THE AWAKENING AND "A PAIR OF SILK STOCKINGS": A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON MOTHERHOOD AS INSTITUTION*

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Abstract: Within the context of American feminist thinking, Kate Chopin (1850-1904) writes 'A Pair of Silk Stockings' (one of her many short stories) and her second – and last – novel The Awakening by focusing on the female self-sacrifice socially imposed as a model for motherly love. This paper analyses the novel from a feminist perspective, revealing the manner in which, in both texts, children reduce the subjectivity of the mother to an object that is meant to guarantee the preservation of their selfhood. The analysis points out that one of the main themes in Chopin's works is the conflict between: personal need and duty, motherhood and selfhood, self-gratification and self-sacrifice. All in all, in the novel and short story, maternity is depicted as a state of self-deprivation when regarded as an institution and, alternatively, as a means of achieving self-realization (through caring for others) when perceived as a relationship.

Keywords: self-sacrifice, selfhood, motherhood, institution, relationship.

The attitude of American writer Kate Chopin (1850-1904) towards her own children is best reflected in the novel *The Awakening* and short stories such as 'A Pair of Silk Stockings'. Chopin loved her youngsters immensely and she made few demands on them while never restraining herself from spoiling them. According to biographer Per Seyersted, she nourished them spiritually with her constant availability and assistance, which is why her children adored her. (Byrd, 1)

Chopin loved children in general due to their lack of sophistication, directness and unconcern for status and wealth. Her love for them inspired the genuineness of her writing and the topics of her stories – topics which often include motherhood and maternal self-sacrifice. (Byrd, 1) Moreover, 'in her works, she depicts children as affecting the lives of adults in many ways: they may pacify, heal, enlighten, comfort and love.' (Byrd, 1)

However, Chopin does also focus on the less enjoyable aspects of motherhood: children also restrict and impose. The short story and the novel provide a glimpse into the lives of a widow and a married woman belonging to a lower and upper middle class, respectively. They struggle with providing financially ('A Pair of Silk Stockings') or emotionally (*The Awakening*) for their children and disregard themselves up to a point when they unexpectedly experience an awakening to their own needs and desires. (Byrd, 3)

'Self-Ownership' and 'Voluntary Motherhood'

By the 1870's, 'self-ownership' had become part and parcel of American feminist thinking and it was often linked to birth control. Women were believed to have the right to decide on the circumstances under which the sexual act should be performed and could also determine when to become pregnant. Therefore, women had gained the right to derive pleasure from the sexual act and to choose if and when they wanted to have children. This new mentality led to the coining of the 'voluntary motherhood' concept which referred to women's right to choose when to become pregnant. (Stange, 123)

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According to social historian Linda Gordon, by the mid 1870's, the concept of 'voluntary motherhood' was already shared by the entire feminist community. Writing in 1881, reformer Dido Lewis argues that 'voluntary motherhood'/'self-ownership' had gradually expanded to include female autonomy – a woman's right to be her own person. (Stange, 123) It also reflected 'commitment to the sexualization of female identity' and it placed motherhood at the core of female sexuality. Thus, motherhood became central to the 'possession of the self'. 'The possession of this sexualized self through self-ownership amounts to the exercise of a right to alienate' (confirmed by a right to withhold in a sexual market in which man makes the demands and the woman supplies). 'Feminists' opposition to birth control technology reflects a commitment to this market: underlying the construction of female selfhood is the ideology of women's sexual value exchange.' (Stange, 123) In *The Awakening*, the depiction and treatment of self-ownership reflects this ideology of women's value in exchange as well as the notions of female selfhood that were contemporary to Chopin. (Stange, 124)

All in all, within feminist vocabulary, 'voluntary motherhood' refers to the fact that women's service as mothers entitles them to self-ownership. They can either refuse or willingly accept motherhood or sexual relations with their husbands. Therefore, 'voluntary motherhood' is a type of 'self-ownership' concerned only with birth control and no other kind of freedom available to women. In *The Awakening*, Edna borrows not only the rhetoric of 'voluntary motherhood', but also that of 'self-ownership' with all the possible rights and freedoms that it entails. (Stange, 121-2) She does so especially when she vows that she will never again belong to another than herself: (Chopin, 118)

Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, 'self-ownership' does not only refer to a wife's right to refuse marital sex, although this seemed to be the key to female autonomy. The concept was first popularized by Lucinda Chandler in the 1840's and promoted by feminists who followed her and took up the practice of self-ownership. The term refers to a set of rights by means of which a woman can gain control over her own person and can, subsequently, become independent of the will and desires of her spouse. (Stange, 123)

Edna's social role as Léonce's wife has converted her into marital property, which is why she attempts to discover a self that she might possess. However, Edna is quite limited in her aspiration to self-ownership. (Stange, 121-2) She 'claims title to a self that exists only in relation to her status as the property of others.' (Stange, 122) As a result of the fact that she perceives selfhood in such limited terms, she ends up claiming the most extreme right to self-ownership: withholding from motherhood by withholding from life. Self-ownership includes ownership of sexual value and Edna decides that the only way she can become the owner of her sexual value is by completely freeing herself from all other possible owners through the act of suicide. Therefore, by the end of the novel, Edna becomes aware of the fact that self-sovereignty is the existential right of women and life itself is not more precious than this right which allows a woman to be an individual. According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, self-sovereignty denotes sexual self-determination and mothers or potential mothers can have a special type of self-sovereignty which consists of withholding from motherhood. It is precisely this type of self-sovereignty that Edna seeks to achieve, realizing that it is the most fulfilling kind of self-ownership to which women are entitled by birth. (Stange, 135)

The Conflict between Motherhood and Selfhood

Edna confesses to Madame Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential (financial prosperity and material goods) and even her own life, but she would not sacrifice her identity for her children's sake: (Chopin, 73)

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"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."

As a result, Madame Ratignolle regards Edna's attitude towards her children as unnatural and bizarre. Moreover, Edna's husband realizes that he is dissatisfied with his wife's failure of being a dutiful mother: (Chopin, 16)

It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or anyone else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived […] In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. […] They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.

As the novel itself, Edna is not a mother-woman. She does not idolize her children or worship her husband. She perceives motherhood as an institution rather than a relationship. She teaches her children to be self-sufficient and never form a dysfunctional bond with their parents thus asserting that the mother and her child are two separate beings. Their identities do not coincide because the mother cannot sacrifice her sense of self for her child's sake and the offspring should never rely on the mother for the preservation of selfhood. The protagonist does not share the same view as her friend – Adèle Ratignolle – who advises Edna to remember the institution of motherhood by pleading with her to think of the children before doing something radical for herself: 'Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children!' (Chopin, 165)

However, Edna believes in her right to authentic identity and states that the mother/wife woman role cannot compensate for the lack of individuality that others attempt to impose on her. A metaphor of Edna's journey toward selfness (that has to be completed with no support from someone else) is provided by the scene in which she learns how to swim and is compared to a motherless infant who learns how to walk: (Chopin, 42-3)

Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim. […] A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her. […] But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy.

In *Powers of Horror*, feminist analyst Julia Kristeva asserts that, to children, mothers often become the other subjects (the objects that guarantee their individuality and well-being). Therefore, from the child's and husband's viewpoint, the mother is an object and her subjectivity is reduced to being the guarantor of the offspring's subjectivity rather than being acknowledged as the center of a distinct subjectivity. (Worton, Kindle Locations 3720-7) This is what Edna experiences as she begins to feel overwhelmed by her family's attempt to possess her body and mind: (Chopin, 172-3)

She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. […] But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. […] He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand.

'That the care of children can be not only a great joy but also a great limitation on a woman's freedom is obvious in "A Pair of Silk Stockings" ' as well. (Byrd, 3) In this short story, Chopin manages to brilliantly depict the contrast between the temporary and selfish freedom (that Mrs. Sommers experiences when she spends all money on herself) and the dutiful and constant care (for her children) that she displays at the beginning of the story.

