



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.4. 2022 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

UNDERSTANDING EXPRESSION OF FEMALE DESIRE IN KATE CHOPIN'S FICTION

REHA KEER

Ph.D. Scholar,

University School of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi.

Email ID: [rehakeer@gmail.com](mailto:rehakeer@gmail.com)



REHA KEER

Article information

Received:06/11/2022  
Accepted: 13/12/2022  
Published online:21/12/2022  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.4.160](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.4.160)

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to understand the expression of female desire in Kate Chopin's selected works of fiction. Most of her female protagonists die while they refute gender norms. This comes as a shock that unsettles her readers. Why cannot her women protagonists live a happy life after transgressing the gender boundaries? What Kate Chopin's fictional works suggest at the very first glance is that women who disobey the rules of society cannot be happy; women who express their sexual desire are necessarily bound to suffer. To understand and explore this tension the paper takes up Kate Chopin's short stories "A Shameful Affair," (1891) "A Respectable Woman," (1894) "The Story of an Hour," (1884) and the novel *The Awakening* (1899).

**Keywords:** Gender, female, desire, sexual and expression.

Why Kate Chopin?

It is already more than a shock while one reads Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* that unsettles the reader in the end and leaves the question why so much of struggle from the protagonist's side if she could attain freedom just by murdering herself as she commits suicide in the end of the novel. If one reads another short story by Kate Chopin called "A Respectable Woman," in which the woman is unable to justify her freedom and desire, and consequently she controls herself and does what she is supposed to do as a 'good' woman of patriarchy.

This is not the end of the story. Once again another short story by Kate Chopin called "The Story of an Hour" where the protagonist feels sorrow and ecstasy at the same time, after the death of her husband. But in the end, due to realization of immense happiness that comes from the freedom after the death of her husband, she dies of heartache.

So, the question comes to one's mind is that why Kate Chopin ends her stories like this? Why cannot women express or if they express why they have to suffer. Why cannot they go on living a happy life? What these stories suggest at the very first glance is that women who disobey the rules of society cannot be happy; women who express their sexual desire are necessarily bound to suffer.

As it is quite known that while an author writes, directly or indirectly, writing gives the impression of his or her surroundings. So is evident in Kate's stories. Margo Culley and Emily Troth in their essay, "A New

Biographical Approach” write that she Kate Chopin used the names of real people and revealed their secrets with disguise. (114) In her own life she defied social conventions by smoking cigarette, walking about the village and city alone, running her husband’s business, refusing to remarry, and likely taking lovers.

### **Kate Chopin: A Biography**

Kate Chopin, an American author of short stories and novels, although born Katherine O’Flaherty, in St. Louis, Missouri in 1850, began writing in nineteenth century when she was 38 and continued writing until the end of her life. She lived in a time when feminism was emerging. Though she was not a feminist, she took women’s issue extremely seriously.

Kate Chopin lived with her mother, grandmother and great grandmother and all three were widows. Her father was an Irish immigrant and her mother was a member of the French community in St. Louis. At the age of twenty Kate married to Oscar Chopin and settled in New Orleans. Oscar Chopin died suddenly of “swamp fever” in 1882 and Kate ran his business almost for a year and then she went back to her mother in St. Louis. She began writing for fulfilling the sole responsibility of her six children. (117)

Janet Beer, in her article, “Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Oerkins Gilman: Studies in short Fiction – An Introduction” says that Kate wrote minor articles, some hundred short stories and is the author of three novels, namely, *Young Dr. Gosse*, *At Fault* and *The Awakening*. Janet Beer, a professor of English in Manchester Metropolitan University, says “Kate Chopin wrote of sexuality and desire in the lives of both men and women with a frankness rarely seen before,” (2) and this is the reason why she had many troubles with her publishers, editors and critics. Janet further says, “Chopin, the writer most affected by the apparently arbitrary power of the editors.” (4) In her essay, “As You Like It”, Chopin says, “But editors are really a singular class of men. I once submitted a story to a prominent New York editor, who just returned it promptly with the observation that ‘the public is getting tired of that sort of thing.’” (4-5) So, it is clear that Kate through revealing such instances wants to show the ideology they impose on the writers of the times. Almost every society suppresses sexuality of both- men and women. But as far as men are concerned they have been given a liberty that they visit brothels or engage in extramarital affairs. The same is not true about women.

### **Sex and Gender: Two Different Terms**

As we know ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ are not only different words but they do have different meaning as well. ‘Sex’ is a biological term that differentiates male body from female body while ‘gender’ is a cultural term that imposes gender roles, prescribed for man and woman on basis of very bodily differences. If he or she acts outside the rules of society, is considered unchaste, especially women, and therefore dangerous for society. Kate’s publishers rejected her many stories on the ground of breaking gender norms.

