

THE NEW WOMAN AND HER DOOMED FATE IN THOMAS HARDY'S JUDE THE OBSCURE AND KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

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ABSTRACT

My paper draws a parallel between the female protagonists of Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure and Kate Chopin's The Awakening against the backdrop of the political, social and cultural changes that were brewing on both the sides of the Atlantic in the very prolific nineteenth century. This was the time when certain amount of female consciousness was on the rise both in fiction and in the real world and the idea of a 'New Woman' as a social, political and sexual being was gaining currency. However, this 'awakening' came with its own perils and limitations. My paper uses Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure and Kate Chopin's The Awakening to compare, contrast and analyze this.

KEYWORDS: *New Woman, Institution of Marriage, Patriarchy, Female Consciousness*

INTRODUCTION

Let's set the stage. The scene is of nineteenth century England, an inventive time for the country. The post French Revolution England was in great flux, churning out new ideas, new philosophies and new theories. These radical, progressive ideas proliferated into the nook and cranny of everyday life and as a result, this century became a space for several important changes and reforms particularly for women in England. England saw the passing of Children Custody Act 1839, Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 that established divorce courts, Infant Custody Act 1872, Married Women's Property Act 1882, the Maintenance in Case of Desertion Act 1886 so on and so forth. First women's colleges at Oxford were established in 1879 and B.A. was offered to women. By 1880 elementary education became compulsory for children aged 7 to 10 and women were now admitted to degree colleges at the University of London.

Let's change the scene a little, cross the Atlantic and reach nineteenth century America. America too witnessed a century marked by expansive changes. On July 19-20th, 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York hundreds of men and women met and occasioned the women's rights movement in America. The historic document 'Declaration of Sentiments' was a product of this convention. First wave feminism was ushered in and the struggle for women's suffrage took centre stage in America. Leading activists and abolitionists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott worked towards building a space where women's voices were heard loud and clear.

As we can see, this prolific century saw several British and American women speak in public for the first time for their rights as a social, political and sexual being. Patriarchal hierarchy was questioned and wrestled with and women's rights (or the lack of it) and roles were minutely scrutinized. On one hand were the suffragists who advocated for women's right to vote to give them their own political identity which had been long denied to them. And then there were the free

love male and female feminists who spoke vehemently in favor of women's right to self-ownership. The free lovers saw marriage as an institution that demeaned women and chained her to her husband for as long as she breathed. State's control over matters like marriage, divorce, sexual preferences and birth control was seen as preposterous by the free lovers. The free lovers did not emerge out of nowhere. They belonged to a long and complicated tradition of intellectuals who ardently believed in being free of social, political and religious institutions in matters of sex and marriage. Marriage as an oppressive institution was challenged by the greatest minds of the time and the rusted shackles of outmoded beliefs was noisily rattled by the discourse they introduced. The influence of thinkers like William Blake, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (famous proponents of free love) remained deep as the nineteenth century English men and women moved towards a dissent of sorts and public opinion began to change, though very thinly. For women who discreetly wrote for free love periodicals to women who secretly subscribed to them – a certain awakening of female consciousness was seen in England and America as the great tide of change swept across the stagnant pool of smothering beliefs.

When Sarah Grand coined the term "New Woman" in March 1894 in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," published in the *North American Review*, she called out for women who were free not only of internal restraints, but also free of external restraints in terms of finance, education, mobility etc. These new women were constantly pushing the gendered patriarchal limits. They were slowly inching from isolated fringes to the mainstream, engaged in negotiating new social roles at a time when a sweeping majority of women were still living and breathing the powerfully constructed stereotypical images of the angel of the house.

