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## Solitude or Loneliness in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

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### **Abstract:**

Solitude is a requisite for any creative task; all evolutions, experiments, and enterprises start with meaningful solitude. The essentiality of solitude for creativity is radical, but very few people can make a practical application of it. Those who master the act of solitude are not insolent but able to connect better. Solitude without shared meanings to choice is aloofness and loneliness and cultivates itself into a challenge to insecure people who desperately need people to lean on.

Women are made to learn to be dependent on men. They have no shared meaning to their preferences and choices, and in the absence of children, husbands and household care, their solitude becomes lonely and challenges their insecure self. To save themselves from injury, they haphazardly strive to hold on to available options and go swept away with uncontrollable forces. Edna in *The Awakening* is one such heroine who fails to add something recreational to her solitude; Children with nannies, a household of servants and husband on foreign tours make Edna find succor in friends and racecourse, but this course misleads her to dangerous sea shores.

**Keywords:** Requisite, haphazard, progression, recreational, vulnerable.

### **Introduction:**

This paper attempts to articulate the voice of women who are hushed up, submitted into silence but not in solitude, for centuries. Solitude is practised by unique humans or by predatory beasts. Humans are social animals, and herd is their security. Women are average or thought to be average humans to be put under the umbrella of security ever and always. They are also doctored since infancy that they cannot survive alone; moreover, women who are vulnerable physically and mentally (they are manipulated and abused) are advised to be in groups. Groups demand uniformity and dilute your identity. It also demands one's presentation and

contribution. It may encourage one but can equally discourage one. Women, when in a group, consider the social and financial status of a person and who owns special status given particular respect and regard.

Edna is the wife of a businessman who forces his wife to socialise with people of importance and influence to promote his business. Tuesday evenings are secured for business meetings, and Edna's husband urges her to mingle with women of clout, even at the cost of her physical and mental well-being.

Edna is a woman of refined taste and suitability who does not want to be in the light or the shadow of her husband and wants a nest of her own making and own choice. She wants autonomy not only in terms of luxury and leisure but in terms of ownership, respect and reverence. Leonce Pontellier, Edna's husband, is not a very strict man, but he is hard on his wife's foresight and her neglect of household or child care. He treats her more as a manager, butler or nanny of his children and less as his wife.

The problem of Edna is her lack of expression; she fails to articulate her problem as she has faced domination of a strict, callous and authoritative father and husband for a considerable part of her life. Edna has always been all alone by herself. She withdraws herself from her family as there is no succor in place of strictness, no help in place of monitors, no kind and considerate touch in place of cold amenities, which stiffens her not to mingle with a family which gives her no emotional care.

She finds Robert in her life who boosts her morale, uplifts her courage, allows and helps her gain some confidence, and uses her voice for herself. She is left alone by absorbed sisters, a military father and a businessman husband. This solitude, she wants to spend in artistic endeavours, but she lacks the skills and patience, also the time required for art. Without skills, her solitude is not best utilised; rather she deviates into two extra-marital affairs and again, without expressing and revealing her ideology, she adds no success to her design. Solitude is an asset, but only those with the skills and, confidence, patience to use it, can tap out nectar from solitude.

Edna, being a woman, is weak enough not to celebrate her solitude, replenish and renovate her mental frame to refine her taste and achieve the hidden potential of her personality. Women are trained since infancy to be dependent, which dilutes their self-confidence, and trains their mind in such a way that they assume themselves fit only for domestic care. Chopin sets a different example in her heroine.

In the novel, the Awakening, the speech of a woman is nowhere. Men speak with great cultivation, and women only listen attentively and silently and are never entitled to give their

voice, opinion or dissent. The apathy of men cuts off a woman from family and even society where she represents her family.

Edna's autocratic father made her an alien in her own family; her husband's indifference made her a puppet of those who could provide financial gain to her husband. Edna had no friends, no relation to share and care about in the true sense of the words. Solitude is strength provided one has the skills and strength to fructify it and also the support of others who can fear and cheer the achievement of solitude.

Edna, inheriting gene pool of her father, strives for independence- financial, sexual and social. She speculates on Racecourse, makes money and enjoys the absence of her husband by realising her dream. Chopin registers her fondness for her father and eagerness to follow him and animation to enjoy rich dividends of her talent and potential for speculation.

...She was talking like her father... she played for very high stakes... the fever of the game flamed in her cheeks and eyes, and it got into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant. (Chopin 71)

Edna, in disregard to gender, associates herself with an objectionable game-like speculation with obnoxious people like Alcee A robin, with nefarious habits of cohabiting with a man even after being a wife of a well-reputed man. Edna understands how unconventional she is, but her assertion of self is above her family. Edna's speechlessness and forced solitude start from her understanding of worldly ways. Chopin finds her:

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 outer and existence, which conform, the inward life which questions (14).

