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EXISTENTIAL ANGST IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*: A FEMINIST READING

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to analyse the idea of existential angst in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in the light of existential feminism. The issue of suicide will be discussed from a larger feminist perspective including Indian. The suicide committed by Edna Pontellier at the end relates to awakening of the self-consciousness leading to annihilation of identity pertaining to the existential despair. The study on this aspect is made by referring to certain existential ethics such as angst and despair. The research is presented through feminist methodology by taking into account the notion of existential feminism by Simone De Beauvoir. The western and Indian notions of feminism are juxtaposed citing disparity among the socio-cultural situations working towards a presentation of a larger picture of the condition of women.

Keywords: Feminism, Existentialism, mother- woman, suicide and despair, hopelessness, marriage, patriarchy

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Existentialism was a literary and philosophical movement which gained prominence in the early 20th century following the two world wars. The mass destruction of lives also led to the destruction of morale and the faith in humanity amongst people. This very dread was termed as angst and the hopelessness as despair which became the basis of existentialism as a philosophy. For the existentialists "life is revealed as nothing" which is the source of absolute freedom and anguish (Pratt, 52). Sartre, a renowned existentialist attempted to find solution to this through Marxism by blaming the capitalist system for the hopeless condition of man; though later he was disillusioned with this too. It emphasizes the subjective reality of an individual and finding their own way through making a choice by opposing the concept of rationalism and idealism¹. While Soren Kierkegaard offered the solution through faith in god, Nietzsche opinionated that 'God is dead'. So, the focus shifted to authenticity, in terms of being true to oneself.

Kate Chopin was born after the outbreak of American Civil War (1861), and though an American she was drawn towards the French writers mainly, Maupassant. She was defiant of decencies and sexual prudery of 1890's and attempted to uncover the suppression of women under the garb of conventions. When *The Awakening* was published it was highly criticised for its immoral theme as some were of the view that Chopin had *Madame Bovary*² in mind while writing this novel. The protagonist Edna Pontellier feels strangely haunted by an indescribable oppression which impinges onto an unfamiliar part of her consciousness. Likewise, she tries to divert this monotony by engaging in infidelity, which threatens the sanctity of marriage and motherhood. And when she realises the futility of life, being abandoned by her lover she ends her life owing to

an internal hopelessness' In the novel, she thinks about her role in the society as a mother and a wife and resents this very notion and asserts that "they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin, 109).

Angst is defined as anguish or anxiety, a negative feeling arising from the experience of life. It is believed to have been coined by Soren Kierkegaard relating to a feeling of anxiety or inner turmoil. However, it is different from fear as the latter has an object and can be worked upon unlike angst whose source cannot be manifested while despair is the loss of hope, the disintegration of one's defining self or identity. Kierkegaard in his work *Either/Or*, states that the external conditions makes one unhappy as they are beyond control and hence causes despair. The existential angst which awakens the knowledge of Edna's solitary self proves redundant as she chooses to commit suicide in order to end her ignominy. And the further stage of angst is despair which relates to complete hopelessness. Albert Camus, the famous Existential thinker opined that one commits suicide not of one's own free will but due to circumstances which oppress upon one's own will. While the feminists like Helen Cixous and Clement claim that "either the woman is passive or she doesn't exist" (Cixous, 561).

Existentialism as a philosophy emphasised the importance of existence of an individual as a conscious being prior to his role or position in the society³. Simone De Beauvoir, the renowned propounder of Existential Feminism dealt with the concept of the 'Other' in her book *The Second Sex* emphasizing the liberation of female sexuality and economic autonomy of women. She traces the biological, psychological and historical aspects of subordination of women also relating to the master-slave dialectic⁴ to explain the suppression of women since ages. Sylvia I. Walsh critiques Soren Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* in terms of its demarcation between two forms of conscious despair: feminine and masculine. He says that feminine despair is of weakness where one is not willing to be oneself while, the masculine despair is that of defiance where one aspires to be a different self-other than being what one essentially is. Thereby, monstrous women represented female energy bristling with will, while male as dispossessed of will. He characterises the woman's nature by devotedness or submission towards others, and this quality according to him determines her identity. Furthermore, he says that "femininity constitutes a 'lower synthesis' than masculinity because women lack reflectiveness and internal orientation of man" (qtd. in Ibid.). And the counter viewpoint comes from Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* which points out that women have been prevented from taking active control of their lives living up to the term the 'Other' throughout the culture whereas man has been the self, the subject. Thereby, she says 'one is not born a woman but becomes one' relating to its social construction.

