

ISSN : 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

**Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal**



**Impact Factor 3.9**

**Vol. 3 Issue 4 August 2017**

**Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh**

**Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)**

**[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)**

# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132



## THE AWAKENING

Bharti

B-16/A, Ground Floor, Near J.V.T.S Garden

Chhattarpur Extension, New Delhi-110074

.....

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) is set in New Orleans at the end of nineteenth century. It depicts the character of Edna Pontellier as trying to assert her free soul in the society where she is bound by domesticity. The novel shows how she is discovering herself and challenging the social boundaries of being a wife and a mother of two children. She falls in love with Robert, which is frowned upon by the society. She finds solace with her friend Reisz, who does not follow a conventional way of life and is the free 'New Woman'. When, at the end, she fails to live the life she desired during her self-exploration, she turns to suicide. She had to choose one persona over the other

The important themes of the novel are: Edna's gradual awakening, her freedom, her conflicts and the superficiality of the freedom she seeks. When Edna is first introduced in the text, after having a swim in the sea, she is shown to reach out to her husband for the rings. At this point she feels incomplete without the rings and chiefly identifies herself as "wife of Mr. Pontellier". Her identity is defined primarily in terms of her marital relation. The lines in text: "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness...", "She was just having a good cry all to herself", shows how she was unable to come to terms with her need to be awakened. She misappropriates these feelings as a passing phase, therefore eluding herself about her own feelings, not being assertive or confident. The patriarchal society thwarts, silences and submerges any kind of personhood in women. Therefore, the readers are encouraged to record Edna's awakening, she is not able to efface herself like the women who idolize their kids and hero worship their husbands.

"A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her- the light which, showing the way forbids it". The lines are reflective of two kinds of impulses, the clash between conscious and unconscious. These are the conflicted emotions within her, to quell her emergent sense of rebellion. It also shows how Edna is avoiding confrontation with herself. She realizes "How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!" Here her enlightenment is measured against all other women. Edna is starting a new worldview, a radically alternative worldview, but the "us" here in these lines is the privileged womanhood in terms of race and class.

The narrative opens with the description of Mr. Pontellier, even before the protagonist Edna.

Vol. 3 Issue 4 (August 2017)

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Bijender Singh

# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132

This highlights the claustrophobic setup that Edna dwells in on a daily basis. Here, the husband is the paradigmatic man of privilege of the south. His actions and speeches depend on his privileges, which give a sheer air of pomposity to his attitude. As the patriarch of the household, he is the provider and the protector of the family. For him Edna is like an item of decoration of ornamental value in the house. She is an object of utility, whose use starts to decrease once she stops playing the perfect hostess to her husband's friends on Tuesdays. Mr. Pontellier actually consults a psychiatrist, when he observes that Edna is evading her duties as a wife. According to him, if a woman is not appropriately feminine, she can only be insane.

As a parallel to Mr. Pontellier's character, is Robert Lebrun, who is superficially liberal. Robert is the unconventional man who does not have a defined career or occupation, one of the primary reasons because of which Edna fell for him. But it needs to be understood that just like Mr. Pontellier, he also mocks at Edna's swimming achievements, trivializes them and is unwilling to concede a woman's autonomy. Robert leaves for Mexico when he is unable to cope with Edna's gradual emancipation with each passing day. When he returns and learns of the Pontellier couple's separation he says to Edna that he was surprised to hear of Mr. Pontellier's absence. This shows that he cannot imagine an independent Edna as it's beyond his conventional comprehension. Both these male characters are almost same when it comes to the assessment of women. These characters are doppelgangers of one another. When Edna finally sees the superficial sense of liberty that Robert is composed of, she is frustrated. With her 'sole resort' gone, she drives herself to suicide.

Two other important female characters in the novel shown parallel to Edna are Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. While Ratignolle is the embodiment of social propriety, on the other hand Reisz's character is unfeminine. In one of the parties at Grand Isle, it is Mademoiselle Reisz's music which sets off the imagery of sexuality within Edna, acting as a catalyst which throws out her subconscious. Therefore Reisz is the figure of the liberated artist. After this Edna takes to water, "She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before", "she swam out alone"; this is the leap of aspiration, desire and imagination. She no longer wants to be her husband's possession, however this is also fraught with loneliness, and she is not willing to go public with her statement. She throws the rings and breaks the case, but the moment the help questions her regarding this, she retracts, evades and avoids answering her.

This kind awakening is incomplete as she is not prepared to cut herself from this lifestyle. She wants to have a room of her own and breaks away from her husband's house to stay alone in a house owned by her husband again. It is reflective of the superficiality of her freedom and makes us question her autonomy. The novel also needs to be read in the light of the important theme of the race-class affinity in context of Edna's superficial freedom. *The Awakening* is mediated by a specific race-class background where Edna's is the elite brand of feminism. She does not extend her solidarity to the women of other races, therefore not governed by a sense of sorority and belongingness. It is vital to analyze her attitude towards the quadroon nurse who tends the children and her domestic help in her "pigeon house".

The quadroon nurse has been purchased as part of the luxury that Mr. Pontellier pays for. At the beach in Grand Isle, Mrs. Pontellier can take time off Mr. Pontellier and engage in conversations with Robert because of the luxury of the availability of a quadroon nurse who is tending the children. Edna is

Vol. 3 Issue 4 (August 2017)

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Bijender Singh

# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132

transferring her 'duty' to another woman who is less fortunate than her. This cannot be called as a democratic understanding of feminism. She remains a "solitary soul" as she does not have a kindred spirit, she cannot identify with other women. Her female subjectivity is negotiated through race and class. In her process of gradual awakening, she is looking at the world anew and feels alienated. She would not have felt so had she extended her solidarity to other women.

## **Bibliography:**

Chopin Kate. *The Awakening and Other Short Stories*. 1<sup>st</sup> World Publishing: 2006. Print.