

An Ecofeminist Investigation of Symbolism and Feminine Subjugation in *The Awakening*



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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



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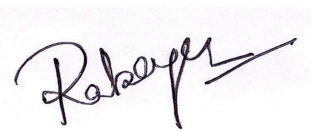
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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgment of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rabeya', with a stylized flourish extending to the right. The signature is set against a light pink rectangular background.

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Dedication

“The earth is not only the common heritage of all humankind but also the ultimate source of life.

By destroying it we destroy ourselves”

- Petra Kelly

To all the future scholars diving into ecofeminist research, who will continue to illuminate the connections between environmental justice and gender equality. This research is a continuation of years of feminist environmental scholarship and warmly invites you to delve deeper into these important intersections.

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Abstract

The objective of this research has been to investigate the convergence of ecofeminism and symbolism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, particularly focusing on the character of Edna Pontellier. Ecofeminism, which analyzes the connections between the subjugation of women and the deterioration of the environment, has offered a powerful framework for examining Edna's path to self-discovery and freedom. This study has employed a qualitative approach using the ecofeminist lens of Carolyn Merchant to explore Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. It has concentrated on a detailed textual investigation of the novel's symbolic representation of natural elements, such as the sea and the birds, along with how women were subjugated in the early 19th century. The symbols that have been explored in reference to the incidents have assisted the researcher to shed light on how Chopin critiqued the intertwined oppression of women and nature within a patriarchal framework, even though earlier researchers have mostly focused on factors such as rebellions against societal norms, self-discovery, women identity, etc. This thesis has aimed to enhance the conversation regarding the significance of ecofeminism in literary studies.

An Ecofeminist Investigation of Symbolism and Feminine Subjugation in *The Awakening*

Chapter 1

Introduction

“...the logic of domination is so important ... that historically, at least in Western societies, the oppressive conceptual frameworks that have justified the dominations of women and nonhuman nature have been patriarchal.”

(Warren 50)

1.1 Backstory:

In the vast canon of American literature, very few works have remained as relevant and influential in rousing debate as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). This novel is still relevant to readers in the twenty-first century as it explores female autonomy, mindfulness of the environment and the complex relationship between nature and feminine identity. The narrative revolves around Edna Pontellier, a woman whose quest for self-awareness exposes the rigid social norms of New Orleans, Creole society in the late nineteenth century.

Ecofeminism, a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne (1920-2005), is a socio-political and philosophical movement that explores the interconnectedness of ecological and feminist concerns. The ecofeminist lens basically examines the interconnected systems of oppression which exploit both women and the environment, emphasizing the role of patriarchal structures in

sustaining these injustices. By examining the representations of women and nature, ecofeminist theory has been enhanced in the study of literature and culture.

Chopin's distinct viewpoint came from her life in the American South, especially in Louisiana, where women were primarily subjugated in roles such as housewives and mothers. Growing up in St. Louis and later residing in New Orleans, Chopin was immersed in the intricate Creole culture, which offered women social freedom in comparison to the conventional American society in the North, yet still upholding rigid patriarchal structures. Her individual experiences as a young widow, tasked with the rearing of six children after her husband's demise in 1882, profoundly influenced her comprehension of women's constrained autonomy. Through her literary narratives and increased participation in the literary communities, Chopin became progressively aware of the restrictive societal norms that limited women's personal and sexual expression. Sandra M. Gilbert also had a similar approach of defining Kate Chopin as she states, "...she was female, however, she saw such epiphanies from a feminine point of view and in what we would now call feminine terms" (46). Thus the novel, *The Awakening* originated from her observations of women's internal conflicts, her own experiences of actualization and her booming feminist awareness. Motivated by the writings of other progressive authors and her own evolving perspectives, Chopin meticulously wove *The Awakening* as a daring critique of matrimony, motherhood and feminine identity that purposefully challenged the conservative societal expressions of the early 19th century. The narrative's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, served as a conduit through which Chopin could investigate the psychological and emotional landscape of a woman striving for self-determination within a societal framework that asked for conformity and renunciation.

Kate Chopin emerged as an unique voice in 19th century American literature, diverging from the domestic and juvenile motifs that were essentially known as characteristics of female authors during her time. Her bold examination of female autonomy and individuality distinguished her from others, who conformed to established conventions and societal norms. Writers like Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman highlighted struggles faced by women for autonomy and gender oppression in their texts, *The House of Mirth* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* but really could not deliver any sort of resistance as Xianfeng Mou argues, “women lack the language to articulate their needs in late nineteenth century America” (113). While Wharton's *The House of Mirth* keenly explained the economic oppression of women through Lily Bart's frantic navigation of societal norms, exposing the transactional essence of female existence which can be observed in the lines, “She was so evidently the victim of the civilization that had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (Wharton 9), and Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* unveiled the psychological repression of women in terms of medical attention as the narrator states, “I've got out at last [...] in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back” (Gilman 12), Chopin boldly transcended mere documentation of female struggles to envision radical change.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontellier does not simply endure societal limitations but actively deconstructs them by embodying a transformative vision of feminine autonomy that her contemporaries could only indicate, “Edna perpetuates the raced and gendered system of subjugation of her class and time” (Hildebrand 201). While Wharton portrayed women as economic assets and Gilman illustrated them as psychologically confined, Chopin depicted a woman who deliberately embraces self-discovery, sexual awakening, and personal freedom. This concept is articulated as Chopin metaphorically narrates, “The bird that would soar above the

level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (88). This summarizes this significant shift, positioning Chopin not only as a chronicler of feminine challenges but also as a visionary who envisioned women's potential for complete psychological and sexual liberation long before such notions gained widespread acceptance. Through Edna's journey, Chopin not only confronted the social conventions of her era but also the very literary frameworks that her contemporaries were still navigating, offering *The Awakening* as a groundbreaking text that redefined feminine identity as a dynamic, self-determined experience rather than a fixed, socially dictated condition and addresses how nature acts both as a reflection and driving force for women's awakening. As C. Alice Evangaline Jebaselvi and K. Mohanraj explain, “the exploitation of the environment is supported by the same cultural logic that defends women’s dominance” (84),

