A MARXIST FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING**[1]

Maria-Viorica Arnăutu, POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652 PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: In feminist terms, Marx's philosophical conception of human labor can be read as the fundamental act of self-consciousness. According to Marx, the alienation of the laborer from the product of his work leads to psychical and material impoverishment under capitalist conditions. This philosophical view on bodily labor can be applied to the exploitation of female sexuality and the performance of domestic work depicted in The Awakening in order to employ a socialist critical perspective within the analysis of the feminist issues addressed in the novel.[2]

Keywords: feminist, socialist, Marx, philosophical view, labor.

1.1. The Marxian Thesis: A View on the Human Body in Terms of Its Productive Labor

In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels focus on bodily labor as the site of human self-consciousness. The physical body also appears as a site of human self-consciousness in Chopin's *The Awakening* as the focus is always on Edna's arms, hands and legs rather than eyes, head or speech. This portrayal of the character is also consistent with the focus that Marx and Engels place upon 'making' (producing) rather than 'thinking' or 'seeing' (perceiving). Moreover, *The Awakening* can also be read through the late nineteenth-century general fear that industrialism could transform nature (including the human body) into 'artifices' of commodity capitalism.[3] The product of the laborer's work becomes a 'commodity' that is shared with others by the laborer.[4]

1.2. An Analysis of the Alienation of Edna's Body and Labor Depicted as The Physical Exhaustion and Psychological Torment of the Industrial Worker

Within the Marxian thesis, the human body is presented only in terms of its productive labor. Therefore, an analogy between the physical exhaustion of the laborer (the exploitation of the body and the shortening of the worker's lifespan) and the psychological torment of Edna Pontellier can be easily identified. Furthermore, Marx and Engels were not only concerned with physical exhaustion. They believed that overwork can also lead to psychical despair and resignation between the futility of a type of labor that produces results which never fully return to the laborer. This sense of futility was explained by Marx and Engels as the alienation of labor made possible by the well developed practices of the industrial capitalist speculator who

[1]*This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.
[2] Cf. Rowe, J. C.,'The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, p. 57
[3] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 57-8
[4] *ibid.*, p. 71

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

reduces the significance of the worker's labor and physical body. The next (possible) phase identified by Marxians is called 'late capitalism' and it completely dispenses with the human body as a meaningful agent and as a productive subjectivity.[5]

Edna's exhaustion is evident in her despair regarding the lack of value and integrity of her labor within the family.[6] In a particular scene, her husband accuses her of not being a dutiful mother:[7]

It was eleven o'clock that night when Mr. Pontellier returned from Klein's hotel. He was in an excellent humor, in high spirits, and very talkative. His entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and fast asleep when he came in. He talked to her while he undressed, telling her anecdotes and bits of news and gossip that he had gathered during the day. From his trousers pockets he took a fistful of crumpled bank notes and a good deal of silver coin, which he piled on the bureau indiscriminately with keys, knife, handkerchief, and whatever else happened to be in his pockets. She was overcome with sleep, and answered him with little half utterances. He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation. Mr. Pontellier had forgotten the bonbons and peanuts for the boys. Notwithstanding he loved them very much, and went into the adjoining room where they slept to take a look at them and make sure that they were resting comfortably. The result of his investigation was far from satisfactory. He turned and shifted the youngsters about in bed. One of them began to kick and talk about a basket full of crabs. Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after.

Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it. Mrs. Pontellier was quite sure Raoul had no fever. He had gone to bed perfectly well, she said, and nothing had ailed him all day. Mr. Pontellier was too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken. He assured her the child was consuming at that moment in the next room. He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once.

In another scene, Edna is bothered by her husband's comments on her neglectful attitude towards her household duties. However, this time, she refuses to become upset on account of his comments. She no longer reacts the way she used to react whenever her husband commented on the (poor) quality of her domestic work in reproachful manner:[8]

"Mercy!" exclaimed Edna, who had been fuming. "Why are you taking the thing so seriously and making such a fuss over it?" "I'm not making any fuss over it. But it's just such seeming trifles that we've got to take seriously; such things count." The fish was scorched. Mr. Pontellier would not touch it. Edna said she did not mind a little scorched taste.

