

Kate Chopin's Ecofeminist Perspectives in *The Awakening*

Mayuri Pathak

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English, CMR University

HRBR Layout, Bangalore

Abstract

In the recent times, there has been a continuous growth in ecofeminist literature, relating gender and environment in ideological terms. In this paper, the researcher will look at the main tenets of ecofeminism and relate those to Kate Chopin's notable yet controversial novel, *The Awakening*. The researcher also focuses on highlighting the interconnections of nature, caste, class, and gender issues in this paper. Further, an attempt is made to see how far the issue of environment has been taken up by Chopin at a period much earlier than the start of the ecofeminist theory's expansion. The presence of ecofeminism in Chopin's novel can help women today who engage in feminist activism. Being able to recognize that the systematic oppression upon women is parallel to the destruction inflicted upon nature, including animals, today's women can reclaim their connection to nature, fighting against patriarchy, the male gaze, and sexual violence.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Gender, Nature

Introduction

One of the significant modern concepts, ecofeminism, emerged in the 1970s based on the inseparable connections between women and nature. The notable concept defines how the devaluation of nature is occurring parallel to the abuse of women. According to noted literary figure Bronwyn James,

“Ecofeminists believe that women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing and intuitive manner.” (James, 8)

In 1974, the term 'ecofeminism' was first coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne for leading an ecological revolution to save the earth, entailing new gender relations between humans and nature. Ynestra King further developed the concept of ecofeminism in 1976, and it became a movement in 1980 with a major conference on 'Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s' (Merchant 184). After this conference, movements dedicated to the preservation of nature and the planet began to flourish. Among them, India's Chipko movement, the Anti-Militarist movement in Europe and the US, and the Green Belt movement in Kenya contributed to an understanding of the interconnections between not only the domination of women and nature but also that between the marginalized and nature based on sex, race, and class; it “not only explores

many bonds between nature and women but also connects all, all marginal entities together.” (Bala, 192)

Noted ecofeminist Ynestra King defines ecofeminism as the theory and practice that analyses the devastation of the earth and ‘her’ beings by the corporate warriors and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. This concept also brings forth the patriarchal mentality that denies the right to human beings’ own bodies and sexuality as well as uses dominance and state power upon the weaker sections. In order to overcome every form of domination, it is necessary to reconstruct the society’s age-old patriarchal values and focus on promoting equality and non-hierarchical structures. According to the ecofeminists, it is high time for human beings to stop controlling nature and working to preserve it instead.

It is a consensus that there has always been an invisible relationship between gender and nature. Ecofeminists believe that there can neither be any liberation for women nor any solution to the ecological crisis within a society unless domination is removed from various describing relationships like humans and nature, man and woman, strong and weak. Maria Mies defines the basic idea of ecofeminism in the preface of the acclaimed book *Ecofeminism*, co-authored by Vandana Shiva,

“We also understood that women all over the world, since the beginning of patriarchy, were also treated like ‘nature,’ devoid of rationality, their bodies functioning in the same instinctive way as other mammals. Like nature they could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man. The tools for this are science, technology and violence.” (2014: xxiii)

In this paper, the researcher tries to discuss the plot, the characterization, and the theme/s of Kate Chopin, born Katherine O’Flaherty’s ‘The Awakening,’ and attempts to analyse Edna Pontellier, the protagonist’s connection with ‘nature.’ Sarah Klein in a conference presentation ‘Kate Chopin’s Ecofeminism: A Dialogue Between *The Awakening* & Contemporary Women,’ describes Chopin’s ways of portraying the connection between nature and Edna:

“*The Awakening* does not, of course, contain the animals of LeGuin or Walker’s fiction, who are clearly given their own subjecthood, voices, and desires. However, Chopin does play with the notion of traditionally objectified nature becoming the bodied subject - and, not surprisingly perhaps, she connects a bodied nature with Edna’s femaleness, blurring boundaries indeed.” (Klein, 6)

Kate Chopin’s ‘The Awakening’

In the preface to ‘The Awakening’ Marilynne Robinson summarizes that Chopin falls into Woolf’s proposed suggestion for a freed woman, having a room of her own. Chopin published this major piece of writing in 1899, and it immediately attracted high attention. The novel is a bildungsroman where the main character, Edna Pontellier, gradually undergoes self-realization and focuses on liberating herself from the restrictions of social conventions, and creating her sexual as well as spiritual self-sufficiency. In the noted research paper on ‘Deconstructionist and Feminist Analysis of *The Awakening*,’ Linda Ayscue Gupta mentions that the novel speaks about

gender relations, focusing on “the stifling effect of societal expectations on a woman’s growth as a person.” (Gupta 3) According to Linda, Kate Chopin also offers a view of the “intrapyschic pain” of Edna, helping readers to understand the main character to an extensive level.