The novel presents a narrative that addresses current concerns about gender equality and environmental degradation by highlighting the significant linkages between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women, as seen in Chopin’s writing, particularly as she mentions, “The sea was splendid and breathless and still, like some great gilded serpent watching her with glittering eyes” (127). This symbolic depiction highlights Chopin's skillful use of natural symbolism to shed light on Edna's emerging consciousness and makes a strong connection between the wild forces of nature and feminine liberation. The novel's lasting importance originates from its feminist echoes as well as its foresighted understanding of the relationship between social and environmental justice, making it a must-read for contemporary feminist and ecological discourse.

As ecofeminist theorist Carolyn Merchant argues in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), the domination of nature has historically been linked to the

subordination of women, a connection that Chopin explores through her narratives. This is particularly evident when Chopin writes, “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (18), establishing the sea as both a feminine force and a symbol of liberation.

The late 1800s American life consisted of a very male oriented society where women were subjugated. Women were expected to be “angels in the house” (Showalter 208), who were completely devoted to domestic duties and parenting. This period also saw the start of serious environmental damage due to industrialization, creating a link between the repression of women and control of nature. The impact of industrialized transformation drastically shaped the American society where both women and nature were subjected to commodification and control. They were regarded as resources ripe for exploitation as women were confined to domestic roles with minimal freedom while landscapes were forcibly altered and ecosystems diminished to mere economic commodities. As Robert True asserts, “the capitalization of nature suggests that Edna may be referring to a narrow conception of the term which has as much of reification as biology in it, one in which ‘Nature’ is used to justify social arrangements” (28). This concurrent subjugation illustrated the patriarchal capitalist ideologies that prioritized dominations, viewing women and natural environments as passive, extractable resources to be governed, controlled and consumed within the booming industrial power structures. This becomes clear in the scene where Chopin states, “voice of the sea speaks to the soul [...] The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (18). These lines show how she portrayed the sea as a feminine power that both supports and frees, sharply contrasting with the constructed limits of society. The harm done to both women and nature becomes clearer as the story moves

forward, shown in the slow shrinking of places where Edna can openly express herself, reflecting the larger environmental concerns.

Edna Pontellier stands out as a complex character whose journey challenges the usual stories of the contemporary period. Born in Kentucky to a Presbyterian family, Edna's early years are filled with a gap between her passionate inner self and the strict religious and social rules of society. Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier, a wealthy businessman from New Orleans, initially symbolizes her acceptance of societal expectations. However, her experience during the summer holidays at the Grand Isle triggers a significant change in her ideology. This transition fundamentally establishes a platonic relationship with the natural world order, such as the sea which evolves into both a representation and a medium for her awakening. The metaphorical link between women and birds symbolizes a recurring theme in the novel and illustrates how Chopin employs elements of nature to express the challenges and ambitions of her female characters.

1.2 What is Ecofeminism?

To undertake a study of a literary text using an ecofeminist lens, it is first necessary to understand the term. Ecofeminism represents a specialized branch of ecocriticism that emerged during the second wave of ecocritical discourse. It is a philosophical and political movement that incorporates ecological concerns with feminist philosophy, asserting that environmental exploitation and women's oppression are inextricably linked and emerge from comparable social, political and cultural structures. An ecofeminist perspective on the symbolism in *The Awakening* uncovers the complex interrelation between female subjugation and environmental degradation. The novel's natural imagery acts not just as a backdrop but as a dynamic force that emphasizes what ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard's statement: "Ecofeminism calls for an end to

all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (1). This viewpoint enables the researcher to provide an essential framework for grasping how Chopin's work anticipates modern environmental and feminist issues.

Carolyn Merchant, a prominent American ecofeminist, philosopher and historian, is celebrated for her pioneering approach on the intricate connections between gender, science and environment. Merchant made noteworthy contributions in the field of environmental history and philosophy, particularly by investigating how the scientific and industrial revolutions altered human relations with nature. In her seminal book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) she states, “Concepts of nature and women are historical and social constructions. There are no unchanging ‘essential’ characteristics of sex, gender or nature. Individuals form concepts about nature and their own relationships to it that draw on the ideas and norms of the society into which they are born, socialized, and educated” (Merchant xvi). She delved into the fundamental causes of environmental crises, associating them with the marginalization of women. She contended that the scientific revolution engendered a mechanistic perspective that equated the Earth to a machine, thereby rationalizing its exploitation and bolstering patriarchal systems that oppressed both women and nature. Merchant’s distinctive ecological feminist viewpoint highlights how these historical transitions sustained environmental degradation and gender oppression, influencing contemporary attitudes towards the exploitation of both women and natural resources.

Merchant's argument is intricately linked to the themes and characters found in Chopin's *The Awakening*. Both Merchant and Chopin examine the ways in which societal expectations dictate and limit the roles of women presuming that these roles are not innate but rather constructed by

the patriarchal system. Focusing on the character of Edna Pontellier, Chopin demonstrated how these imposed norms influence and restrict female identity which reinforces Merchant's assertion that there are no essential traits of gender. It is evident as Edna states, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin 52), underscoring her awareness that motherhood is a societal construct rather than the entirety of her identity, because "women's social identities were inexorably tied to marriage" (Mathews 129). Furthermore, Chopin introduced contrasting characters that embody different reactions to these societal constructs, such as Adèle Ratignolle, who epitomizes the internalized social ideals of femininity as the quintessential mother-woman who "idolized their children, worshiped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals" (Chopin 12).

