bloom. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom suggests that 'a strong misreading' (which underlines almost the same issue as the term 'Intentional Fallacy' did) is an interpretation that works closely with the text but takes it over and interprets it in ways the author never intended (Bloom-1975).

Kate Chopin lived during the second half of the nineteenth century in Louisiana. She lacked male role models because she was brought up by independent women both at home (mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother) and at school with the priestesses. At the age of 33, after giving birth to six children, her husband died in 1883. From Chopin's official biographies, one could not find any crucial problems in her marriage with Oscar Chopin. On the contrary, Chopin's husband, as Tuire Valkeakari underlines, was a man of upper class who "tolerated more unconventional behavior on his wife's part (largely because of his New Orleans Creole background)" (Valkeakari, 2011: 198). Valkeakari, calling attention to the Chopin chronology published in *Kate Chopin's Private Letters* edited by Toth and Seyersted, states that Chopin had a romance with a married plantation owner called Albert Sampite in 1883-1884 (Valkeakari, 2011: 199). In an interview on Chopin, Elizabeth Fox Genovese, a scholar at Emory University, underlines that "There was no indication that she regretted her marriage, or regretted being a mother" (Genovese in Jhirad, 1998). Although she is said to have lived a tranquil life throughout her marriage, it seems that she had an affair with a married man shortly after her husband's death. She was 39 years old with six children when she began to write fiction.

Chopin wrote *The Awakening* in the end of the 19th century, a transition period from the Victorian age to the era of Modernism. In Europe and the United States, late nineteenth century was a chaotic and tumultuous period. The social, scientific, and cultural paradigms in Europe and across the Atlantic were undergoing radical changes due to the theories propounded by the scientists and theorists. As Freud, Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche revealed their theories, the paradigms of the institutions of the society began to be questioned in favour of individualism. Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection, Freud's theories on psychoanalysis, Nietzsche's existential thoughts that opposed Christianity and put forward the idea that "God is dead", and Karl Marx's thoughts that favour a classless society had put the established views and social values into question. These questionings which favoured the rights of individuals rather than the social conventions had rational reasons, and not such irrational aspires in search of fulfilling one's instinctive desires. In addition to these events, women's rights movement had been in progress since the first women's rights conference which was held in 1848. As Culley states, "Women from all levels of society were active in attempts to better their lot, and the 'New Woman', the late nineteenth-century equivalent of the "liberated woman" was much on the public mind" (Culley, 1976: 117). But these women's rights activists were in search of having the same rights with men as regards property and suffrage rights. They were not in search of a complete freedom of their impulsive feelings. The women's rights movement of the second half of the 19 century is known to be the first wave of feminism that mainly struggled for equality in property rights and for women's suffrage, i.e., women's right to vote. Considering the characteristics of this first wave of feminist struggles for women's rights and Chopin's protagonist Edna's behaviours, it is difficult to say that Edna longs for women's freedom, and that she should be regarded as a prototype for feminists.

Nevertheless, many critics are of the opinion that Edna Pontellier's questioning the institution of marriage, her intense sexual desires, longing for a complete independence and rebellions against the way in which women are expected to behave are all the indications of a feministic point of view. For example; Sandra M. Gilbert, in *The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire*, considers Edna as a heroine who is "journeying not just toward rebirth but toward a regenerative and revisionary genre, a genre that intends to propose new realities for women by providing new mythic paradigms through which women's lives can be understood" (Gilbert, 1983: 59). Chopin's official biographer, Per Seyersted, in *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, considers Edna's suicide as "a strong assertion of her identity" (Seyersted, 1969: 149). Seyersted goes on underlining that "feminism was well advanced in Kate Chopin...and she probably foresaw that women would obtain the degree of equality with man..." (Ibid, 148). On Edna's approach to familial ties, Seyersted highlights that Edna "thinks nothing of disregarding her traditional duties toward her husband and of challenging the sacred concepts of matrimony (Ibid, 151)." Kenneth Eble states that there is "reason for her affair in the kind of romantic desire

to escape a middle class existence which binds her to husband and family (Eble, 1956. 148). Nadine Marik, in an essay titled *Edna's Suicide in Kate Chopin's The Awakening* claims that Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a masterpiece of feminist philosophy. It tells the story of Edna Pontellier, a wife and mother who realizes that her society does not allow her the possibility to be an autonomous individual human being.

