

The Awakening

Topic #2 LAP

Abid Ahmad

Winter Jasmine flowers that endure the harsh cold in beauty and elegance; This is the embodiment of women in society, whether it be today or one hundred years ago. When Kate Chopin wrote of the woes of Edna Pontellier in her novel *The Awakening*, no one could have expected just how much our society had shifted since the release of her ground-breaking publication. The book entails the barriers that had controlled women back in the late 1800s. Although modern women's rights is a new battle that is being fought on different fronts, it is the same war that was always being waged since the infancy of society. No matter what era, women have always fought for the same fundamental underpinnings of empowerment, respect, and progress in their life. Unfortunately, these flowers of growth have been conditioned to survive the stifling conditions of the foundations of a patriarchal world. However, they have not wavered and constantly shine through their strength regardless of the pressure they face. Amazingly, their unheralded grace is unaffected by this storm, still flaunting their timeless beauty. This war has been waged for far too long in our culture. It is incumbent upon us to utilize the tools left by our predecessors to bestow the spring of equality to this world.

The main pressure that *Awakening's* Edna faces revolves around her marriage. Edna has to deal with a traditional patriarchal husband that has unfortunately become a recurring theme in our broken society. The idea that women are beholden to the men around them has been perpetually enforced throughout our communities. This is ever-present in the book, where Edna literally committed suicide in an attempt to regain control of her identity. "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." (Chopin 116) Chopin explicates the relief that Edna taking her own life brought, when using the sea as an analogous figure to freedom. While Edna isn't fighting in

the same manner as the great women in our history, her strong principles in her own identity fall parallel to the many people who acted as catalysts of equality throughout history. Women have forever been relegated to a state where they are discouraged from getting a job and gaining independence in their personal life. “One recent study revealed that approximately 75 percent of people think “men” when they see career-related words such as business, profession, and work, but think “women” when they hear family-related words such as domestic, home, and household.” (Kramer & Harris 4) The fundamental problem with this assertion in our society is that it is premised on the idea that women are dependent on men. Instead, our society must assert the idea that men and women are interdependent upon each other. Men and women have been cut from the same cloth and it is imperative we work with each other in order to prosper. A society that pushes this narrative would subsequently allow women to expand their roles within a family. Women would be empowered and would have a greater respect for their marriage. Marriage would no longer act as shackles to women, but a sanctuary where their grace is complemented with loving kids and a respectful husband.

Our society takes this idea of respect for granted. It is just sickening to see the level of which women have become objectified, with complete disregard of the fountain of wisdom and growth that their minds provide. Chopin delves into this idea with Edna’s appearance as well as how she is treated by the men around her. “Her eyebrows were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful.”(Chopin 3) Edna was a “handsome” woman that holds such greatness underneath her skin and within her mind, which is unfortunately locked in by society. This is the ugly truth of how many women are treated today as well as centuries before us. In order to treat this epidemic, we must instill

modesty in a community that worships material beauty. “Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands...”(Quran 24:30-31) The only way our society can be fully cognizant of the greatness of women is if we can for once look past their dazzling eyes, but rather take a glimpse into their thoughts. Similarly, Islam emphasizes the devaluation of personal beauty over greater attributes such as piety and personhood. If all men see are the “beauty” of women and their physical attributes, then they will cease to be able to see them as anything more than an object. In turn, women will feel pressured even more so to look good physically. This is the case in the novel, where Edna’s husband clearly sees Edna as nothing more than a personal belonging. “You are burnt beyond recognition, he added looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage”(Chopin 2). A woman is so much more than a nice car or a beautiful house. Rather, they are unique individuals that hold diamonds of knowledge in their thinking and so on. The only way they can uncover this beauty is if we stop digging skin deep. When Edna became naked and submerged herself into the sea, Chopin emphasized the important factor that physical appearances play in oppressing women. “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.”(Chopin 115) For once, Edna would not be judged for her looks or her dress, and she celebrated this by revealing her true self to the world.

Moreover, becoming more of who we really are is at the forefront of the issues being discussed today in feminist circles. Our world continues to evolve, with an increasing diversity in the types of people we meet and the groups of people we interact with. It is our responsibility to ensure that if these people aren't hurting our society, then we fully incorporate them into our world. This is easily one of the biggest takeaways from Kate Chopin's novel, as Edna completely upturns the idea of gender roles in communities. "She made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household (like a good housewife) going and coming as it suited her fancy."(Chopin 57) Far too long has society told us that women are supposed to take care of the kids and stay at home. "According to the BSRI, people expect women to be affectionate, sensitive, warm, and concerned with making others feel more at ease. Men are expected to be aggressive, competent, forceful, and independent leaders."(Kramer & Harris 6) Frankly, this is only the case because many men want women to perpetually be dependent upon them. This power struggle has been dominated by men for too long, and we have finally seen some progress in recent years. This debate is now shifting to a different front, of an entirely disenfranchised group of people. The LGBTQ community has begun a full scale war on the imprisonment that is gender boundaries. The discrimination against these people is merely an extension of the idea that men and women are entirely different in nature. Whether this argument is spiritual or religious is absolutely irrelevant. Religion should only be practiced by the believer, so that they can become at peace with themselves as well as make the world a better place. To imprint one's ideology onto another by force is near blasphemous, and will only serve to divide our neighborhoods. "So if they come to you, [O Muhammad], judge between them or turn away from them. And if you turn away from them - never will they harm you at all. And if you judge, judge between them with

justice.”(Quran 5:42) Men and women should stand united in the idea that we should accept all people and their lifestyles because although all of us are different, ultimately we are still together as humankind.

The storm of indifference will not be waged for long. As stifling as it has been for women to grow throughout history, all it takes is for one person to build shelter from this discrimination. Through this, our society can begin to spread gardens of grace, benefiting their surroundings and the environment around them. Accordingly, when Chopin wrote this book, the war on equality was much worse and no one saw any end in sight. Since then, women have made strides in the political and socioeconomic atmosphere, actually gaining some of the respect that they so rightfully deserve. However, we should make no mistake that this blizzard of social construction is still presently freezing our world's growth, as the remnants of past patriarchal structures are still intact. This is the same war though, and since the enlightenment our communities have consistently been inching towards the light at the end of the tunnel. It will take time, but if our society can take the same lessons of empowerment and equality from our predecessors, then we will only further the cause of social equality. It's scary to attack the very foundations of which our society was built upon, but make no mistake that man-made structures have no chance when Mother Nature turns her back against them.

Bibliography

- *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin
- *Breaking Through Bias: Communication Techniques for Women to Succeed at Work* by Andrea S. Kramer and Alton B. Harris
- The Holy Qur'an