Sonia Kruks contextualises the life of Beauvoir in terms of contemporary modern age in terms of her free union with Sartre, her denial of marriage and motherhood and refusal to do housework shows the modern aspects of femininity where her-self is not influenced⁵ rather established. In *The Second Sex* she argues that "woman is shut up in a kitchen or boudoir- so her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped and it's found deplorable that she cannot fly" (Chapter 5). This very resentment towards limitation of a woman's role subjected to household sphere is shunned by Nora in the play *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen when she slams the door at the end and walks out of her marriage. The echo of the slam reverberates with the message that women are not to be treated as playthings and that she has to assert her freedom in order to be acknowledged. But Toril Moi views it differently and says that

a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in world...she makes something of what the world makes of her...this process of making and being made is open ended; it ends only with death (T. Moi,189-98).

Edna takes the same extreme leap wherein her awakened consciousness and the futility of her existence in relation to others force her to submerge herself into the universal symbolised by the imagery of sea. The statement that the wings of an artist ought to be strong to be able to soar above the level of tradition and conventions is issued as a warning to Edna by Mademoiselle Reisz in the novel. Edna chose to paint and listen to music in her idle time which was considered detrimental for women in those times. Thereby, her awakening is related to the monstrous power which results in death. Culturally and even traditionally held view was that woman's self was only through her association with the husband, and the subject that is Man, his self has to be

attained via assimilation into the universal God. So, the woman is at level three and doubly removed from the eternal being who is at level one. Another aspect is that since ages women have been granted two forms of identity one in lower of that of a whore and the other in transcendental of being a Virgin mother, denying the middle level of being human. Thereby, Edna's death is a result of existential self- discovery and realisation of her essentially solitary nature.

Towards the end of the novel Edna contemplates her position in the universe as a human being and her relation as an individual to world within and about her. This very inner consciousness is termed absurd by the existentialists. In other words, the world is absurd having to do with the meaning which we assign to it and not otherwise. So, one can observe two conflicting angsts here, one is of that of her role as a women subdivided into the role of a mother and a wife in confliction with the conventions. And the other is that of her 'self' as an individual in relation to the universe evoking a sense of ennui. Rosemarie Tong observes that Beauvoir disagreed with the Marxist view about the representation of man as a bourgeois being the breadwinner while woman as the proletariat who performed household and reproductive tasks. She also relates to the popular trope of ideal woman circumscribing them for their duty to sacrifice for the others. And in turn, this internalisation makes them wary of their own identity and of believing in it as their true reflection. This very "otherness" is solidified through marriage and motherhood (181-191). On the other hand, Helen Cixous attempted to undo the logocentric ideology and proclaim woman as the source of power and life. Her theory attempted to subvert the patriarchal binary schemes which were an effort to oppress and silence women. Femininity according to Julia Kristeva is simply that which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order. In the contemporary times, this ideology is working through women's willing consent and their internalisation of oppression.

From 1870-1920, there was an increase in the divorce rates in America as a result of women's 'selfish desires' according to men who pursued opportunities away from home, which in turn led to devaluation of the role of motherhood and housewife. Feminist fiction emerged in U.S during the second wave of feminism which demanded for female autonomy, sexual and reproductive freedom. The radical feminist like Ti-Grace Atkinson had famously compared marriage to cancer in a CBS Evening News Segment that aired on March 1970. While the 1960's and 70's was marked by the spirit of marital rejection. The main contention being asserted was that "women's free labour in the home sabotaged their demands for equal pay outside of it" (Friedan, 120). Marriage came to be considered as the main cause for depression amongst women. In simple terms, "women were inculcated to believe that their ideal of character is the very opposite of that of men, not self-will but submission and yielding to the control of others" (Mill, chapter 2).