Although, from the late 1960s on, there have occurred few readings highlighting Edna's nature as unnatural, most of the critics, some of whom are mentioned above, regard Edna Pontellier as a feminist figure, and Kate Chopin as her feminist creator. However, it seems very unlikely that there'll be some space for Chopin's and her Protagonist Edna's behaviours within the field of feminism because, dictionaries such as Merriam Webster, Cambridge, Encarta and Oxford, defines feminism as an organized activity on behalf of women's rights, and also as the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. Feminism is generally broken up into three waves: first-wave feminism, which spans from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, was mainly engaged in equality in property rights and in women's suffrage, or women's right to vote. Second-wave, which spans from the early 1960s through the late 1980s, focused on discrimination and on cultural, social, and political issues, and this wave feminists broadened the scope from the early quest for political rights to fight for greater equality in education, in workplace, and at home. The third-wave which emerged in the early 1990s was a reaction to the second-wave for its lack of attention to the differences among women due to race, ethnicity, class, nationality and religion. Bell Hooks, on that account, argues that:

Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice. (Hooks, 1989: 22)

On Hooks' account, the defining characteristic that distinguishes feminism from other liberation struggles is its concern with sexism. Hooks regards feminism as "a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression" (Ibid, 23), not as a movement to dismantle and dismiss the social institutions such as motherhood and marriage. It is obvious that feminism is regarded as a liberation struggle against patriarchy. But this struggle is exerted to construct an equality of both men and women in social, economic, and political spheres. It is not regarded as a luxury of fulfilling one's all intrinsic desires, be it emotional or sexual. In this regard, Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontellier does not employ any exertions in pursuit of women's rights. She rather makes efforts to fulfill her amoral desires. She is enthusiastic to push away all her matrimonial, familial and societal bonds, (be it the father, the husband, the children or social mores), for the sake of her impulsive feelings.

Reading the novel, one can not find any hints that Edna is suppressed by her husband or the other male characters such as her father or her lovers. In George M. Spangler's words in *Kate Chopin's "The Awakening": A Partial Dissent*:

Mr. Pontellier [Edna's husband] is not a hopeless boor whose nature would provide easy explanation and justification for his wife's rebellion. Rather he is portrayed as a thoroughly likable man of good nature and intention, successful in his business, popular with his peers, devoted to his wife and children. Though more than a little smug, he is immediately sensitive to the change taking place in his wife; and his concern is sympathetic enough to allow for his taking the advice of their old family doctor to ignore Edna's whims for a time in the hope that her curious mood will pass. (Spangler, 1970: 252).

Edna extends her defiance against her father, too. When her father arrives from Kentucky to make purchases and plans for the marriage of her sister Janet, Edna refuses to attend her sister's wedding (Chopin, 1982: 185). With such a response, she denies the responsibilities implicit through family ties, defies male dominance in general (be it husband, father or children), and

states her disgust to weddings and to the institution of marriage itself. She thinks that "... a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (Chopin, 1982: 172).

The Awakening's setting is Grand Isle, near New Orleans. The protagonist Edna Pontellier is a woman of upper class with two children and a tolerant husband. She has a few servants and a group of close friends. To sum up, she enjoys all the opportunities that a woman can aspire. Nevertheless, she lacks tranquillity and she is unhappy with her current life. After giving birth to two children, she considers herself in a marriage that lacks love, but something expected of her. She loves her children, as she claims, but considers them as burden. As time goes on, she grows more and more unhappy. Soon Edna begins to fall in love with another young man, Robert Lebrun. Judging that she is married and it would be unconventional to have an affair with Edna, Robert becomes perplexed and leaves to live in Mexico trying to forget Edna. On his leaving her, she becomes more and more independent. She objects to do anything, even activities that she used to do without objection, such as sleeping in the same bed as her husband. She also neglects her children, and her duties as a wife and woman of the community. When her husband is away for business, she decides to move to a smaller house to live on her own drawing and selling pictures. Depressed by Robert's absence, she has a sexual affair with another man called Alcee Arobin who is known as a philanderer. Robert eventually returns from Mexico, unable to stay away any longer, but his return is short lived. Robert leaves once again, realizing that what they are doing could never work because Edna is married with kids. Edna unable to bear the pain any longer returns to Grand Isle, where she and Robert first fell in love with each other. Edna undresses herself, swims out as far as she can, and drowns herself leaving behind her husband and her children.