### **History of Sexuality**

Now, it would be interesting to go back to Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a French philosopher who talks about history of sexuality. He says there was a time when sexual intimacy was not considered illicit and indecent as compare to the nineteenth century Victorian moral and social values. But with the coming of bourgeoisie in Victorian society, sexuality was carefully confined. He says, “The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction.” (Foucault 3) It was the time when even talking about sex openly tabooed.

But in contrast to this general idea of sex, gender and sexuality, Kate Chopin deals with the tabooing desires of female sex, which are based purely on bodily pleasures of women. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford write in “Introduction” to *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* write that though she is one who made fun of women’s club and never been politically active in any suffrage movement, second-generation feminist issues like reproduction, mothering, sexual violence, expression of sexuality, and domestic labour became central theme in the fiction of Kate Chopin. (xxi)

---

### Female Desire in Kate Chopin's Works

Now it would be interesting to look at Kate Chopin's selected short stories, which are already mentioned above. "A Respectable Woman," published in 1894, is a story about a woman called Mrs. Baroda, who in the presence of a friend of her husband finds temptation irresistible as "why she liked him she could not explain satisfactorily" (Taylor 78) and he is not the one as she expects him to be. She finds him quite courteous but also notices that he is irresponsive towards her inclination. Perhaps that is the reason of her attraction towards him as she finds him quite different. Though in the story there is no sign of unsatisfactory marriage, she goes into 'illicit' desire, which can destroy her marriage and her reputation as 'a respectable woman.' When she comes close to Gouvernail, she finds herself helpless to resist the power of passion.

But being a 'respectable' woman she suppresses her desire and wants to leave the house till Gouvernail is gone. Her image of a 'respectable' woman prevents her from committing adultery. But in the end once again readers are left in an ambiguity that what Mrs. Baroda wants and thinks as at the mention of his coming once again in summers she says "I have overcome everything! This time I shall be very nice to him." (Taylor 81) These words from her make the reader think that whether she has overcome her passion and desire or, alternatively, overcome the repression of being married to someone else and that is Mr. Gaston. Therefore, her 'respectability' is little ironic in society where she lives. Through this story of Mrs. Baroda, Kate, perhaps wants to put in the different light instead of just being a dutiful wife.

Another story "The Story of an Hour," published in 1894 too reveals and comments on the imposed wifeness. When Mrs. Mallard hears the news of the death of her husband through the mouth of her sister Josephine, in the presence of her husband's friend Richards, she weeps "at once with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. (Taylor 82)

But, gradually she finds things in "the new spring life." (Taylor 82) She tastes individuality and senses freedom for the very first time, "the delicious breath of rain was in the air, under her breath: free, free, free." (Taylor 83) The elixir that she tastes, takes her life as she dies of heart disease.

In the story, Mrs. Mallard's grief towards her husband's death is a quick response but the happiness and freedom she comes to know, explicitly reveals the fact that how women are suppressed in the name of marriage and wifeness. Thus, though obliquely, the story comments upon the institution of marriage. Kate has portrayed a discontented wife. There is no third party involved in making her realise that her freedom has been overpowered by patriarchy that authorized the subjugation of her individuality.

Through the abrupt death of the protagonist because of extreme ecstasy, Kate perhaps wants to suggest that freedom of both, body and soul is something which is more important than living a long life. The joy that kills her also symbolizes the hardships she went through during her lifetime. Mrs. Mallard is a woman who never crossed her supposedly role as wife but her joy at the death of her husband stands her apart from rest of the patriarchal submissive women.

One comes across another such character in a story called "A Shameful Affair," published in 1891, by Kate. In this story she brings to the fore internalization of gendered role in a patriarchal society. The protagonist, Mildred submits herself to the norms of a 'good' woman. Although Mildred, like Mrs. Baroda, is little alien to her passion, she notices Fred Evelyn's appearance every time. There comes a time when after acknowledging her desire to herself she is piqued and then 'shame' covers her consciousness but even then she follows him to the riverbank which suggests that she is audacious enough to follow her instincts.

Kate has used 'shame' as cultural phenomena, which is in Foucault's term panopticon gaze, through which society regulates itself. She does not feel ashamed just because Fred is the witness of her transgression, but she knows that there is society that is constantly surveillance her behaviour. Perhaps, Fred stands for the society she lives in, where sensuous passion in women is considered immoral and unnatural. The cultural norms in Kate's stories are of Europe as Creoles are descendents of French or Spanish, who born in Louisiana. The story is divided into three stages. At the first stage she begins to feel a desire, at the second stage there is partial fulfillment of that desire as both come close and Fred kisses her, but the crucial stage is the third one where she

feels herself guilty and thereby ashamed as she says “someday –perhaps; when I shall have forgive myself.” (Taylor 23) Though the man wonders why she is blaming herself. It is remarkable how Chopin represents the internalized gender norms.