Against this backdrop, we have Thomas Hardy and Kate Chopin, two very different writers, with different sensibility, different aesthetic style and purpose yet with similar probing questions. A literary giant like Thomas Hardy in England and a well-loved female writer like Kate Chopin in America, separated by political, geographical boundaries, seem to voice similar concerns particularly in their novels *Jude the Obscure* and *The Awakening* respectively. They seem to have jolted the sensibilities of their reading public quite harshly as can be gauged based on the similar reactions both the novels received. *The Awakening*, immediately after its publication in April 1899, was denounced as immoral and inappropriate. Words like "unhealthy" and "morbid" were frequently used as favored adjectives for this so called scandalous piece of work centered around a woman's desire. "It is not a healthy book; It is a morbid book, and the thought suggests itself that the author herself would probably like nothing better than to "tear it to pieces" by criticism if only some other person had written it," reported the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*: 13 May 1899. (Unsigned) "And as the biography of one individual out of that large section of femininity which may be classified as "fool women," The book shows a searching insight into the motives of the "fool woman" order of being, the woman who learns nothing by experience and has not a large enough circle of vision to see beyond her own immediate desires. In many ways, it is unhealthily introspective and morbid in feeling, as the story of that sort of woman must inevitably be," stated a review in *Los Angeles Sunday Times*: 25 June 1899. (Unsigned) Clearly, this novel was panned and shunned and it is common knowledge that Kate Chopin never wrote a novel again after the scathing reviews it received. Moving on to *Jude the Obscure*, the last completed novel by Thomas Hardy. This novel too received a hugely negative critical reception upon its publication in 1895. The reviewer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (12 November 1895) renamed the book 'Jude the Obscene', and branded the book a work of 'naked squalor and ugliness'. The Bishop of Wakefield went even further, being repeatedly so disgusted by the novel, he threw his copy into the fire. Edmund Gosse in 'Mr Hardy's New Novel', *Cosmopolis* (January 1896) wrote, "What has Providence done to Mr Hardy that he should rise up in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fist at his creator?" (Margaux) These

two novels did create a furore among the late nineteenth century reading audience in the countries of their publication.

In Hardy's Jude the Obscure the entire gamut of women's reforms and their successes as well as failures, the new bubbling ideas and their limitations can be found neatly, and at times discreetly, woven into the text. The fictional Wessex becomes a space where ideas intersect and even clash and where stories unfold. And when one reads closely, reality is sewn into the fictitious fabric in the most dexterous manner. Hardy gives us Jude Fawley, Arabella Donn, Sue Bridehead and Mr. Richard Phillotson – an interesting set of convoluted characters that are used to break open, finger, probe and question the contradictions of the age of which they are a product. Sue Bridehead's doomed search for self – ownership connects one to the literary landscape of The Awakening by Kate Chopin. Sue and Edna - two white women, one English the other American, living in two different continents at the time of great social and political turmoil, both are tormented women who desire, women who think critically, women who question, women who try to break free and reclaim their right over their body and life, both in search of selfhood – one drowns herself, the other compels herself to first return to and then sleep with the husband that has always been repulsive to him, a suicide of sorts, a symbolic death. Both are solitary souls, there is no sisterhood that they can recourse to, there is no kindred spirit they can turn to. They are lone figures. Edna is marked to die as soon as she awakens begins and Sue is torn apart continuously till she resigns to smother the fiery spirit within.

The New Woman in these two texts is constantly pulled apart by forces of fixed binaries – good / bad, pious / sensuous, passion / reason, desire / duty, obedience / rebellion. Edna neither shares the enthusiastic, self-negating love of the “Mother-Woman” nor does she subscribe to the liberating ideology of the “Artist Woman.” Sue is neither a seductive, crafty temptress like Arabella nor a fiercely pious evangelist like Aunt Drusilla.