Cheryl Glotfelty, an influential ecocritic similarly articulated ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii) in her seminal work, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). She highlighted how depictions of nature within literature mirror societal views on both the environment and gender roles. Her theoretical approach is especially pertinent for exploring symbolism in *The Awakening*, where natural elements such as the sea embodies both environmental and feminist awareness. Glotfelty's claim that "Ecocriticism ... [is] a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice" (xxv) offers a valuable perspective for analyzing how Chopin employs natural symbolism to draw parallels between Edna's defiance of patriarchal limitations and the spiritual connection to nature.

To give a comprehensive criticism of 19th-century patriarchal norms and to imagine new possibilities for female identity and agency, Chopin's *The Awakening* effectively combines

environmental symbolism with feminist consciousness. The possibilities and constraints that women of Chopin's era faced are examined in this research through the author's use of natural images including the sea, birds and the alluring Grand Isle landscape. Using an ecofeminist theoretical framework, the study demonstrates how the novel's environmental symbolism anticipates contemporary ecological problems while addressing themes of independence and self-actualization and thereby acting as a reflection of and catalyst for female awakening. Kate Rigby explored nature as it greatly influences women's consciousness while men see nature as a subject, "women are inherent in their natures as biologically male and female, such that women are naturally 'closer to nature' or more ecologically benign than men" (151). This study shows how Chopin's narratives engage the readers today despite their historical context since they explore the complex relationships among gender, environment and social justice.

1.3 Research Objective:

This thesis has used the ecofeminist theory of Carolyn Merchant and investigated how Chopin employed the symbols of the sea and the birds to reflect Edna's growing consciousness of her own oppression and her ultimate quest for liberation. This research has contended that the symbolic ties between Edna and the natural world illustrate an ecofeminist critique of the ways in which both women and nature are oppressed under the system of control and commodification. By exploring the connections between ecofeminism and Edna's journey towards freedom, this thesis has sought to delve into feminist issues while also providing a critical examination of the human-nature relationship. However, due to time constraints, not all events and minute details could be thoroughly explored but will help to boost the existing understanding of ecofeminism in the field of literary studies.

1.4 Research Question:

How does nature and gender manipulation influence Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*?

1.5 Research Methodology:

This study has been accomplished through archival research and addressed scholarly resources to conduct a qualitative analysis that aligns with its purpose. This research has used the ecofeminist lens of the American philosopher and historian Carolyn Merchant to examine *The Awakening*. Furthermore, focusing on the concept of nature and society as a crucial element for a healthy wellbeing, this research has explored the intricate connection between nature and social structure with Edna Pontellier's life. Merchant's theories, particularly those presented in her book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, have been used to investigate the multidimensional reading of Edna's psychological and physical relationship with her environment, demonstrating how her personal awakening is intrinsically linked to broader systemic constraints. Merchant's theoretical approach not only sheds light on the novel's deeper symbolic meanings but also provides scholarly discussions about the complex relationships between gender, ecology and social transformation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* has been a focal point for feminist literary critique for many years, yet recent academic inquiries have started to delve into the convergence of feminism and environmental themes within the narrative. The articles reviewed for this study delve into the developing domain of ecofeminist analysis as it pertains to Chopin's work, concentrating on the symbolism and the quest for freedom experienced by the protagonist, Edna Pontellier. By integrating recent findings, this section has sought to illustrate how ecofeminist viewpoints provide fresh understandings of the novel's motifs related to female liberation, natural imagery and social limitations. This section has investigated various academic contributions to this area by earlier researchers, emphasizing the intricate relationship between gender, nature, and individual autonomy in *The Awakening*. The articles explored in this section have been organized thematically.

The article, "Taking the Waters: The Summer Place and Women's Health in Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'" by Tara K. Parmiter explores Edna Pontellier's quest for self discovery in nature. Parmiter identified Edna's psychological stress that stems from the constraints of patriarchy. She identified the repetitive nature of domestic obligations, emotional labor and societal expectations that left her soul exhausted and felt trapped in roles she did not desire. Her article has been used to highlight the oppression of women and exploitation of nature which resulted in the sufferers establishing a relation of spiritual bond.

Moreover, Molly J. Hildebrand discusses the importance of nature, gender and independence in her article "The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'".

According to her, the natural factors allowed Edna to identify herself with a masculine persona as nature and its various forms were given masculine identity. Since nature and its beauty cannot be contained, it contrasts with the societal condition of women of the contemporary period where they were constrained by the norms set by the patriarchal society. Hildebrand's article has been used to identify the essential connection between nature and women and understand contemporary gender ideologies.

Similarly, Donald A. Ringe explores the diversification of gender identity and its relation with the natural world order in his article, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*". According to him, the natural order has the ability to establish connection between the soul and the universe. Furthermore, he also discusses how nature can help one identify their true self by knowing the definition of individualism and the world or the society. This article has helped the researcher to have a deeper understanding of how Edna connected herself with nature in the face of patriarchal oppression and achieved the concept of liberation.

On the other hand, regarding the patriarchal oppression of contemporary society, Steven T. Ryan Austin published an article, "Depression and Chopin's *The Awakening*". According to him, the male oriented society encouraged female members of the family to acquire maternal qualities such as looking after the children and the household duties which often resulted in a psychological revolt and trauma within the oppressed. His article has been explored to have a better understanding of the psychological plea for the women to seek symbolic liberation and attain peace through the natural elements.

