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**Kate Chopin's the Awakening: a Symbol of Quest for Autonomy,
Individuality and Freedom**

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Abstract:

During the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century, American Fiction by presenting itself as an imitation of life and a mirror of manners had codified its form in Realism. The life of the characters mirrors the everyday life of common man and they confront the same problems faced by ordinary people. The dawn of the nineteenth century saw the *awakening* of women. Women writers threw off the shackles imposed upon them by men. Kate Chopin occupies a unique position among the American writers of the nineteenth century. Katherine O' Flaherty was born in 1850 in St. Louis. *The Awakening* (1899) is the story of Edna Pontellier who moves in her quest for autonomous self-hood and individuality. This leads her to reject her responsibilities as a mother and a wife. Her awakening in life happens at three levels. Edna in her quest for freedom stands alone. She is unmindful of the society's conventions as she flirts with Robert but she is warned about her act. She wants to be an artist to assert her independence, "to succeed, the

artist must possess the courageous soul . . . the soul that dares and defies" (*TA* 84).

Keywords: Imitation, life, manners, realism, problems, dawn, awakening, shackles, quest, autonomous, self-hood, individuality, responsibilities, conventions and courageous.

Introduction:

During the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century, American Fiction by presenting itself as an imitation of life and a mirror of manners had codified its form in Realism. The urge to portray things 'as they are' and 'as they really happen' is central and accounts for the most important development in American fictional structure known as Realism. The life of the characters mirrors the everyday life of common man and they confront the same problems faced by ordinary people. The dawn of the nineteenth century saw the *awakening* of women. Women writers

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threw off the shackles imposed upon them by men.

Kate Chopin occupies a unique position among the American writers of the nineteenth century. Katherine O' Flaherty was born in 1850 in St. Louis. She was influenced by the writers such as Dante, Goethe, Coleridge, Jane Austen and the Bronte Sisters. She ascribes her literary awakening to Maupassant. She is a noted short story writer as well as a Novelist. She is highly praised as a short story artist and rated genius. She is also pronounced as incomparably the greatest American short story writer of her sex. The submission of women and their struggle against submitting is the theme of Chopin's fiction. During her era, feminist thoughts became a concern as women were considered as inferior to men by the patriarchal society. Women threw off their bondage imposed by men to come into their own. Thus forces were operating against women's need for autonomy. Thus Chopin with her modern view believed that women and men were equal and she tried to portray this in her novels. She also dealt with the problems regarding women's liberation in a patriarchal society and all her Heroines are independent and have a desire for freedom.

The Awakening:

The Awakening (1899) is the story of Edna Pontellier who moves in her quest for autonomous self-hood and

individuality. This leads her to reject her responsibilities as a mother and a wife. Her awakening in life happens at three levels. Edna being not a native of the place and belonging to the French Creole society is not acquainted with the society's unwritten code of conduct. She is rebellious by nature and goes against the norms imposed on her by the society as a selfless mother and Leonce Pontellier's possession on the virtue of his being her husband. It was a marriage of convenience on her side. Even in the early years of their marriage there was hardly any emotional contact between the husband and wife. Leonce spends most of his time in clubs. Edna is thus left alone most of the time.

Edna and her family return to their former existence in New Orleans, after their vacation where she becomes unsatisfied and bored with her usual routine life. Her husband Leonce cannot understand her change of behavior leaves her alone and goes on a business trip to New York. Edna being left alone moves into a small house called the 'pigeon-house' to break away from all the bondages of being a wife and mother. Thus she moves into an act of freedom, breaking away the shackles placed on her freedom by the society in the shape of her children and willful duties.

Further, Edna refuses to define herself by a role. She doesn't want any role to bind her freedom. She is tired of her pre-defined social role of caring the children

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and discharging her husband's social obligations. She feels inadequate in this role. Her love for freedom and autonomy does not permit her to stay as an ordinary wife and mother and content to be considered as her husband's sole possession. All these responsibilities appear as 'antagonists' seeking to enslave her soul forever. She finds that she is not a natural mother-woman and so she rejects the concept of mother-woman. Her behavior towards her children is not constant. She considers them as shackles that bind her and as death knell to her freedom. Thus she moves into an act of freedom, breaking away the shackles placed on her freedom by the society in the shape of her children and willful duties.