Her husband, had a habit of ceasing the society with disgust and discomfort which failed to amuse him. Leonce Portlier, Edna's husband lambasted her:

"You are burnt beyond recognition, what folly! To bathe at such an hour in such heart" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. (He had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed long to him.) looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. (Chopin 4)

This statement shows how Edna's husband exercised his authority and influence on his wife, whom he counts as an arm candy and decoration piece. Edna was doing nothing wrong; she was swimming and learning it intensely and passionately, purposely, and she was doing a creative activity, and instead of encouraging her, he was degrading her for slight sunburn, which even he knew was temporary. The real reason was the house care and company to her husband and children but in her spare hours she could do recreational activities as fun or

entertainment but not as a passion. Her father was also an unyielding autocrat; army services further tightened his heart against any appeal or soft situations. Edna married Léonce against his wish and will, or it can be said that she wanted to liberate herself from the stifling aura of her natal home. Her father never kept her happy in her home and in her husband's home too; he wanted her to be under his position, and thus, his upbringing of Edna was justified. He said to his so-in-law about his daughter: "Authority and coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down and hard, the only way to manage a wife" (Chopin 68).

All these statements of husband and father alienated Edna from the warm, playful, happy atmosphere of the family. She was thrown into solitude where with hard work, patience and perseverance, she could achieve her own identity, but she craved warmth and happiness, and the absence of them at her home forced her to discover it outside of the home. "Her marriage to Léonce was purely an accident... his absolute devotion flattered her." (Chopin 16)

Here, it is noticed that Edna was a person who desperately sought love and care and non the availability of it at home compelled her to seek it with her future husband. Léonce's apathy and his control of his trophy wife further stifled her, and she found solace in her mentor and trainer, Robert. Edna continued her focus only on herself, not on her family. She was a mother of two, but she failed to come out of her romantic zone. She desperately moved from one option to other, one man to another, to gain love and respect; ironically, all men cheated on her with a facade of love and care but to control her either in matrimony (Robert) or sexually (Alcée Arobin). Edna could never form a bond of trust and faith with anybody as she either chose not to express herself or was silenced into submission.

Creole women were very much devoted and dedicated to their families, but Edna had no sense of family as she never had a family and never enjoyed love and warmth from one member to another. She had an example of her father before her, who prioritized himself on his children and just reared them without creating filial gratitude. Her friend, Adele, told her male friend about Edna. "She is not one of us: She is not like us" (Chopin 20).

She was not taught to connect with her children, and both her children were males. She had no mother to counsel her in worldly matters and self-care, so appreciation and applause by men---true or false affected her. Her unhappy home and relations gave her constant turmoil and torment. Edna was always obsessed with a feeling of constant oppression and tedious drowsiness as she prepared herself to be a dedicated and devoted wife, but she could live her life in all its taste and distaste, pleasure and displeasure. She failed to enjoy her solitude in recreational activities like painting and sketching as she was more interested in love, romance and bubbly sports. Patience, preservation and peace, a requisite for artistic embellishment, were

not in ingredients of her mental constitution; her family and marriage were a disappointment to her as they “closed the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance & dreams” (Chopin 19).

Chopin contrasted Edna with two women: One, Adele Rationale, who was absorbed in her family and followed the dictations of her husband as religious inscriptions, and the other was Reisz, who was unconventional but shabby, paying all her attention and devotion to art, enjoying her solitude in artistic pursuits; she had no proper, organised household, no dressing sense and no social sense she was hailed as highly disagreeable and also unpleasant. Madame Reisz was denounced by society for her unwomanly devotion to art- an activity of male bastion and her rejection of family in service of art. Ironically, Reisz had some social sense to understand that Edna loved Robert when she “ought not to.... She cautioned Edna: “You are purposely misunderstanding me” (Chopin 8). When Edna changed her house, she again questioned whether she had confided her decision to her husband or not. Here, it is noticeable that Edna is unconventionally, inhabiting a conventional setup, and Reisz has social sense despite her unconventional social demeanours.

Throughout the novel, Chopin showcased how Edna, unlike Chopin, who utilised her solitude and widowhood in service of art, failed to sublimate her pain and time in artistic endeavour. Edna kept on degrading herself, focusing on her erotic energy; Reisz sublimated her entotic energy in her absolute solitude into intellectual energy and earned fame as a noted musician. Reisz earned her reputation in art and a place in society only when she employed her youthful suppleness and energy, exotic reserves in persistent and consistent service of art. People applauded her despite her peevish and sarcastic nature. "What passion! What an artist! I have always said no one could play Chopin like Reisz! That last Preludes! It shakes a man!"(Chopin 26).