Considering this brief plot, one cannot avoid from asking a few questions such: Is feminism the freedom of fulfilling one's all caprices and subconscious feelings? Or, is it a movement which struggles for equality in social, economic and political stages? Has anyone ever read anything -within the feminist discourse- which propounds that all women, be they married or not, should have the freedom of having relations with whoever they like? Or, is feminism against matrimonial and familial practices? Or is it coherent that a woman who has awakened to her feminist thoughts kills herself for a man's love? One can extend the number of such questions, but the crucial one is the question which asks: Is it "awakening" or being schizophrenic when a married woman with two children can not control her 'id' by her 'ego', and lusts for a young man's love; and while longing for that love, upon being rejected, she cannot avoid having a liaison with another man for whom she doesn't even feel anything sentimental?

It is obvious that, according to Freud's 'structural model of the psyche,' Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontellier is undergoing such a psychic abnormality that due to not having a strong 'ego', she cannot balance out the demands arousing from her subconscious area -the id- of her mind. The structural model of the psyche, or the psychodynamic model of abnormality is a model in which Freud introduced the id, ego, and super ego as templates for the functioning of the psyche. It is based on the principles that psychological illness comes about from repressed emotions and thoughts from experiences in the past.

Freud, in his prominent paper "*The Ego and the Id*," propounds that the id represents the impulsive aspect of human nature, it is present from birth and it is the pleasure drive. The ego is present from the age of 2 and deals with reality by balancing out the impulses coming from the id. It is a mediator between the id and super ego evaluating whether the impulses conflict with the superego (social mores) or not. Finally, the superego is present from the age of 5 and so is morality (knowing the difference between right and wrong). In this respect, one can conclude that if the ego is not strong enough to balance out the demands of the id and the superego, then abnormality will occur. Edna, as Seyersted states, "thinks nothing of disregarding her traditional duties toward her husband and of challenging the sacred concepts of matrimony" (Seyersted, 1969: 151). She has willingly accepted a marriage and given birth to two sons, has a loving and caring husband and an enviable economic and social condition, but nevertheless, she

has an illegitimate love affair with Robert Lebrun, and while longing for that illegitimate love, she finds no fault in having a sexual affair with Alcee Arobin. Considering Freud's psychodynamic model of abnormality, it is likely to propound that Edna's illegitimate affair (that is, her pleasure impulse coming from the id) is an affirmation that her ego is not strong enough to refrain her to act in such a manner which is not in agreement with the customs of the society (that is, with the superego) in which she lives. Furthermore, she finds no fault in sending her children to stay with their grandmother while she uses the time to pursue her defiant and adulterous acts. Here, her ego once again seems to be null to realize that it is the parent's responsibility, "intended by nature," to take care of the children. George Arms's claim that, "Mrs. Chopin regards freedom from children as a necessary basis for complete freedom" (Arms, 1981: 150), is another indication that for Edna, complete freedom means to be completely free of her ego and super ego, and to live a life driven by the instinctive pleasures, namely, by the id. In this regard, Walker stresses that Edna "resembles a sleepwalker much of the time, not aware on an intellectual level of what she is doing" (Walker, 1979: 68). For Walker, Edna's awakening is instinctively sexual, a process that leads to a "lack of command over her own feelings and actions" (Walker, 1979: 69). According to Walker, "[t]here is, in Chopin's novel, no stance about women's liberation or equality" (Walker, 1979: 69). Being of the same opinion with Nancy Walker, Harold Bloom clearly articulates Edna's non-feminist standpoint, propounding that: "*The Awakening*, a flawed but strong novel, now enjoys an eminent status among feminist critics, but I believe that many of them weakly misread the book, which is anything but feminist in its stance" (Bloom, 1987: 1).