Theme – Quest for Freedom:

Edna in her quest for freedom stands alone. She is unmindful of the society's conventions as she flirts with Robert but she is warned about her act. She wants to be an artist to assert her independence, "to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul . . . the soul that dares and defies" (TA 84). Further, Edna refuses to define herself by a role. She doesn't want any role to bind her freedom. She is tired of her pre-defined social role of caring the children and discharging her husband's social obligations. She feels inadequate in this role. Her love for freedom and autonomy does not permit her to stay as an ordinary wife and mother and

content to be considered as her husband's sole possession. All these responsibilities appear as 'antagonists' seeking to enslave her soul forever.

Edna knows that she cannot return to her husband and give up her new self. She can give up her life but not herself. She can sacrifice her body but not her soul. Her quest for freedom leads her to take this final step of committing suicide as she knows for sure that to live is to go back to the shackles that obstruct her freedom. Finding no way to elude the threat to her freedom, she finds her quest for freedom completed, is taking away her life, her way to the world of freedom.

The Three Levels of Awakening:

Kate Chopin originally titled her novel as *A Solitary Soul* in keeping with the loneliness, frustration of her central character Edna Pontellier. She then renamed it as *The Awakening*. It tells about the three stages of self-awakening in the life of the protagonist. The title refers to Edna's awakening and awareness of her. Her awakening is both spiritual and physical. Edna's awakening begins with Adele. Adele invites Edna into the world of female love on her first step to her voyage of self-discovery. Thus she begins to analyze her past and her personality.

Edna's second moment of awakening comes with the music of

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Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna likes Reisz's music and feels that it echoes the struggles and feelings in her heart. She seemed "to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (TA104). Her intimacy with Reisz helps her to express her feelings and discover her soul's desires. She now acquires a quiet sense of self-confidence. She is like the "tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (TA36).

The next level of her awakening happens with Robert. She physically awakens to her own sexuality. A feeling of exultation overtook her as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless. She wanted to swim far out to reach out for the unlimited in which to discover her.

The Awakenings A Feminist Novel:

Edna, the central character is the strongest character and all the other characters give her adequate support. Edna in her role of a mother and wife finds her individuality being crippled. She finds that she is not a natural mother-woman and so she rejects the concept of mother-woman. Her behavior towards her children is not constant. She considers them as shackles that bind her and as death knell to her freedom. Edna is the image of the bird in a cage. She considers her marriage to Leonce

as a cage. In order to break out the cage she must have strong wings. She strengthens her wings by resuming her painting, abandoning house-keeping and social duties, sending her children to their grandmother's house and moving to a house of her own the "Pigeon-house". Thus Edna is portrayed as a non-mother woman with a love for individuality which clashes with her motherly and wifely duties.

The Awakening is a pearl beyond price, a jewel among works and the favourite of the Muse. It is the most honest treatment of adult female sexuality and can be read as a description of the growth of the female artist where birth is unique to the female experience. It portrays women's condition and sexuality. It is an attempt to seek a balance perspective on women's experience. It tells the story of a woman's struggle on her path to liberalization. It is a transitional female fiction, a narrative of and about the passage from the homosocial women's culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of Modernism.

The Awakening was destined to become a classic of modern feminist thought and sensibility. It is about women's psychological awakening which portrays female protagonist in her quest for freedom. According to Seyersted, Kate Chopin wrote the absolute truth about women's submerged life and was a pioneer in the

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treatment of sexuality, of divorce and women's need to be free. Chopin tries to record the inward life of women in all its chaotic details in her novels. She was caught between contradictions of femininity and creativity and the question whether to join them or to transcend them altogether.

Conclusion:

The female protagonist Edna Pontellier chooses her fate, an act of free will and thus raises the issue of a woman's right to control her own life and even chooses her death. Edna is a symbol of modern young woman in search of individuality, autonomy and freedom. The readers can claim them as icon – a timeless symbol of women's quest for freedom.

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