Likewise, Peter Ramos explores the traumatic condition of women resulting from gender oppression in his article, "Unbearable Realism: Freedom, Ethics and Identity in *The*

Awakening”. According to him, the extent of the induced trauma from binding women into a limited opportunity often resulted them to commit self-harm or even suicide. Furthermore, he also discusses the extent of psychological stress for women that often resulted from the societal norms and culture practiced in England during the end of 19th century. Ramos’ article has been investigated to find the implicit factors of oppression against women and understand the reasons behind Edna’s choice of committing suicide.

In contrast, Jennifer B. Gray, in her article “The Escape of the ‘Sea’: Ideology and *The Awakening*,” states that Edna’s suicide was a result of her inner rebellion against the societal norms. Death allowed her to gain wings and attain the freewill of leading a life according to her own choice. Moreover, she also discusses her revolution against the designated roles that were forcefully imposed on her against her wills by the people. Her article has been explored to have a clearer understanding of how nature can procure the concept of transcendentalism and provide a sense of relief both psychologically and physically.

Additionally, the article “Surviving Edna: A Reading of the Ending of *The Awakening*” by Robert Treu explores the complications of having dual perspectives of the world around Edna. According to him, Edna inhibited the tendency of confronting the widely practiced societal norms and at the same time addressing her inner longings as mysterious and vast scope of opportunities. Furthermore, Robert Treu also identifies Edna’s practice of painting and organizing parties as an act of personal deliverance. His article has been investigated to thoroughly examine both the explicit and implicit reasons of Edna’s choice in living her life and her connection to nature.

In addition, Carolyn L. Mathews explores the role of attires of women in reference to the male dominant society in her article, “Fashioning the Hybrid Woman in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*”. According to her, Edna’s indulgence in abiding to contemporary women's attire resonates with her psychological, ethical and moral development. Her rebellious perspective towards the women attributed activities resulted into taking actions that opposed the traditional and cultural norms of the contemporary period. Her article has been addressed in this study to understand her psychological detachment from the outside world and her newfound concern about her true self and nature which does not necessarily abide by the social rules.

The article titled “Kate Chopin’s Ecofeminist Perspective in ‘The Awakening’” by Mayuri Pathak focuses on an ecofeminist interpretation of *The Awakening* by examining the ideological connections between gender and environmental matters. Pathak delved into the relationships among nature, caste, class, gender and emphasized how Chopin's literature engages with these issues well before the formal emergence of ecofeminist theory. Moreover, she illustrated how Chopin's narrative serves as a catalyst for feminist activism revealing the similarities between the subjugation of women and the degradation of the environment. This article has offered the researcher a foundational viewpoint on how Chopin’s portrayal of nature and feminist concepts correspond with ecofeminist theory and assist in providing a framework to investigate the symbolic link of Edna’s ‘awakening’ with the natural elements, particularly the sea.

Likewise, Ruth M. Dilley critically analyzes the ecofeminist viewpoint concerning gender and nature in her article, “The Male Hero v. Mother Nature.” She articulated the ways in which gender roles that are influenced by patriarchal societal frameworks affected human interactions with the natural world. Through an ecofeminist framework, her article investigated the juxtaposition of Edna’s bond with nature against the male protagonist’s hegemony as illustrated

in Hemingway's literary oeuvre. Dilley's work has been meticulously scrutinized to elucidate the symbolic interplay between Edna and nature as well as how ecofeminism challenges the dichotomous representations of masculinity and femininity in the field of literature.

Moreover, Jiamin Zhang's article titled "Viewing Environmental Issues from Ecofeminism: Ecofeminism Views in 'The Story of One Hour'" investigates the intricate relationship between women and the natural environment through the theoretical framework of ecofeminism. Zhang posits that ecofeminism elucidates the interconnectedness of the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the natural world. In Chopin's *The Awakening*, the natural world is portrayed as a metaphor for female emancipation that reflects the parallel domination experienced by both women and nature under the patriarchal hegemony. The research presented in Zhang's article served as a valuable comparative framework for elucidating how Chopin systematically critiques patriarchal oppression through the employment of natural metaphors and reinforcing the symbolic connections in *The Awakening*.

On the other hand, the paper "Women and Nature Revisited: Ecofeminist Reconfigurations of an Old Association" by Kate Rigby delves into the enduring link between the oppression of women and the environment within the patriarchal framework. Rigby emphasized how ecofeminism challenges this connection by positioning women's involvement in both historical and modern struggles as crucial for tackling ecological challenges. Edna's deepening relationship with nature, particularly her interactions with the ocean represents her yearning for independence and freedom from confining social expectations. This article has been utilized to examine how Chopin employed natural imagery such as the ocean to depict Edna's defiance against patriarchal dominance and drawing connections between the characters' quest for freedom and ecofeminist critiques of societal subjugation.

Additionally, “The Feminine Face of Environmental Activism: An Ecofeminist Perspective” by C. Alice Evangaline Jebaselvi and K. Mohanraj highlights the intertwined oppression faced by women and environment under patriarchal systems which resonates with Edna’s battle against societal norms. They argued that ecofeminism critiques binary frameworks such as culture versus nature and man versus woman; thereby illuminating Edna’s yearning to escape confining roles. The insights from this paper facilitated the researcher’s exploration of Edna’s journey towards self-awareness and her ultimate quest for autonomy while establishing a relevant context for understanding her symbolic relationship with nature and personal liberation.

In addition, in “Kate Chopin's Narrative Techniques and Separate Space in *The Awakening*,” Xianfeng Mou explores Chopin's groundbreaking approach to narrative techniques. Mou posits that the natural environment depicted in the novel, especially Edna's bond with the sea represents her deep desire for liberation and autonomy. This aligns with the ecofeminist perspectives which promote a harmonious relationship with nature and highlight the shared subjugation of women and environment within the patriarchal framework. This article has been examined to identify Chopin's depiction of nature as a source of strength rather than something to conquer that enriches the ecofeminist dialogue and underscore the necessity for a fairer and more sustainable connection among women, society and the natural world.