Kate Chopin’s much criticized and condemned work, *The Awakening*, published in 1899, in which, the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, an upper-class southern white woman, is not like other Creole women who sacrifice their very existence for the sake of motherhood and wifehood. In marriage she finds herself burdened with the domestic duties though she has a number of servants. For the first time Edna finds something interesting and captivating in life when she meets Robert Leburn. She desires him passionately but he, since she is married and there is outside pressure upon him, leaves her. This makes Edna quite hopeless and “a solitary soul” (Culley 25) becomes unconscious of what she wants from life. She ultimately commits suicide.

Edna’s suicide does not seem a conscious choice. She responds to the seductiveness of the sea unconsciously. (Culley and Wolkenfeld 246) She can die for her children but cannot give up her essential selfhood. This is quite a desire to live on her own terms. Instead of sacrificing herself for children she escapes from the imposed ‘motherly responsibilities’. By some critics Edna’s this act is viewed as an act of self-liberation. But how she can be freed or self-liberated by committing suicide as Edna’s struggle throughout the novel is about her very physical existence and achieving that which is her right as a human being.

Since “Louisiana was a largely Catholic state, divorce was a scandalous and rather a rare occurrence.” (Culley 120) Thus, Edna cannot have divorce while her husband can. But within bondage of female responsibilities she, for the very first time meets her real self as suppression of identity and individuality does not always degrade women within partial social structure. It produces a desire to enable them to stand for their needs and demands. Edna Pontellier goes for that which makes her Edna, the woman of her desires and not Edna Pontellier, the wife of Leonce Pontellier. Her marriage to a Catholic, her decision to not to attend her sister’s wedding, roaming alone at the Grand Isle signify her wish to be not a part of hypocrite society. Since Robert does not accept Edna’s love because she is not free, it can be said that he, being a man, is too not free from patriarchal mindset which ensures ‘masculine’ attitude. She is a restless creature and alien to patience and submission.

Edna is sensitive towards herself which male dominated society never allows women in order to be sensitive towards the people around her. Edna’s husband, Leonce Pontellier remarks while she returns with Robert from bathing in the sea, that “she has suffered some damage” (Culley 217) as if she is a piece of property who does not have a voice of her own. But, what is significant in Edna’s case is that she recognizes herself as a creature of flesh and blood that has desire and an aspiration to be free and to be her own self. Thus, she listens to her own voice and not the voices around her though the fact disappoints her that Robert left her alone, in complete solitude. Earlier, because of the absence of her husband, and isolation from her familiar environment make her a solitary soul and, later, in the novel Robert’s inability to love Edna openly makes her once again a solitary soul. Thus, in the last scene of the novel she, instead of sacrificing herself, attains that which is unattainable in the physical world.

For many publishers Edna’s extramarital relationships with Robert Leburn and Alcee Arobin are not only transgressive but unnatural and an issue of critiquing Kate Chopin. Her publishers have been problematic in her growth as an artist. Kate’s stories deals with the theme of women’s desire which are rarely spoken so frankly. Some of her heroines comeback to their ‘feminine’ roles while some, for example Edna Pontellier defy all of them in the face of society. Edna Pontellier is her most romantic character with a most romantic ambition and that is the reason perhaps she in the end stands alone, far from her society and community of her own sex, and drowns her physical self in order to attain spiritual self. She submits herself to none but the sea, which symbolizes her going back to the mother-womb.

## Conclusion

For Kate love in measure animalistic and her heroines are not untouched from this aspect of love. Since she is someone who saw a number of rejections for her radical writing, the endings in her many fictional works

---

are, perhaps, to delude the carefully regulated world of magazine publishers. Female desire in Kate Chopin's short stories, there, in this paper, "A Respectable Woman", "A Story of an Hour", "A Shameful Affair" and the novel *The Awakening*, is webbed in complex customs of society which deny women expression. What woman actually suffers, Kate has experienced in her own life through the women around her. She, in her fictional work brings real concerns of women's life though their needs and desires are condemned by society as they lose patriarchal power structure. Kate's works suggest that repression produces counter knowledge as Foucault says. If a woman does not feel suffocating within social conventions, she would never rebel against it. But as Kate's protagonists go through psychological and sexual conflict, they come up with a resolution, a resolution that weakens the authority of 'others' from them and defy 'double standard' of sexual morality.

#### Works Cited

- Bier, Janet. *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Oerkins Gilman: Studies in short Fiction*. 175 Fifth Avenue, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.
- Culley, Margo. *A Norton Critical Edition: Kate Chopin: The Awakening*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1994. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*. London: Penguin Books, 1976. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of The Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Print.
- Gillis, Stacy. Howie, Gillian. Munford, Rebecca. *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*. 175 Fifth Avenue, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Goodman, Lizbeth. *Approaching Literature: Literature and Gender*. Routledge in association with The Open University, 1996. Print.
- Taylor, Helen. *Kate Chopin Portraits*. London: The Women's Press, 1979. Print.