Jean E. Kennard wrote about the popularity of the female adultery trope in 1970's which came to be understood as an indication for the search for self-fulfillment. In other words, a woman sought companionship outside her marriage in order to be loved and not be victimised and thereby, strived for self-discovery. In *Anna Karenina*, the fateful protagonist Anna chooses to end her life owing to the futility of her life in relation with Vronsky, her lover. She defies the role of mother and wife by indulging in infidelity. And the process of self-discovery forces her to end her life owing to her position in the society at large now as an adulterous. Therefore, the adultery of women further led to more problems due to the conventional stigma attached to it. And the women were forced to comply according to the societal ethics which led to either madness or suicide. Suicide like madness was considered a female malady (Elaine Showalter) as a result of insanity among women who were the weaker beings unable to resist the urge owing to their weak willpower and hence the victims of whim. Along with the physical aspect a critic named Cobbe pointed towards the metaphysical aspect as living state of death in life. He relates that the logical end of women becomes suicide when she like a child or a mistress is ignored about her existence and thus she relinquishes herself as a confirmation of the way she is perceived by others. One can draw parallel with the character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's famous novel *Jane Eyre* here which also led to the study of the archetype "Madwoman in the attic"⁶.

To expand this very notion of suppression of women in relation to Indian cultural practice of 'Suttee' is not farfetched. This practice being aligned with the idea that a wife had to immolate herself along with her dead husband as she now no longer possessed any life or identity of her own thereby she had to die to feed

the socio-cultural ritual structured by patriarchy. While, it was an excuse for laying off the burden in terms of economy in relation to feeding the dependent widow in the inmates' house. In the present time, though Sutte is not practised but the internalisation of the same is resulting in suicide amongst Indian women. According to a symposium conducted at Madrid, many studies of common mental disorders, deliberate self-harm (DSH) and suicide come from developing countries highlighting the over-representation of women, particularly young married women. The *Abstracts Book* estimates that "the male to female ratio in suicides is also much narrower and in China they are reversed" (186) suggesting that unlike the west where marriage "is protective, in many developing countries it is a significant source of stress for women leading to higher psychiatric morbidity and suicidal behaviour" (M. Khan, 453-64). Some of the factors responsible for this include early marriage, lack of autonomy in choosing male partner in the form of arranged marriage; pressure to have children early in marriage in many cases for a "male offspring, economic dependence on husband and the joint family system" (Ibid.).

To substantiate this further, consider the example of Khap Panchayat in Haryana in context of the prevalence of patriarchy in the present times. It is a collective patriarchal body which is repressive in nature supporting honour killings and negating Gotra marriages. They defend it in the name of preserving their culture and values. The women in their region have no choice in choosing their own partner for marriages but adhere to the conventional setup of arranged marriage and if anyone transcends this norm, they are socially boycotted or fined. It has been ascertained that in most cases, they are killed or are forced to commit suicide. The biggest irony to be observed from this is that though the fate of woman is being decided by these leaders, there are no women leaders among them. In yet another newspaper article, the then Haryana chief minister, O.P Chautala, gave a statement that the law against child marriage is to be reconsidered as it can serve as a remedy for rape. He said that the sexual urge among teenagers can be fulfilled through means of marriage, which will in turn decrease the rate of sexual crimes in the state (Joshi, *The Hindu*).

Indian Feminism differs from the Western Feminist concept as it relates to retaining the basic means of survival; it's about eradication of social vices like dowry system and the right to get education. While the Western feminists demanded equal voting rights and the autonomy in terms of work and pay. And in context of *Ecriture*, the western feminists have fought for voicing out their existence through writing, but still the representation of the third world women had to come through yet another genre of post-colonial feminism. In Cixous's opinion, the voice of the subaltern still needed to be raised and heard through our body which had been abused since centuries to write back to the patriarchy constituting the centre.