On the other hand, in “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire,” Sandra M. Gilbert delivers an in-depth examination of *The Awakening*, concentrating on the symbolic and mythological aspects of Edna Pontellier's journey. Gilbert argued that Chopin employs the myth of Aphrodite, the goddess that represents love and sensuality to contextualize Edna's awakening as an experience of erotic and existential metamorphosis. According to Gilbert, Edna's narrative transcends the mere quest for personal freedom from societal limitations

and evolves into a mythological story of rebirth and elevation. She investigated how Edna's bond with nature, especially the sea signifies her emergence as an embodiment of desire, strength and independence. The ocean is depicted as a realm of both allure and peril where Edna reasserts her identity yet confronts the boundaries of her existence within a patriarchal framework. This article has been utilized to delve into how Edna's identity and sensuality are intricately intertwined with natural imagery, particularly the sea which transforms into a domain of renewal and evolution for her autonomous identity.

The ecofeminist perspective in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* uncovers the complex relationship between natural symbolism and Edna Pontellier's path to self-discovery. While previous research has laid a foundation to examine *The Awakening* through an ecofeminist lens, this study stands out by providing a focused analysis of specific symbols in the novel, such as the sea, birds as vehicles for both ecological and feminist commentary. Unlike previous studies, which frequently emphasise broad thematic concerns such as gender issues, psychology and societal structure, this thesis situates the symbols of women and nature under patriarchal norms, providing a nuanced interpretation. Furthermore, this research demonstrates how Edna's internal awakening and engagement with natural elements provide an alternate point of view on the ecofeminist discourse in literature.

Chapter 3

The Spirit Unveiled: Threads of Divinity

3.1 A Feminine Odyssey:

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* narrates the transformative journey of Edna Pontellier, a woman from the Victorian era who uncovers her independent self through her deep connection with various components of nature, such as the sea, bird imagery and garden. Set against the backdrop of the restrictive societal environment of late 19th-century New Orleans and Grand Isle, the novel illustrates Edna's gradual awakening of her desires and identity which is significantly propelled by her bond with the natural world.

The sea emerges as a formidable feminine force that calls Edna toward freedom from societal restrictions, “highlights the limitations of Edna's home life in the middle-class ... [and] drives her to become as daring in defying societal conventions as she is in diving into the sea” (Parmiter 1). Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, as explained by Carolyn Merchant, “Within pre industrial capitalism, women's economic roles became more restrictive and their domestic lives came to be more rigidly defined by their sex as women, rather than by their class” (150). The dynamics between Edna and the sea symbolizes a resistance to the patriarchal mechanistic perspective that aimed to dominate both women and nature. Merchant's theory highlights how the efforts of the industrial era undermined nature and symbolically mirrors the oppression of feminine autonomy, turning Edna's relationship with the sea into a powerful act of defiance against the dual forms of subjugation.

Chopin unveils the sea's allure that pulls through vivid sensory imagery as she notes, “the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to

wander in abysses of solitude” (18). This portrayal of the sea as a feminine entity with agency directly contests the perception of the industrial age where nature was a mere resource to be dominated. The sea's voice stands as a counterpoint to the patriarchal narratives that pervade Edna's social environment.

Edna's metamorphosis is intricately linked to her deepening relationship with the sea. The narrator captures her first genuine experience of liberation while recounting her swimming adventure, “a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (32). This moment signifies not only physical mastery but also a psychological release from imposed gender boundaries.

The sea's role as a nurturing yet intimidating feminine force becomes increasingly apparent as Edna's awakening unfolds. In a crucial scene, the narrator illustrates Edna's profound bond with water, “[t]he 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” (Chopin 120). The sea as both a mother and a liberator provides Edna with an escape from the stifling roles of wife and mother that society imposes upon her. As Ruth M. Dilley critically analyzes nature as “both the opponent to conquer and the sensuous world of solitude and pureness” (25).

Chopin poignantly depicts Edna's moments of enlightenment, which “felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (120). This striking observation implies that through her communion with the sea, Edna experiences a form of rebirth, transcending the confines of her socially constructed identity. Since water stands as a

crucial source of sustaining life, the sea carries the notions of regeneration and transformation each time Edna immerses herself in the ocean. From an ecofeminist perspective which can be viewed not as a defeat but as a radical repudiation of patriarchal dominion over both feminine and natural realms.

Edna's relationship with the sea represents Merchant's portrayal of the pre-industrial naturalistic perspective, in which nature was viewed as a living, nurturing force rather than a resource to be exploited. She states “natural resources were utilized only for items necessary to the community as a whole. Nature was not raped for profits” (89). Using this lens, Edna's voyage implies more than just individual disobedience as it exemplifies a broader rejection of the mechanistic worldview that aimed to govern both women and nature. Her final swim becomes more than a personal choice; as Peter Ramos states “Edna’s own childhood was far from idyllic, given her mother’s early death and her father’s stern personality, and this may have some relation to her life-long quest for such freedom” (147), making it a dramatic statement about the inseparable balance between feminine liberation and environment.

The natural imagery, particularly the sea, serves as both a literary device and an insightful reflection on the relationship between feminine awakening and natural forces which aligns with Mayuri Pathak’s statement that “waters provide her the confidence and strength to fight against the patriarchal norms” (169). The sea's embrace provides Edna the freedom to define herself outside of predefined boundaries and the ability to connect with a deeper and real sense of self that the society could not deliver. Applying this ecofeminist approach, it is observed how Edna's story serves as a powerful indictment of the industrial age and its desire to rule both feminine and natural forces. Moreover, it also implies how genuine liberty requires recognition and honour of the natural connection between women and the environment.