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Therefore, the authoress proves capable of great human insight by portraying a paradox of human existence and of motherhood in particular. (Byrd, 3)

When Mrs. Sommers unexpectedly receives fifteen dollars, she proves quite eager to please her own children and satisfy their needs. As a result, she makes plans on ways to spend the money on what her children would benefit from the most. She is portrayed as an organized lady who would never act on impulse or make an error of judgment. However, her behavior throughout the story sheds light on her repressed needs and wishes that take control of her actions and dominate her personality which shirks reason and surrenders to pleasure. A moment of unplanned weakness is sufficient to allow the subconscious part of her psyche (the 'id') to fully manifest itself in the form of selfish acts of self-gratification. (Byrd, 3)

As she usually never 'thinks of anything beyond her immediate life as a mother and a martyr', Mrs. Sommers is in the habit of sacrificing herself to the extent of depriving herself of the minimum amount of necessary nutrition and of any time dedicated to her own personal needs. Since all requirements that would maintain her healthy and content are disregarded on a daily basis, Mrs. Sommers enters a state of detachment from her own body and existence which leads to automatic behavior that is no longer driven by any motivation other than the preservation of the children's well-being: (Chopin, 211)

She had no time— no second of time to devote to the past. The needs of the present absorbed her every faculty. A vision of the future like some dim, gaunt monster sometimes appalled her, but luckily to-morrow never comes.

It is precisely this state of performing domestic tasks in an automatic mode that allows for a triggering experience (the touch of smooth silk) to change the course of the events that she had so carefully planned for several days in a row. (Byrd, 3)

On the designated shopping day, Mrs. Sommers commits an unforeseen mistake: she forgets to feed herself in order to provide her own body with the required strength and energy that would keep her focused on the task at hand: (Chopin, 211-2)

But that day she was a little faint and tired. She had swallowed a light luncheon— no! when she came to think of it, between getting the children fed and the place righted, and preparing herself for the shopping bout, she had actually forgotten to eat any luncheon at all!

The reader is made aware of the fact that bargains (to which the protagonist is accustomed) can only be carried out by means of perseverance and assertiveness. As a result, despite all of her previously designed plans, Mrs. Sommers is not fully prepared for dealing with an exhausting 'ritual' of bargaining and this small flaw in her plan crushes her will and proves to her (as well as to all readers) that the self-sacrificing behavior of a mother is not an inborn attitude but rather a socially instilled/imposed one. (Byrd, 3) Once Mrs. Sommers's own desires surface while the defenses of the ego and super-ego are weakened (and the conscious censorship can no longer keep the 'id' in check), the maternal instincts are reduced to the same silence to which the heroine's own self-preservation instincts were previously reduced. (Chopin, 212)

She wore no gloves. By degrees she grew aware that her hand had encountered something very soothing, very pleasant to touch. She looked down to see that her hand lay upon a pile of silk stockings. A placard near by announced that they had been reduced in price from two dollars and fifty cents to one dollar and ninety-eight cents; and a young girl who stood behind the counter asked her if she wished to examine their line of silk hosiery. She smiled, just as if she had been asked to inspect a tiara of diamonds with the ultimate view of purchasing it. But she went on feeling the soft, sheeny luxurious things— with both hands now, holding them up to see them glisten, and to feel them glide serpent-like through her fingers.

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The responsible and the self-gratifying sides to a woman's personality will always be in conflict as long as the former requires self-sacrifice. (Byrd, 4) The following scenes are suggestive of the fact that the motherly and responsible self cannot coexist with the self-pleasing one: (Chopin, 213)

How good was the touch of the raw silk to her flesh! She felt like lying back in the cushioned chair and reveling for a while in the luxury of it. She did for a little while. Then she replaced her shoes, rolled the cotton stockings together and thrust them into her bag. After doing this she crossed straight over to the shoe department and took her seat to be fitted.