Moreover, according to Emily Toth, Chopin herself brought in the separation between the appearances and reality in Edna’s life, an “outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.” (Toth, 115)

Although there are various philosophical and theoretical chasms among ecofeminist scholars and activists, some shared fundamentals still exist, such as ecofeminists recognize a parallel between the condition of women under patriarchy and the of nature under patriarchy, a mode and practice of domination that reduces living beings to mere objects. Sarah Klein has discussed the relevance of the relationships between human and landscape in Chopin’s novel, referring to and applying Gretchen Legler’s theories on ecofeminism or “emancipatory strategies” to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, as a sort of preliminary litmus test for the philosophical building blocks of ecofeminism that Legler finds in contemporary American women’s writing. Besides, Klein clearly points out that the application of Legler’s criteria to Chopin’s novel raises the possibility of proving the fact that in some respects the novel sets an early tone for contemporary ecofeminist thematics in American women’s writing.

Ecofeminist Ideas in ‘The Awakening’

Throughout Chopin’s *The Awakening*, there are several natural images, such as the ocean, the water-oaks, and serpents, to wield substantial power over Edna’s psychological awakening. Chopin goes on to describe Edna with words that resembles an animal,

“She bathed her face, neck, and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh.” (Robinson, 25)

In a few instances, Chopin brings in resemblance of animals with Edna, who is brave and ‘naturally’ female. For example, the character of Alcee “sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first and brought the crimson into her face; in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her.” (Robinson 74) Even the mention of natural seasons can be seen in the narrative to present the boundaries between the protagonist’s personal self and the natural world. Klein suggests that Edna’s social and psychological realities are so closely in relationship with natural patterns that “the device beyond simplistic metaphor dissolve a boundary between Edna and het natural world.” (Klein, 7)

Klein further adds to the connection between Edna and the seasons stating that the blurring thin line between the main protagonist’s psychological and natural landscape can be seen in the novel through “a period of lingering glow in autumn, extremes in winter, and a drowning in the ambiguous chill and sunshine of an early spring day.” (Klein, 8)

The imagery of the ocean/sea is used by Chopin to bring out a vivid picture connecting Edna's gradual 'awakening' to nature.

"First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now!" (Robinson, 13)

Edna feels like "some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known," in her final swim. This reference clearly proves the sense of freedom Edna feels in the waters. The waters provide her the confidence and strength to fight against the patriarchal norms. Edna shouts for joy with every sweeping stroke or two when her body lifted to the surface. Edna feels as if she gained some power of significant import to control the working of her body and soul. "She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." (Robinson, 20)

This oft-quoted passage sends a strong feeling of the development of a powerful 'female' in an era where women were taken to be mere 'husband's property.' Edna's feeling of liberty amidst nature, her desire to break free of the traditional societal norms, and her spiritual communion with the waters is clearly visible in the sense of eroticism she feels for the sea:

"The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water." (Robinson, 74)

Throughout the novel, Edna keeps on searching for ways to set herself as an individual, having her own identity, which was quite a daunting task at that period. Although she dared to pursue her love interests, moving out of her husband's house, yet she ensured to keep her entire focus on her own happiness by gazing away toward Grande Terre and thinking that she wanted to be alone with Robert, "in the sun, listening to the ocean's roar and watching the slimy lizards writhe in and out among the ruins of the old fort." (Robinson, 24)

Another image used by Chopin is that of a serpent that is a combination of beauty and danger; Chopin describes Edna's hair as "coiled like a golden serpent." This reference invokes the readers to connect the two sides of a woman.

In her final descent, Edna "cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her." (Robinson, 74)

The interconnection that Edna shares with the natural world is visible throughout the novel. Chopin successfully knits the politics of gender with that of ecology. *The Awakening* can be minutely observed through an aesthetic and political viewpoint related to contemporary women's writing and feminist politics.

Conclusion

In the paper 'Prakriti and Shakti: Associate in Nursing Ecofeminist Perspective,' Khanduja states that point is high to focus on issues that specialize in the ecofeminist area and address those through correct policy action. It is a necessity for the human world to feel belongingness with the ecology, which is the original foundation of life and "the inherent characteristic of the life in its elemental form." (Khanduja, 112) As the present world is engulfed with the sick effects of ecological destruction usually seen inside rising pollution and the birth of incurable diseases, this time is ripe for humans to revive nature's regenerative capacities and concentrate on developing a property world.

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