She was somewhat familiar with such scenes. They had often made her very unhappy. On a few previous occasions she had been completely deprived of any desire to finish her dinner.

Sometimes she had gone into the kitchen to administer a tardy rebuke to the cook. Once she went to her room and studied the cookbook during an entire evening, finally writing out a

[5] Cf. *ibid*., pp. 60-1
[6] Cf. *ibid*., p. 61
[7] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, pp. 12-3
[8] Rowe, *op. cit*., pp. 78-80

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

menu for the week, which left her harassed with a feeling that, after all, she had accomplished no good that was worth the name. But that evening Edna finished her dinner alone, with forced deliberation. Her face was flushed and her eyes flamed with some inward fire that lighted them. After finishing her dinner she went to her room, having instructed the boy to tell any other callers that she was indisposed.

They jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope. She turned back into the room and began to walk to and fro down its whole length, without stopping, without resting. She carried in her hands a thin handkerchief, which she tore into ribbons, rolled into a ball, and flung from her. Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet.

Edna's despair resembles the frustration of the industrial worker. Similarly, the new speculative economy is represented by Léonce, Robert and Alcée. Edna desires a material selfhood, but the men in her life only allow her to have roles and personas ('wife', 'mother' and 'lover'). The exhaustion and ultimate death/extinction of the body in the 'late capitalist' phase is reflected in Edna's final swim which symbolizes the extinction of the body as its own labor: the body becomes the labor. However, according to another (Sandra M. Gilbert's) reading of the suicide act, Edna actually rejects the roles provided for her by the system ('wife', 'mother' and 'lover') and rebels against the speculative economy that seeks to exploit her body. But, in terms of Marxian labor philosophy, Edna's life and death can only be read as the result of exhaustion leading to alienation of her labor and physical body as well as to the impossibility of ever achieving 'self-ownership'. In *Capital*, Marx and Engels focus on the practical consequences of the laborer's exhaustion in order to demonstrate the inefficiency of capitalism which fails to provide the worker with resources for basic needs that renew the ability to produce. Poor working conditions and inadequate nourishment for the human body performing a required task point to the 'theft' performed by the capitalist speculator whose surplus value is taken directly from the resources that should instead be offered to the body of the worker in order to ensure its capacity of functioning in a normal and healthy way.[9]

In her attempt at becoming independent of the men in her life by being (herself) the owner of her physical labor and body, Edna realizes that she can only own and experiences her body as an act (through activity, production and motion). 'The body experiences itself as such only by means of an activity, a making that may be as simple as the motions of the body' during swimming. 'For the body to experience itself as such, it must feel itself making some thing in the particular process of making which allows the body to recognize itself in and through *other*.' Therefore, Edna 'must understand her body as an activity rather than some thing, natural or social' – hence, the powerful sense of self that Edna experiences when swimming or achieving something productive in material terms.[10]

1.3. The Female Body and Sexuality as Property and Labor

Another aspect (in the novel) that can be analyzed by employing concepts of Marxian bodily labor philosophy is the depiction of women's bodies (and women in general) as property belonging to the representatives of patriarchal culture: men.

[9] Cf. Rowe, J. C.,'The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, pp. 59-61
[10] *ibid*., pp. 56-7

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

What troubles Edna is that her body no longer belongs to her and she can find 'no utterly transcendental experience of herself as a body.'[11] There is always someone else that possesses her body, which is also the case with Madame Ratignolle. Edna's body is exchangeable for something else or becomes something else as she is (interchangeably) a wife (to Léonce), a mother or a lover (to Robert). Her body has entered an economy in which it can be changed and, apart from the few private moments in which she can have her body to herself (when swimming or admiring her own arms), Edna's body is possessed by her husband or lovers (Alcée and Robert who, eventually, refuses to accept her body being transferred from Léonce to himself).[12] At the beginning of the novel, Edna is even described as a valuable piece of property belonging to her husband:[13]

The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. When they reached the cottage, the two seated themselves with some appearance of fatigue upon the upper step of the porch, facing each other, each leaning against a supporting post. "What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. He himself had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed long to him. "You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.