These two New Women are married to men that are ideal as per the set standards of the society, fulfilling their masculine roles and responsibilities. Edna's husband, Mr Pontellier, is rich, well-settled, devoted, respectable, successful, kind to a fault, a good father and a good husband. Chopin records the general impression of Mr. Pontellier, “All declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew none better.” (Chopin) Edna lives a comfortable life in a beautiful house, surrounded by a plethora of servants and enjoys the luxury of yearly vacations – an ideal situation. This reminds us of Margaret Fuller, who writes, “In our country, the woman looks for a “smart but kind” husband; the man for a “capable, sweet-tempered wife.” (Fuller) That's the status quo where Edna lives. However, it is Mr. Pontellier's patriarchal patronizing attitude of niceness that stifles Edna. Also, what is important to note is that Mr. Pontellier, though not outrightly cruel, considers Edna as one of the many beautiful things he owns. She is crucial to his stature in the society. And that is the reason when Edna decides to move to a house of her own, he sees it as a threat to his business and reputation. Chopin's Edna is a woman who questions not just the institution of marriage, but also the institution of motherhood. And in doing so, she comes very close to differentiating between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood, a concept that was unheard of at the time. Edna proclaims, “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.” (Chopin) There is a certain part of her identity as a human being that she cannot sacrifice for anyone, not even her children. This firmly establishes her as a New Woman who has begun to take baby-steps towards her quest for complete internal and external freedom. But this quest is not hers to freely embark upon as Edna realizes eventually. The world around her is not ready to be challenged. Every pathbreaker, every pioneer, every revolutionary needs its own time, its own catalyst. This is not the

Edna's time. May be in another time and place, Edna's quest would lead to emancipation. But not yet. Edna drowns herself as she feels that is the only way to set herself free-free from the hold of the society, of her husband and her children. With the burning desire for a liberated womanhood pumping through her veins, this New Woman returns to the watery womb.

Hardy's Sue too marries a man (Mr. Richard Phillotson) who is good, hardworking, educated, honorable and kind. Mr. Phillotson is not rich, but that does not decrease his worth in the community. He is smitten by young Sue but for Sue the despicable institution of marriage creates anguished, isolated, unloved, unwanted beings and is capable of choking life and love out of a couple. As a new bride, she tells Jude, "I have been thinking... that the social molds civilization fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star-patterns. I am called Mrs. Richard Phillotson, living a calm wedded life with my counterpart of that name. But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson, but a woman tossed about, all alone, with aberrant passions, and unaccountable antipathies..." (Hardy) Talking about expectations that are placed upon a married woman Sue says, "What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes, good as he is morally! – the dreadful contract to feel in a particular way in a matter whose essence is its voluntariness!" (Hardy) Sue is clearly anxious about how harmful the institution of marriage is to women. To her, as with several others before her and after her, marriage is a "dreadful contract" that forces a woman to feel, act, respond in a prescribed way. She is also troubled by her identity as an individual getting corroded as Mr. Phillotson's lawfully wedded wife. Sue sees the institution of marriage as a destructive one – a system that smothers love instead of allowing it to blossom. "I think I would much rather go on living always as lovers, as we are living now, and only meeting by a day. It is so much sweeter—for the woman at least, and when she is sure of the man. I think I should be afraid of you... the moment you had contracted to cherish me under the Government stamp, and I was licensed to be loved on the premises," exclaims Sue when Jude raise the subject of marriage. (Hardy) Now that both Jude and Sue are legally divorced, he talks about the likelihood of their marriage of marriage to which Sue uneasily voices her concern over the legal bond, the "license to love" running their love, companionship and happy life. Sue also makes a critical observation a day before her wedding to Mr. Phillotson is to take place, "According to the ceremony as there printed, my bridegroom chooses me of his own will and pleasure; but I don't choose him. Somebody gives me to him, like a she-ass or she-goat, or any other domestic animal." (Hardy) Sue's words resonate strongly even a century later as we continue living in a world, where women are treated like cattle to be given away. Sue is a woman with independent, critical thoughts that she does not shy from putting into strong words. She is a woman who is confused yet wise, a woman who desires, yet treads carefully, a woman who attains individuality through the course her younger days only to lose it in the fullness of time. Sue is a New Woman who is neither an overtly passionate creature, nor an ice maiden. She exists somewhere in between on the margins of physical desires. She teases, toys, enjoys the attention of men, yet she does not let any man master her till, driven by the trauma of her children's murder, she submits to Phillotson as a way to redeem herself. She sacrifices her spirit at the altar of guilt and duty. Sue begins to crumble under a sense of moral culpability. Internalization of social, cultural, religious values manifests itself in the form of guilt so to say. This firestorm of guilt consumes the vibrant, prodding, prompting, questioning spirit that defined her in the first place. When Mr. Phillotson asks a cringing Sue if she is ready to sleep with him as his wife, she answers "Yes, it is my duty." (Hardy) That marks the end of this New Woman.