3.2 Wings of Desire:

One of the most emotionally impactful moments that illustrates the bird symbolism where Chopin presents a caged parrot that speaks both French and Spanish, alongside a mockingbird that “hung in a cage outside the door” (5). The scene at the Grand Isle becomes increasingly meaningful as the story progresses. The parrot in the narrative exclaims in French “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi” (5) which loosely translates into “Get out! Get out! Damn it!” While the mockingbird produces his flut[e] notes. This seemingly straightforward moment establishes a deep metaphorical framework that resonates throughout the entirety of the novel, highlighting the central struggle between confinement and freedom that Edna Pontellier confronts. Despite being a talented artist, she was in doubt whether the society will accept her choices: “the demands that the social organization makes upon the individual, and which the self sometimes finds hard to accept” (Ringe 583).

The bird imagery in *The Awakening* symbolizes the intricate intersection of natural liberty and societal entrapment that women encountered. The caged birds act as powerful metaphors for women's restricted existence within a patriarchal framework, whereas free-flying birds embody the potential for emancipation and self-governance. This correlation between women and birds emphasizes how patriarchal society not only limits women but also seeks to dominate and tame nature itself. The bird with clipped wings has been in different literary texts like *Wide Sargasso Sea* to symbolize the restrictions imposed upon women, “made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire” (20). The ecofeminist interpretation unveils how Chopin intentionally positions birds as symbols of both natural freedom and imposed restrictions. Just as Victorian society aimed to tame both nature and women, the caged birds signify the domestication of both natural and feminine spirits. This

symbolism culminates in Edna's final scene, where Chopin describes “(a) bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (120). The striking image signifies not only Edna's physical condition but also her spiritual disposition that parallels the bird. She has endeavored to soar free but finds herself incapable of maintaining that freedom within the limitations imposed by her society.

The encounter is an important excerpt that links birds to women's quest for autonomy, which states, “...bird[s] that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (Chopin 88). This statement directly addresses the obstacles faced by women striving to rise above societal constraints, implying that merely wishing for freedom is insufficient and one must also possess the strength to uphold that freedom in the face of resistance. The evolution of birds throughout the novel maps Edna's journey from a confined life to her attempts at flight towards freedom. Just as birds must learn to soar, Edna must navigate her newfound autonomy. Nevertheless, the tragic conclusion implies that, akin to a bird raised in captivity, she lacks the essential tools and support system to thrive freely.

The comparison between women and birds in *The Awakening* serves several functions. It underscores the inherent longing for freedom that is present in both women and animals. Additionally it also illustrates how societal limitations can inhibit this intrinsic urge for liberty and implies that genuine freedom necessitates not only the aspiration for it but also the resilience and support needed to maintain it. This examination uncovers how Chopin employs bird imagery to craft a multifaceted reflection on freedom, restriction and the obstacles to female liberation. According to Carolyn L. Mathews, “...the whole cult of respectability that directed the lives of middle class Americans of this era lie at the heart of Edna Pontellier's quest for self-ownership”

(130). The birds depicted in the narrative act as both real beings and significant figures of the feminine quest for independence in an oppressive environment. Through employing this imagery, Chopin conveys that women's emancipation is not merely a societal concern but a natural entitlement which is as vital as a bird's instinct to take flight. The bird motif transcends simple representation to emerge as a component in grasping the novel's overarching themes surrounding feminine identity, independence and the dire repercussions of a society that stifles its women's potential, robbing them of their inherent right to rise.

3.3 Gardens of Growth:

Edna undergoes a significant awakening in Madame Antoine's garden on Chénière Caminada. After feeling dizzy during a church service, Robert escorts her to recuperate at Madame Antoine's residence. The garden environment becomes a symbol of Edna's emerging awareness and her detachment from the societal limitations. Such strength is seen as "... threatening to patriarchy and is conspicuously rebellious against dominant ideology" (Gray 67). The lush area, with its wildflowers and untamed flora, sharply contrasts with the carefully groomed gardens of New Orleans society which illustrates the natural essence of feminine strength, unrestrained by male authority. Edna's time at this garden scene can be examined through an ecofeminist lens exemplifying the deep connection between female freedom and natural environments. The garden acts as both a literal and metaphorical foundation for Edna's metamorphosis, contesting the patriarchal belief that women, akin to nature, must be controlled and nurtured. Jiamin Zhang in regard to such practice asserts, "...in the Victorian period, and it has completely transformed nature and women into subjects for human (men) aggression and conquest" (21). The wild, organic growth in Madame Antoine's garden signifies an alternative to the stringent Victorian social framework restricting Edna from flourishing. This interpretation also uncovers how

Chopin intentionally posits nature as a catalyst for feminine awakening. Just as the garden thrives in its natural form (that is free from artificial confines) it serves as a blueprint for Edna's own emancipation. This relationship between female independence and the natural environment implies that women's liberation is essentially linked to breaking away from imposed social constructs and returning to a more genuine state of existence.

The transformative essence of the incident within the yard becomes apparent in Edna's subsequent behavioral shifts. Her experience within this natural setting sparks a deeper comprehension of her desires and potential for development. This is evident in the narrative as Edna states “[t]he whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics” (Chopin 42). This quotation encapsulates the profound influence of Edna's connection with nature, implying that the garden acts as a gateway between her former life and newfound awareness. Edna's evolving notion of self is further depicted through natural imagery and is reinforced in Chopin's narrative as she explains, “...days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day” (63). Edna's awakening intricately weaves with natural elements, suggesting that her authentic self emerges most vividly as she embraces her bond with nature rather than yielding to societal norms.