Both the scene in which Léonce sees Edna as a piece of valuable property and the one in which Alcée lures her into having physical contact with him highlight the fact that *The Awakening* is 'a look at the sites of bodily violation and wounding' and shows that social and human intercourse have, ultimately, failed.[14] This is particularly evident in the scene in which Alcée and Edna reenact the duel that he supposedly fought in Paris at the age of only nineteen:[15]

With ingenuous frankness he spoke of what a wicked, ill-disciplined boy he had been, and impulsively drew up his cuff to exhibit upon his wrist the scar from a saber cut which he had received in a duel outside of Paris when he was nineteen. She touched his hand as she scanned the red cicatrice on the inside of his white wrist. A quick impulse that was somewhat spasmodic impelled her fingers to close in a sort of clutch upon his hand. He felt the pressure of her pointed nails in the flesh of his palm. She arose hastily and walked toward the mantel.

At the end of the nineteenth century, women in the U.S.A. experienced the same type of fatigue as the industrial laborer. This sense of exhaustion also has a psychical effect of frustrated erotic and economic energies. Moreover, according to Engels, sexual production follows the same laws as industrial production under capitalism. In his view, the alienation of the mother and children to the patriarch's theft of surplus value is evident in the servitude of mother and children to patriarchal domestic laws (including public laws against divorce and inheritance). Edna herself becomes aware of the way a woman's social productivity is perceived and quantified by men and she is horrified by the 'torture' experienced by Adèle during her childbirth. She is also bothered by the misguided advice (to remember the children) that she receives immediately after witnessing the disturbing scene. Therefore, children are portrayed as living signs of the productivity of women's bodies. However, the labor product (the child) belongs to a patriarchal legal system that governs the social/economic market as well as the

[11] *ibid*., p. 56
[12] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 54-6
[13] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 8
[14] Cf. Rowe, *op. cit*., p. 73
[15] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 113

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

home. As a result of this evident exploitation of women's labor, Edna experiences ambivalence regarding her own children.[16] She feels as if they are the antagonists who seek to overpower her and enslave her soul for the rest of her days:[17]

The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days.

1.4. Woman as Property

Since, throughout the novel, the bodies of women and female sexuality are depicted and perceived as property belonging to the male representatives of patriarchal culture, it is only natural that woman herself should be portrayed as a piece of property. In the property system indirectly presented in *The Awakening*, Edna exists only as a sign of value.[18] Léonce's ownership of Edna (and her body in particular) is well established from the beginning of the novel:[19]

The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. […] "You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.

Moreover, even Edna considers herself an item of property and wishes to own herself:[20]

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

While discussing the rights of women and what should rightfully belong to her as an individual, Edna asserts that her property is her own body.[21] Furthermore, at one point in the novel, Edna even makes a visual evaluation of her property/body:[22]

She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. She clasped her hands easily above her head, and it was thus she fell asleep.

Edna does not only assess her own body in these terms, but also evaluates the body of Adèle as a sign of male ownership.[23] She sees the hands and entire body of Mrs. Ratignolle as a display of physical charm especially when the housewife is engaged in domestic labors:[24]

She was growing a little stout, but it did not seem to detract an iota from the grace of every step, pose, gesture. One would not have wanted her white neck a mite less full or her beautiful arms more slender. Never were hands more exquisite than hers, and it was a joy to look at them when she threaded her needle or adjusted her gold thimble to her taper middle finger as she sewed away on the little night-drawers or fashioned a bodice or a bib.