Chopin exposed the chinks of Edna’s personality. Edna also evolved herself; she added expression to herself. “She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candour... first breath of freedom” (Chopin 19).

Edna moved further, learned swimming “realised her power... alone, boldly"... (Chopin 27) and gained confidence to make her own ideology. Her solitude accorded her space and time to think, review, revise, and re-evaluate her position in the family, society and the entire cosmos. Unfortunately, she was a woman of delicate taste who wanted all kinds of embellishments in life---name, fame, stylish way of life, love and warmth of family. Chopin shows how she failed to understand that marriage has been a social contract, an agreement with the consent of two people for ages. In case a woman depends on a man, she has to follow his

command, and if she wants to attain autonomy, she has to strive for it for years with continued efforts and leaving behind all that might interfere with her pursuit of purpose.

Taking a leaf from Reisz, Edna strove in the field of painting and sketching, but she failed to establish herself as time, passion, and potential did not bless her like Reisz. Reisz cautioned her in her conversation with Edna.

“Painting”, laughed Edna, “I am becoming an artist. Think of it!” Ah! An artist! You have pretensions, Madame’... The artist must possess a courageous soul... Courageous indeed, the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies (Chopin 61).

Edna tried to emulate Reisz, mesmerised by her talent for art, but she had no passion and even patience to develop a passion and follow it with devotion. Chopin liberally exposed Edna with all shades of her personality. She showed how :

Mrs. Portlier had brought her sketching materials, which she sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way...with freedom which came not from long and close acquaintance with them...after surveying the sketch critically, she drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface and crumpled the paper between her hands. (Chopin 12,13)

Edna had absolute solitude; her husband never strongly interfered with her choice of painting. He wanted her to spare time, but he allowed, and with the passage of time, she could learn and master the art, if not with excellence, at least with absorption. Edna prioritised her praise over artistic aspirations. The neglect of husband and father inflicted on her a kind of boredom and self-condemnation. Chopin explained how mentally upset she became in her frustration with failed ventures after dissatisfaction with her performance.

Edna’s artistic failure and her impatience in employing her faculties wholeheartedly in service of art forced her to get some boost, support and admiration from someone nearby, especially a male, as she was fond of her father if not adored or approved of him. In her frustration, her quietude she got the support of Robert, who acted as a mentor to train her in swimming. Edna always felt:

A particular ungovernable read hung about her when in the water unless there was a hand nearby that might reach out and reassure her... she was like a bit off fattening, stumbling, clutching child...(Chopin 27)

The weakness of Edna happened to be a male support, which she never got but always sought, male appreciation which, in its absence, threw her out of the female circle in utter loneliness with negligible expression but constant turmoil and delirium. With the application of patience and self-confidence with a genuine passion for art, she could stabilize her life; her

love for children over her 'self' could further settle her in her surroundings, but her solitude allowed her reflection and intensified her miasma, her mental agony and anguish and her preservation of self even in death. Her choice of two contrary and diverse options made her feel "whole seemed to be no longer worth wearing" (Chopin 44). Edna's choice for her 'self' without preparation; her tendency to challenge convention, she earned in her solitude, but she had no strong wings to fly over and above her habitat, Chopin suggests:

The birds that would soar above the plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth. (79)

Edna's solitude, her 'un womanly habit', her craving not for art but happy home, her desire for self-control and autonomy created such chaos and confusion in her mind due to their diverse nature that Edna could not handle all elements of her nature in one string and unstinged her life. Gilmore has also witnessed that Edna had "no inkling of the decent red internally conflicted self-made familiar by freed" (83). Edna could not solve her mystery, a loneliness was imposed on her, but it was self-imposed as she never allowed the expression; she played dual self to protect herself from unpleasantness; her "suicidal longing for self-identity is a salutary reversion to the ecstasies of the queen of love a self-aware neurotic" (Harmon 52).

Edna failed as a neurotic as she failed to relate herself not only to herself but also to the family and world. Her husband consulted a doctor, taking her mental health disturbed and necessary for diagnosis. He complained "She is not like herself... her whole attitude toward me and everybody and everything has changed..." (Chopin 63). Edna put herself under tremendous mental strain; she had approach – approach conflict in which she wanted both – a glittering, warm, lovable life while of appreciation and compliments and also the name and publicity of a celebrity like Reisz. She failed to understand that everything is earned; affection is earned by sacrifice of ego, and fame is earned by sacrifice of ease and leisure. She was given loneliness and, a loveless life, but failed to convert it into peaceful solitude for the evolution of her soul.