The garden scene signifies more than a physical location as it evolves into a metaphor for the fertile ground of feminine consciousness and the potential for growth when women are liberated from societal limitations. Just as a garden requires space and freedom to thrive, Edna's actualization necessitates a departure from the stifling demands of the Victorian society. Consequently, it showcases how Chopin skillfully employs natural settings and imagery to delve

into themes of feminine awakening and liberation, establishing *The Awakening* as a groundbreaking work in both feminist and ecological literature.

Chapter 4

Chain of Silence: Scars of Broken Eden

4.1 Masters of the House, Masters of the Land:

“Peace in patriarchy is war against women” (26) a quotation by Maria Mies highlights the interconnected oppression of women and nature under patriarchal systems in her seminal book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. The statement underscores the inherent conflict between patriarchal structures and women’s well being. Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* portrayed the intertwined exploitation of nature and women which stands out as a pivotal theme that profoundly aligns with contemporary eco-feminist ideologies. Through her intricate depiction of the Creole society of the nineteenth century, Chopin reveals how patriarchal authority transcends the domestic realm to include environmental degradation, thereby weaving a complex tapestry of power dynamics that continues to shape modern dialogues surrounding gender and ecological equity.

The novel's exploration of these interlinked forms of exploitation becomes particularly pronounced where Léonce Pontellier's commercial pursuits along the Louisiana coast exemplify both financial and environmental degradation. His nonchalant conversation about property development over dinner, while his wife remains in enforced silence, encapsulates the dual aspects of patriarchal oppression; the concurrent commodification of natural resources and the silencing of feminine voices. This moment illustrates how nineteenth-century capitalism, fueled by male ambition, regarded both women and nature as assets to be dominated and exploited for economic gain. As Jennifer B. Gray asserts “Pigeons are not free, soaring birds; they fly away,

but always return” (66). Just as women wished to break free, they were eventually made to return to their husbands.

Chopin's meticulous language consistently uncovers the relationship between environmental and social subjugation throughout the narrative. As Carolyn Merchant notes in her book *The Death of Nature*, “The images of both nature and woman were two-sided” (127) the same ideology that seeks to master nature also endeavors to regulate women's bodies and their actions. This concept becomes evident as Chopin states, “Mr. Pontellier was very fond of walking about his house examining its various appointments and details, to see that nothing was amiss. He greatly valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his” (54). This excerpt highlights how ownership and control extend beyond mere material belongings to encompass both domestic environments and by implication, their occupants. The alteration of natural landscapes under patriarchal dominance is particularly emphasized in Chopin's portrayal of coastal development. She notes, “The interior of the ruin is ablaze. Not with the moonlight, for that is faint beside the other one— the sparkle from the crystal candelabra” (132). This description implies how human construction enforces an artificial order upon the natural environment, akin to how societal norms impose artificial limitations on women's conduct. The correlation between environmental degradation and feminine oppression becomes increasingly evident as the narrative unfolds.

Edna's expanding environmental awareness parallels her defiance against patriarchal authority as Chopin conveys her protagonist's awakening, “...voice of the sea whispering through the reeds...” (40). This passage illustrates how Edna's growing recognition of her own independence is deeply intertwined with her reverence for natural spaces, implying that both nature and women possess inherent value that transcends their usefulness to male interests. The novel thus foreshadows present-day ecological issues while shedding light on the connection between

environmental exploitation and the subjugation of women. Just as the Louisiana coastline undergoes transformation through commercial development, women like Edna experience relentless pressure to adhere to fabricated social norms. Both phenomena entail the imposition of artificial order upon natural systems, whether ecological or human. Therefore, from the discussion it demonstrates how Chopin's work anticipates modern ecofeminist theory by illustrating that the emancipation of women and nature are intricately linked with struggles against the patriarchal system of oppression. By meticulously depicting these interconnected forms of subjugation, she constructs a compelling argument for the imperative to confront systems that aim to dominate both natural and feminine realms.

The lasting significance of Chopin's critique becomes more evident as modern society continues to contend with environmental destruction and gender disparity. Her work implies that genuine advancement necessitates acknowledging and evaluating both natural ecosystems and feminine independence rather than perceiving them solely as resources to be exploited and controlled. This message strongly resonates with contemporary environmental and social justice movements, rendering *The Awakening* as not only a literary gem of the nineteenth century but also a predictive caution regarding the effect of unrestrained patriarchal control over both ecological and societal domains.

4.2 From the Urban Machine to the Natural World:

The stark contrast between urban and natural settings acts as a compelling metaphor for the simultaneous exploitation of women and nature within patriarchal frameworks. Through an ecofeminist perspective, Chopin skillfully depicts the oppressive urban atmosphere of New Orleans in juxtaposition with the liberating natural landscape of Grand Isle, shedding light on the

intertwined struggles for environmental and feminine emancipation. A crucial narrative moment that illustrates the concept as Edna transitions from her husband's grand mansion on Esplanade Street to the more modest 'pigeon house'. This shift signifies not just a change in location but also a symbolic evolution from patriarchal restriction to a more authentic existence as Chopin states, "...step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual" (99). This highlights how Edna's physical departure from the urban hub mirrors her increasing defiance against patriarchal oppression.