The inner delicacy, expensive tastes and quiet distinction that the protagonist displays during her shopping spree are proof of the fact that she has not completely settled into the impoverished widow lifestyle imposed on her by unfortunate circumstances. When she escapes the needs and wants of her family, Mrs. Sommers can achieve self-discovery and can reiterate the ease of her former life. This is particularly evident when she acquires two magazines of the kind that she used to read before getting married. (Byrd, 4)

Up to the end of the splurging experience, the protagonist is fully transformed into a proudly sophisticated woman whose stateliness is acknowledged by the waiter that bows before her: '[She] left an extra coin on his tray, whereupon he bowed before her as before a princess of royal blood.' (Chopin, 215)

At the end of the day, the exalting experience of attending the theater is made possible only by the total forgetfulness which engulfs all of Mrs. Sommers' senses to the extent to which all responsibilities and duties are completely forsaken. (Byrd, 4) 'Motherhood has deprived Mrs. Sommers of her true self, her identity.' (Byrd, 4) It is not only the luxuries that she misses, it is her right to be an individual and not a subject dedicated to the needs and wishes of others: (Chopin, 215)

A man with keen eyes, who sat opposite to her, seemed to like the study of her small, pale face. It puzzled him to decipher what he saw there. In truth, he saw nothing-unless he were wizard enough to detect a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever.

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich states the difference between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as a series of individual practices. The type of motherhood by which Edna feels imprisoned is only depicted in its institutional dimension. She realizes her position in the universe and understands that she is in a relationship not only with the world but also with herself. (Worton, Kindle Locations 3283-8) As a result, she becomes aware of the fact that she needs to relate to others as an individual and acquire a sense of identity that would enable her to achieve selfness in relation to others: (Chopin, 23-4)

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. […] The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life— that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.

Chopin's female protagonists are not rebels against materialism or patriarchal oppression. They are truth seekers that start a journey towards a greater sense of self after having experienced a spiritual awakening and the desire to be regarded as individuals.

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(Worton, Kindle Location 3198) Edna likes money as much as the other female characters in the novel and she accepts it from her husband: (Chopin, 14)

Mr. Pontellier gave his wife half of the money which he had brought away from Klein's hotel the evening before. She liked money as well as most women, and accepted it with no little satisfaction.

Similarly, in 'A Pair of Silk Stockings', Mrs. Sommers knows the use of bargains and does not rebel against materialism: 'Mrs. Sommers was one who knew the value of bargains; She had seen some […] veritable bargains in the shop windows.' (Chopin, 211)

She actually enjoys making plans about spending money and she feels pampered when she starts buying items that she does not usually afford: (Chopin, 211-3)

For a day or two she walked about apparently in a dreamy state, but really absorbed in speculation and calculation. She did not wish to act hastily, to do anything she might afterward regret. But it was during the still hours of the night when she lay awake revolving plans in her mind that she seemed to see her way clearly toward a proper and judicious use of the money.

She held back her skirts and turned her feet one way and her head another way as she glanced down at the polished, pointed-tipped boots. Her foot and ankle looked very pretty. She could not realize that they belonged to her and were a part of herself. She wanted an excellent and stylish fit, she told the young fellow who served her, and she did not mind the difference of a dollar or two more in the price so long as she got what she desired.

Mrs. Sommers does not rebel against materialism or patriarchal oppression as it may initially seem. Similarly to Edna, she rebels against the institution of motherhood and the constraints that are imposed on women by means of social institutions (such as marriage) in general. As she prepares to return home, Mrs. Sommers realizes that her house is not a place in which she feels at home. She wishes that the cable car would go on with her forever and never stop. She wants her favorite day to never end. (Worton, Kindle Location 3198) She, therefore, becomes aware of the fact that being the 'spirit of the home' cannot compensate for selfness (for a well-established sense of self): (Chopin, 215-6)

A man with keen eyes, who sat opposite to her, seemed to like the study of her small, pale face. It puzzled him to decipher what he saw there. In truth, he saw nothing-unless he were wizard enough to detect a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever.