Furthermore, the third world feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Sarojini Sahoo criticize western feminism for being ethnocentric. They state that the white women writers have not portrayed the third world women justifiably. Thereby, the further segregations of the term 'Other' are emphasised here. In other words, as the patriarchal men have not given the say to the women, likewise, the white women feminists have tended to ignore the more marginalised women of the third world, the blacks and the Asians. The poststructuralist feminist critic Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* critiques the work of Beauvoir, Foucault and Lacan by arguing that gender is constructed through language and critiques the earlier feminists' effort to distinguish between the biological sex and socially constructed gender. According to her, "woman" is a debatable category and that there is no single cause for women's subordination and approach to be dealt with (Chapter 1). Even Virginia Woolf denied the label of feminist writer as she believed that an individual has androgynous qualities and no clear cut labels can be ascertained. She dealt with this theme in her book *Orlando*, which covers a relative time period and the protagonist's gender is interchangeable with respective to time. Also, she resurrected the idea that if Shakespeare had a sister, who aspired to be a writer, must have been forced to kill herself or be pushed into the household drudgery. Ironically, Virginia committed suicide due to mental illness, which is said to have been due to her own anxieties about marriage and the responsibilities attached to it. All these above factors point out towards the repression which the women faced from patriarchy for writing and expressing their angst if not vocally, then at least through pen.

Rosemarie Tong offers possible solutions for countering patriarchal subversion which may seem radical in practice. Firstly, she suggests negation and diffusion of the historically dominant meaning set by patriarchy through ideology which she labels as recuperation. Secondly, in order to attain economic equality, the abolition of capitalism and adoption of socialism is to be in practice, where the means of production belongs to one and all. Thirdly, through bringing change in the legal and political structures which in turn will change the social scenario and also suggests the possible solution in resorting to lesbianism and celibacy.

Conclusively, this paper has traced the existential angst in context of feminism in *The Awakening* by taking into account the cause and effect of the same. Also, it has discussed about the western and Indian notion of feminism in relation to feminine Ecriture. Thereafter, it has referred to particular texts which deal with the same theme of female suppression and hence stated the possible solutions as suggested by a feminist critic. It has analysed not only the conventional suppression of women but of contemporary subordination too in the form of ideology.

Endnotes

¹Rationalism relates to reason, where the truth is ascertained through intellectual mind and not the natural instinct. And Idealism adheres to the concept of mentally constructed reality which otherwise is immaterial.

²Reference to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in context of its theme of adultery. Wherein, Emma like Edna resents her husband, neglects children, takes an adulterous lover and commits suicide.

³Sartre's maxim of Existentialism was "existence precedes essence". He also said that man makes his nature by his actions- it is of his nature not to have a nature, but project himself outside himself, to catch up with himself.

⁴The Master-Slave Dialectic is propounded by Hegel: He explains this by stating that human consciousness is an inherently social process, and one cannot be fully certain of their consciousness unless that consciousness is "mediated" through another entity. Basically, a person must receive acknowledgment of their consciousness from another person in order for that consciousness to exist.

⁵ *The Second Sex* has been criticised for its influence by Sartre's philosophy. Diane Raymond, in *Existentialism and the Philosophical Tradition* (1991), for example, characterizes Beauvoir's central thesis, that under patriarchy woman is the Other, as an application of Sartre's "phenomenology of interpersonal relationships," and its "dynamic of consciousness struggling against consciousness" (Raymond 386,389). Also, Beauvoir had altered the existential slogan 'will to power' to 'will to change'. She believed that for women, the power will come through change in the society along with the inherent change in the ideology of women.

⁶*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, published in 1979, examines Victorian literature from a feminist perspective. They explored the idea behind feminist' writing where female characters were either to be portrayed as "angel" or the "monster". They also allude to Virginia Woolf who says women writers must "kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been killed into art".

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