Ecofeminist scholar Carolyn Merchant's notion of 'the death of nature' offers valuable perspective on this interplay. Merchant posits that the mechanistic worldview stemming from the scientific revolution resulted in the concurrent exploitation of both the environment and women. This viewpoint sheds light on Chopin's portrayal of the Pontellier residence as "...house was painted a dazzling white; the outside shutters, or jalousies, were green" (54). Despite its elegance, the house symbolizes the mechanistic arrangement of space that caters to patriarchal interests while suppressing both natural and feminine expression. The novel starkly contrasts this with its depiction of Grand Isle's natural surroundings. As Chopin writes, "...voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (18). This passage exemplifies what ecofeminist Vandana Shiva refers to as 'embedded ecology' in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) to understand the intrinsic connection between human awareness and natural landscapes. The sea serves as a counterpoint to urban exploitation which provides both physical and spiritual emancipation. This theme echoes in other modern works, such as Sarah Orne Jewett's *A White Heron*, where the young heroine finds liberation and self-discovery in nature and states "...this was a beautiful place to live in, and she never should wish to go home" (Jewett 4) and rejecting the economic

exploitation symbolized by the city hunter. Similar to Sylvia in Jewett's narrative, Edna realizes that breaking free from urban limitations fosters a deeper bond with both natural forces and her true self.

Chopin further explores this theme through Edna's heightened consciousness regarding her own commodification within the urban society. She observes “...look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her” (99). This awakening aligns with ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren's concept of ‘ecological consciousness’ where “... twin dominations result[s] in an inaccurate account of how it is that nature has been and continues to be dominated and exploited...” (11) and the awareness of how patriarchal systems exploit both natural resources and feminine vitality. The disparity between exploitative urban environments and liberating natural spaces becomes particularly noticeable in Edna's artistic awakening. Her ability to paint thrives in natural surroundings but becomes restricted in the city, reflecting what ecofeminist Greta Gaard describes in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) as the ‘nature-culture dualism’ that patriarchal society enforces upon both women and creative expression. The urban settings operate as mechanisms of patriarchal dominance, while the natural environment presents opportunities for defiance and rejuvenation. This duality mirrors the wider ecofeminist prism that recognizes the intertwined origins of environmental degradation and the oppression of women both stemming from a patriarchal mindset that perceives nature and women as mere resources for exploitation. Through Chopin's skillful depiction of the struggle between urban restrictions and the freedom found in nature, *The Awakening* illustrates how literary critique can shed light on the intricate connections among gender, environment and systems of power.

4.3 The Cost of Freedom:

In *The Awakening*, the ultimate reconnection with natural elements signifies both a release from patriarchal restrictions and the deep toll of pursuing freedom in a society designed to thwart feminine independence. Edna's final interaction with the sea embodies both the promise of liberation and the harsh consequences imposed by a society resistant to feminine self-actualization. A significant moment that encapsulates this theme arises in the novel's final scene as Edna makes her way back to Grand Isle. Chopin illustrates this return through rich symbolism and states, "[t]he voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (18). This portrayal resonates with Merchant's concept of the 'partnership ethic', a connection to nature that stands against patriarchal oppression and exploitation. On the other hand, Warren's idea of the 'logic of domination' sheds light on how Edna's return to nature symbolizes a defiance of patriarchal authority.

The novel also presents a crucial moment that highlights the price of freedom as Edna contemplates her consciousness. "Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (116) that suffering is inevitable but it feels more heavy living in such suffering. Moreover, Maria Mies refers to this as 'subsistence perspective', the realization that achieving liberation often necessitates sacrifice and suffering within patriarchal structures. This theme resonates in other contemporary literature, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where the protagonist's liberation similarly comes at a racking personal cost. Like Gilman's narrator, Edna learns that total liberation from patriarchal constraints may demand a drastic departure from prevailing social structures. Therefore, the price of freedom becomes particularly apparent in Chopin's depiction of Edna's final swim. She states, "...looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. The vast

expanse of water stretched before her, inviting her into its depths” (121). This is the recognition that true liberation often requires a return to the natural elements that patriarchal society has sought to suppress and control.

Edna's return to the sea can be interpreted as both a personal decision and a wider commentary on the limited choices available to women striving for independence in a patriarchal society. The sea symbolizes what ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak refers to as the ‘ecological matrix’ that is, the interconnected web of life that presents an alternative to patriarchal hierarchies and exploitation. Chopin further elaborates on this theme through the vivid depiction of Edna's last moments where, “She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on...” (120). This excerpt illustrates the shift from fear to acceptance, implying that the price of freedom, although steep, may be more desirable than enduring a life constrained by patriarchal limitations. *The Awakening* reveals how literary symbolism can shed light on the intricate dynamics between gender, nature and power hierarchies.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has been a crucial literary text for researchers for a long time to understand the societal standing of women in the early 19th century. Highlighting the notions of gender oppression, imposed gender norms and societal structure, researchers have explored its relevance and how these concepts have evolved and influenced the lives of women in the modern era. Edna's artistic awakening and her final plunge into the sea signify the ultimate rejection of societal constructs and illustrate how individuals can challenge and dismiss socialized norms. The purpose of this research has been to acknowledge the collective oppression of women and nature, thereby illustrating Edna Pontellier's journey towards self consciousness and wider rejection of societal conventions. The study has concentrated on how the manipulation of nature and gender provokes the character, Edna Pontellier, to reject social norms and ascend towards liberation from stringent Victorian society. American philosopher Carolyn Merchant's ecofeminist theory has been used for this research to investigate how concepts such as patriarchal structures of the contemporary period commodified both women and the natural world in *The Awakening*. The symbolism of the sea in the novel further supports Merchant's theory by highlighting liberation from societal constraints as "the voice of the sea speaks to the soul" (Chopin 18). Chopin's work effectively demonstrates Merchant's theoretical perspective on the constructed nature of gender roles and societal expectations reveal that the roles are indeed learned and how individuals navigate their relationship to these norms through socialization and education rather than inherent predisposition. By critically examining the text this study has opened a gateway for a better approach and explicit interpretation of the text to its readers.

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