She mindlessly follows whatever impulse moves her...all her life has long been accustomed to harbour thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves...devoid of ambition, striving not toward accomplishment...abandoned herself to fate... (32, 46, 70, 98)

Here, Chopin registers Edna's struggle and desperate attempt to understand life. Her solitude facilitates her all reflections, all emotions to sweep over her, to let her decide right or wrong, in, proportion to think of herself. She sings her story to herself; she speaks a language no one understands, but "one does hear in her story the constant murmur, whisper, clamour of another

vision of life” (Papke 87), which her solitude bestowed on her and unleashed the idea of self-fulfilment of women.

Chopin presents her heroine, Edna as a rebel who with no weapon of accomplishment and ability and has defied the mightiest warrior; she represents “the aspects of the female lifestyle which are outside of and unlike those of men ...” (Showalter 262).

Edna’s career is shown by Chopin not only as a transcendent triumph or absolute effort but also not as a study of repression. Edna is neither a symbolic heroine nor a realistic victim; rather she is caught in contradictory choices of creativity and refined decorative femininity. Edna’s cultural affiliations deter her from her pursuits. She, since her childhood, harboured a tendency for peaceful solitude imposed on her by a cold and apathetic family. She wanted all the bliss of life, but peace was the priority. Edna, in her youth, craved self-respect and recognition along with peace and a lifelong craving for male flattery. Her instinct dragged her into extra marital affairs instead of patient penance of art. Well-dressed, elite women like Edna represent the system in which a nascent, naive consumer and the institution are sutured to violent forces of nature so that no difference is found between wound and suture. Syntagmatic mimesis of Chopin’s second, paradigmatic quasi-religious voice adds metaphysical pronouncement to the novel and converts it into symbolic tableaux of universality, making Edna a common entity.

Edna becomes an archetypal human being alienated forcefully from her comfort zone, flung into a silent and unhappy state, allowed slightest expression and nurses an irritable longing to return to affection from family, head of the family anyhow, anyways. Edna, surprisingly, has no sense of family; she changes one person after another as if she has no self of belongingness and accountability; being alone and alienated, she is neither taught nor learnt what a family stands for and how its members are not replaceable. Edna prioritises Leonce over her father, Robert over Léonce, Alcee over Robert, and self overall. She is alienated from care and share of family. She strives to regain it with various options and, ultimately, alienates herself from the entire world and leaves it forever. Edna is not used to an outward, spoken articulation of emotions and “is accustomed to being isolated by male gaze and regarding other women as rivals of masculine esteem; Edna cannot understand social roles ...” (Harmon 60). Sandra also finds Edna “the mystic, the pagan, the aphrodisiac” (Gilbert 105), and her death concludes Sandra's observation.

**Conclusion:**

Edna asserts herself willfully and exercises whatever pleases her fancy, unmindful of the repercussions. She is condemned but leaves behind a question of whether women should be defined by leisure and luxury with a status symbol of an expensive commodity or by self-identification with the talent which nature graced them with. Why are the dual standards set for women, and why are they skillfully condensed in their composition so much so that they are reluctant or impotent to reject one mode of self-definition clearly and boldly? Edna is unable to resist the temptation of being a royal woman, apart from the crowd, by her attire and jewels, and she equally fails to resist a statuesque status for presentation in a dumb, dull, drab form at business parties for the financial gain of her husband. She wishes to give herself where she chooses as her solitude has accorded her self-worth in place of self-damnation, but she lacks the skill and virtue to further the solitude and, above all, to gracefully sublimate the silence, solitude into strength to empower her intellectually and establish herself in her new role, self-identity in society. Her journey in her solitude is from silence to sharp shrieks which deafen the ears, and her problem becomes visible but not understood, never cured. Here, Edna “invites the viewer to reflect with her upon the quaint stupidity of gender performances that require women to appear unconscious of the effects they strive to produce” (Harmon 59).

Edna loses her hope and fails to add meaning to her solitude as gender constraints have never trained her to imagine a life beyond men, beyond their attention and approval. She flouts the conventions, but both of her families – natal and her husband too have flouted norms and regulation by not providing her due succor, support and warmth of love. After all progressions in life, Edna regresses to her childhood where she enjoyed the carassing touch of meadows. She finds the same touch in the blue meadows of the sea, “she felt like some newborn creature ... heard the voice of sea ... inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude ... enfolding her naked body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 109) just as mother provides utter solace, solitude and succulent space to a child.

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