We must also remember that the New Woman is in want of the New Man. Unfortunately, society is not ready to accept a New Man – society persecutes New Man just as the New Woman is hounded till she is reduced to being a living

dead or, in some cases, stone-dead. Now, Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier, is no new man. If anything, he is a syrupy version of the patriarch. However, Mr. Richard Phillotson inherently is or at least in all sincerity tries to be sensitive and free from patriarchal conventions. But what the society does to him is not just appalling but also the naked reality. Mr. Phillotson takes a revolutionary decision and lets Sue move on when she confesses to him that she likes him as a friend but cannot take him as her husband. He consents to their separation because he believes that it is wrong to force Sue to stay in a marriage that is dead right from the very start, "I know only one thing: something within me tells me I am doing wrong in refusing her. I, like other men, profess to hold that if a husband gets such a so called preposterous request from his wife, the only course that can possibly be regarded as right and proper and honorable in him is to refuse it, and put her virtuously under lock and key, and murder her lover perhaps. But is that essentially right, and proper, and honorable, or is it contemptibly mean and selfish?" (Hardy) He follows the goodness of his heart, his instincts and disregards the principles of the society that have been ingrained in him and in those around him. And for this, he is punished severely. He loses his job, his livelihood, his position in the village, his self-respect in the process for letting his wife commit adultery. He suffers for doing what is right simply because the right thing stands in opposition to the deeply misogynist societal norms of the time. Mr. Phillotson eventually succumbs to the patriarchal dictates of the society in which he lives and works. This is the fate of the New Man just as the New Woman is doomed to die, physically or emotionally. A man with enlightened, modern ideas is punished for doing the right thing because the right he did was not how it was meant to be as per the society of the time. Mr. Gillingham, Phillotson's childhood friend becomes a mouthpiece of the society when he speaks thus, "I think she ought to be smacked, and brought to her senses—that's what I think!" (Hardy) For the society, Sue commits a grave sin and must be disciplined by her lawfully wedded husband, her master, her lord against whom she has rebelled by refusing to love him and refusing to allow him into her physical and emotional sanctum. However, Mr. Phillotson is at fault too for not controlling his wife, taming her, breaking her and compelling her to succumb to his masculine power and authority as a husband.

CONCLUSION

The New Woman (Sue and Edna in this case) suffers and is doomed, but her doom strengthens the others that come after her. Edna and Sue pave the way for several other women who question the conventional model of womanhood and create a new definition of femininity that is based not on negation but on the celebration of the self. However, this was quite an uphill task in Chopin and Hardy's world, as it still is in ours. For a woman to get in touch with her elemental nature, to acknowledge her fundamental desires, to assert complete control over her body and mind, to enjoy external and internal freedom, to vocalize, to live and love freely and fearlessly is almost akin to being engaged in a never-ending battle with a formidable enemy. With its hardened foothold under the surface and its moldy canopy above the surface, this enemy is not easy to depose. It requires steely nerves and persistent determination to fight a gigantic system that has clawed roots as deep as its height. As Kate Chopin writes, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings." (Chopin) And we all know that the tragic end of some has always strengthened and fueled the flight of many.

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