[16] Cf. Rowe, *op. cit*., pp. 63, 68
[17] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 171
[18] Cf. Stange, M., 'Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, p. 122
[19] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 8
[20] *ibid*., p. 118
[21] Cf. Stange, M., 'Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, p. 124
[22] Chopin, *op. cit*., p. 57
[23] Cf. Stange, *op. cit*., p. 125
[24] Chopin, *op. cit*., p. 16

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

The femininity of these instruments of labor is suggestive of Adèle's value as a laboring wife and mother owned by the family that she serves through her domestic work.[25]

1.4.1. 'Possessive Individualism' and Female Self-Speculation

According to feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, women should claim their right to 'possessive individualism' which refers to what belongs to the individual exclusively and cannot be shared with another. Throughout *The Awakening*, Chopin suggests that a woman can claim her right to 'possessive individualism' by owning something in particular: herself. By owning herself, a woman also owns her sexual exchange value.[26] In the novel, Edna believes that she can own her 'self' only if she withholds herself as a mother: for Edna 'the self exists in the presumption of the right to withhold oneself as a mother.'[27] Moreover, as a feminist advocate of self-ownership, Edna also realizes that voluntary motherhood means withholding herself sexually (from her husband) and not only emotionally (from her children). After her first successful swim, Edna experiences a moment of self-support and, due to the solitude of the near-death experience, the female protagonist starts confronting her husband and decides to withhold herself sexually in her relationship with him.[28] In her confrontations with Léonce, Edna insists that she has a self and that she possesses that self along with the freedom to withhold herself and give herself according to her own will:[29]

I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose.

Edna gains the right to choose whom to withhold herself from (Léonce) and whom to offer herself to (Robert) as opposed to Adèle who never withholds and, subsequently, can never choose to give/offer either. She, ultimately, has no will of her own because she has no freedom of choice. However, her giving is not completely involuntary either. Her role as 'mother-woman' produced through deliberate public staging is a consciously and intentionally developed identity. Moreover, there is indication of the fact that she actually practices self-ownership and voluntary motherhood by withholding sex from her husband in order to space her pregnancies at two-year intervals. It is highly unlikely that the spacing results from chance.[30] She intentionally plans her pregnancies in order to preserve her 'condition' which provides her with a sense of identity:[31]

About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one. She was always talking about her "condition." Her "condition" was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation.

Furthermore, the planning of pregnancies also suggests that Mrs. Ratignolle produces children for herself and not for her husband or public approval. For her, 'motherhood' has become a 'role' that she consciously and willingly produces and parades in order to be admired and appreciated. Nevertheless, motherhood has a built-in selflessness on account of the fact that it a social role by means of which women are effaced as individuals. In the novel, there are two 'poles' of motherhood embodied by Adèle (the 'mother-woman') and Edna who, although has

[25] Cf. Stange, *op. cit.*, p. 125
[26] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 127
[27] Stange, *loc. cit*.
[28] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 128
[29] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 161
[30] Cf. Stange, *op. cit.*, p. 128
[31] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 17

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

given birth, refuses to be a 'mother-woman'. She feels as if her motherhood is arbitrary, imposed and unwilled.[32] To her, it is a responsibility that she refuses to take on:[33]

She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them.

Edna's refusal to giver herself as a mother offers her the possibility of controlling and owning her own life through passivity (resistance, denial, refusal).[34]

1.4.2. The Sexual and Reproductive Exchange Value of Edna and Adèle

In the Creole community, there is no private sphere and, therefore, Adèle's sexual and reproductive value is located in the sphere of public exchange.[35] Edna is inspired (by the example provided by her friend – Adèle) to turn 'her sexual exchange value in an economy of public circulation'. 'The reserved, private, domestic self of Adèle reveals itself to Edna as the valuable product of circulation,'[36] which motivates Edna to explore her own possessiveness. As a result, Edna displays her domestic private attributes (sexuality, modesty and reproduction) as social value and withholds herself from her husband in order to give herself to Robert.[37] 'The forms of value in which Edna exchanges herself as the duties and functions of the woman and wife are: female sexual service, motherhood and the performance of wifely domestic amenities.'[38] Edna gives up her domestic duties as the lady of the house by moving out of the family home [and] into a private domestic space and by withholding sex from Léonce. She announces it at the dinner party (that she gives in honor of her departure from the marital home) and she launches her sexual exchange value into wider circulation.[39] From that moment/evening forward, Edna starts circulating (in the public market) as the owner of her sexual exchange value, stating – at one point – that she can offer herself to whoever she chooses because she only belongs to herself:[40]

I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose.