In a similar way, Edna feels oppressed in a society in which women are not treated as individuals but rather as property belonging to their husbands and children. The second wave of feminism that was best represented by Betty Friedan's critique of the patriarchal family (in 'The Feminine Mystique') focused on the general discontent of the average housewife. Friedan's assertions mirror the argument of Chopin's 1899 novel (*The Awakening*) in which the heroine is awakened to feminist consciousness by several experiences in her life and realizes her status as property rather than person within her own family. (Killeen, 145)

All in all, both Mrs. Sommers and Edna realize that motherhood cannot replace selfhood and, subsequently, they start on a quest for a greater sense of self after having experienced a spiritual awakening. (Worton, Kindle Location 3198)

The Awakening of the Mother to Individuality

Without any financial or moral support, Mrs. Sommers remains faithful to her social role as a poor and genteel mother until she 'experiences an awakening of her sensuous self during her shopping spree.' (Byrd, 3) The background information provided at the beginning

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of the story suggests that Mrs. Sommers was born into a higher social class but married into a lower one or was simply impoverished by the misfortune of losing her wealthy husband along with the inheritance she should have received. The circumstances that led to her current financial situation point to the fact that all the deprivations and restrictions imposed on her by motherhood and by her recent social status (as a poor widow) are probably experienced as overwhelmingly unnatural and frustrating on account of the constant comparison with the former and better standard of living that she enjoyed when she was younger. (Byrd, 3)

The trigger to the protagonist's awakening consists in a pair of silk stockings that lure the protagonist into purchasing the first item that is not on her carefully conceived list. The snake imagery associated with the temptation scene suggests the awakening of a sensuous and desirous side of a young female who has been repressing this part of herself: The esthetic and sensitive self of Mrs. Sommers is awakened by a simple touch – an experience that appeals to her senses instead of her reason. Moreover, the moment the protagonist changes into her new black silk stockings, a transformation takes place and the former self of the higher social classes (to which Mrs. Sommers was born) takes over the entire personality while the maternal side of the heroine becomes dormant. (Byrd, 3)

In her current life, there is no space and no time for the genuine self of Mrs. Sommers. She has sacrificed her individuality and identity to 'the demands of mothering and financial responsibilities.' 'Feeling free, she now senses her own beauty, but can hardly recognize her foot and ankle as belonging to her since it was so long ago that she even observed or considered her body.' (Byrd, 3) Therefore, the spiritual awakening that Mrs. Sommers experiences (during her free afternoon) is not only a discovery of the self but also a rediscovery of her own body which has been entrapped and enslaved by domestic labor that has alienated her genuine physical potential. (Byrd, 4)

Similarly, in the novel, the focus is on Edna's awakening which takes place when the female protagonist experiences a self-discovery achieved by means of the assessment of her own body and sexuality. Her duty as wife and mother (which consists of childbirth, raising her children and keeping her husband satisfied with her domestic work) results in frustration and rebellion against the oppressive system in which her physical body is exploited and her sense of self is continuously reduced in favor of that of her spouse or offspring.

Conclusions

In both texts, the female protagonist is a white, urban, middle/lower-class woman who has become isolated from the politics of choice and feels trapped within the household sphere. Despite the fact that, through her works, Chopin managed to address a few feminist issues that were particularly relevant at the end of the nineteenth century, many feminist re-readings focused on criticizing the exclusion of divergent versions of female experience which should include the struggle of female servants and women of color and not only the discontent of the average white (lower) middle-class housewife. (Killeen, 145)

Although *The Awakening* and 'A Pair of Silk Stockings' provide only an Anglo-American version of leap into individuality, they are still quite enlightening in terms of social problems that women were confronted with at 'fin de siècle.' Moreover, by offering a limited perspective on women's issues at the end of the nineteenth century, the authoress achieved an even more accurate portrayal of the social status of a certain category of American women due to the fact that she was able to focus on all the important details and did not offer only an overview of the economic and social conditions of the targeted class of women. (Killeen, 145)

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