It is a fact that in all societies and social classes, women have been suppressed and forced to remain intact on social, economic and political issues. Their struggle on equality and having spaces in the social stratum is something essential that must be propounded by both women and men. It was hard to imagine, not even one hundred years ago, that women lacked a voice not only in society but also in everyday life. Male dominance has consistently been practiced throughout the world, especially in the eastern world. But, in spite of being aware of all disadvantages that women have been experiencing, and being of the opinion that all women and men should have equal rights, it is difficult to consider Kate Chopin as a woman in pursuit of women's rights, and her protagonist as a proto-feminist character. As Culley states;

It cannot be admitted that a woman who has willingly accepted the love and devotion of a man, even without an equal love on her part—who has become his wife and the mother of his children—has not incurred a moral obligation which peremptorily forbids her from wantonly severing her relations with him, and entering openly upon the independent existence of an unmarried woman" (Culley, 1976: 150).

In an interview on Kate Chopin's writing style, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, a prominent feminist, states that "Kate was neither a feminist nor a suffragist" (Genovese in Jhirad, 1998). She goes on to say "Her lack of interest in feminism and suffrage did not have to do with a lack of confidence in women... She simply had a different understanding of freedom. She saw freedom as much more a matter of spirit, soul, character of living your life within the constraints that the world makes [or] your God offers you" (Genovese in Jhirad, 1998).

Another indication, which can be considered as a clue that Kate Chopin did not have any feministic thoughts when she wrote the book, is concealed in her response to the critics' reaction, saying: "I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over, and it was already too late" (Culley, 1976: 159). From this response, it is clear that Chopin's subject matter is not the women's rights. A feminist, instead of articulating such a regret, would have resisted her actions. As Walker and Bloom underlines, Chopin's subject matter is purely sexual whim, and from this standpoint it is "beyond its time." The main theme, in some other short stories written by Chopin, is generally a married woman's struggle to fulfill her sexual freedom. For example; *The Storm*, which describes an extramarital sexual encounter

without a slightest hint of moral censure in tone, is another short story written by Chopin after *The Awakening*. It was not published until well after Chopin's death. Its subject matter is the illegitimate sexual affair between a married woman called Calixta, who has a son and a caring husband, and a man called Alcee. (It is interesting that the man with whom the female protagonist Calixta cheats her husband is called Alcee, the same name given to the man with whom Edna has a sexual affair).

Harold Bloom, in *A Map of Misreading*, has suggested that many of the most compelling literary interpretations are 'strong misreading'. A strong misreading, according to Bloom, is an interpretation that works closely with the text but takes it over and interprets it in ways the author never intended (Bloom, 1975). Bloom's term of 'strong misreading' points the same issue as the new critics M.C.Beardsley and W.K.Wimsatt highlighted by coining a term called 'The Intentional Fallacy' which also underlines that, as Moran states, there is neither a need nor a benefit trying to know or find out the intention of author, because we can't imagine the thoughts in an author's mind that his/her aim and his/her implementation may not be the same (Moran, 2008: 208). So the meaning of the work is in the text itself which has already come apart from the author (Moran, 2008: 208). In these regards, although there have been many critics and scholars who passionately insisted that Kate Chopin and her protagonist Edna Pontellier are women beyond their time and prototypes of feminism, it is hard to match Chopin's life style and her protagonist's infidel, selfish, inconsistent and uncontrolled behaviours (which, according to Freud's theory of psychodynamic model of abnormality, must rather be considered as morbid) with a real feminist's struggle for equality of genders. Claiming that *The Awakening* is a novel written to advocate women's rights, those critics (who propound that the novel is a head stone of feminism) rather seem to have performed a strong misreading of *The Awakening*.

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