Although (after the self-liberation marked by the dinner party event) Edna is the one in control of her sexual exchange value, the representatives of the main two modes of the market in sex value are: Arobin (the gambler and womanizer who represents adulterous and extramarital relationships/affairs) and Monsieur Ratignolle who represents the bond of Creole marriage. Moreover, even though Edna is apparently becoming independent of the speculators who control the sex value market (men), at the dinner party (and up to that point in the novel), she is portrayed as a gift offered by her father to Léonce who makes her into a form of wealth by marking her as value.[41] At the dinner party, Edna resembles a bride and she is described as 'the daughter whom he [her father] invented'. The concept of 'bride' itself is a man-made invention meant for the staging of ownership in the consumption of a wedding:[42]

[32] Cf. Stange, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-30
[33] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 30
[34] Cf. Stange, *op. cit.*, p. 130
[35] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 130
[36] Stange, *loc. cit.*
[37] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 130
[38] *ibid.*, p. 132
[39] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 132
[40] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 161
[41] Cf. Stange, *op. cit.*, p. 133
[42] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 129

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

I may as well admit that this is my birthday, and that I am twenty-nine. In good time I expect you to drink my health. Meanwhile, I shall ask you to begin with this cocktail, composed— would you say 'composed?'" with an appeal to Miss Mayblunt—" composed by my father in honor of Sister Janet's wedding." Before each guest stood a tiny glass that looked and sparkled like a garnet gem. "Then, all things considered," spoke Arobin, "it might not be amiss to start out by drinking the Colonel's health in the cocktail which he composed, on the birthday of the most charming of women— the daughter whom he invented."

At the dinner party, Edna also says that she is celebrating her birthday ('I may as well admit that this is my birthday').[43] She gains a sense of self by achieving self-ownership.

1.5. Self-Ownership and Voluntary Motherhood

According to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in the civilized world, the woman/mother becomes a sexual commodity by means of her self-sacrificing love for the children and the husband. Feminists evoke the sacrificial figure of the mother to highlight the limited sexual independence of women. They argue that a woman's autonomous selfhood is relinquished through the self-giving role as a 'mother'.[44]

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.[45] She does so especially when she vows that she will never again belong to another than herself:[46]

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 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.[47]

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.[48] She 'claims title to a self that exists only in relation to her status as the property of others.'[49] 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

[43] Chopin, *loc. cit.*
[44] Cf. Stange, M., 'Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, p. 121
[45] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 121-2
[46] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 118
[47] Cf. Stange, *op. cit.*, p. 123
[48] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 121-2
[49] *ibid.*, p. 122

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

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.[50]

1.6. The Body as Self

Edna's awakening takes place when the female protagonist experiences a self-discovery achieved by means of the assessment of her own body and sexuality:[51]

She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. She clasped her hands easily above her head, and it was thus she fell asleep.

In this particular scene, Edna analyzes the texture, form and complexity of her own body and gains a sense of self through discovering her body. Therefore, the essential self is associated with Edna's physical body and it is discovered through the immersion of the body into the ocean.[52]

All in all, Edna's problem is also that of Chopin herself. Edna struggles with how to make the body 'other' without losing it, whereas Chopin also did not know how to make her novel 'other' without losing it. In Kate Chopin's case, the satisfaction and sacrifice of producing a literary creation could not compensate for the lack of circulation of the novel within the market. *The Awakening* was not a source of enthusiasm among editors and the authoress was not allowed to explain the message that she wanted to convey by means of the novel. Nevertheless, nowadays, the message is well received by readers from different parts of the world, even though it was particularly relevant at the time when the novel was written. Chopin attempted to convince her late nineteenth-century readers to envision a new history and economy in which the New Woman (and the New Man) might share in the coordinated labor of social production.[53]

Bibliography:

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*. New York: Bantam Classics. Kindle Edition, 2006;

[50] Cf. *ibid*., p. 135
[51] Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 57
[52] Cf. Rowe, J. C.,'The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, p. 53
[53] Cf. *ibid*., pp. 70-2

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)

Rowe, John Carlos. 'The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*. Edited by H. Bloom. Landisville: Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011;

Stange, Margit. 'Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*. Edited by H. Bloom. Landisville: Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011.

BDD-A23198 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:40 UTC)