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## ***The Awakening: A Feminist Document***

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### **Abstract:**

Feminism is a word with multi-dimensional perspectives. Feminists are also marginalised as male haters precisely in the way women are marginalised as secondary gender. Feminist espouses the cause of women, he is not intolerant and aggressive toward men. Demand of freedom, equality and equity for women is the real aim of feminists and the inherent positivity of the word make it relevant and required in the debate and discussion for women. Chopin is not an anti-feminist to punish the unconventional diversion of her heroine, in her novel, *The Awakening* by suicide in the sea, she is a feminist instead to reveal that a woman too needs equality, justice, freedom and self- rule. She can not be some possession and property of men and if she is curtailed and coerced to be a dependent entity, she is also determined to rebel. Edna, the heroine of Chopin gives a passionate manifestation of her rebellious self- assertion as her final and only choice i.e. chosen death. Chopin invites the attention of the reader to the fact that rebellion tumbles out of silence as a repercussion of suppression. Sagacity, Chopin suggests, ripened with passage of time and experience of failed women whenever blended with well-thought out rebellion may culminate into revolution to vindicate the necessity of equal rights and duties for women.

**Keywords:** Vindicate, Self-assertion, unconventional, equity, Feminist.

**Analysis and Reflection:** Toril Moi opines that both men and women shy away from being called feminist because in such case "people would think that they must be strident, domineering, aggressive and intolerant and worst of all- that they must hate men" (1736).

Here, Toril Moi specifies how the term feminist is distorted to make it against the interests of women on a broader canvas. Toril also registers her surprise and annoyance about

stance of “women who are careful to preface every gender- related claim that just might come across as in conventional with “I am not a feminist but...” (1736).

Feminism earned notoriety as it became synonymous with militant culture in women. Pat Robertson also opined that feminism is an anti-family political movement to encourage women to divorce, perform abortions, witchcraft and becoming lesbians.

Rush Limbaugh also asserts:

I prefer to call the most obnoxious feminists what they really are feminazis... A feminazi is a woman who finds abortion the single greatest avenue for militant women to exercise their quest for power and advance their belief that men are not necessary. (193)

Toil Moi here regrets that women if procreate like animals without choice yearly (without hormonal stimulation like animals), they will lose their human status. Abortion, toil observes as a human right of a woman to choose her family, quality life for herself and also for family and Toil also suggests that “The truly distressing part of the critique of two critics is that the rest of this demagoguery has become part of the mainstream of American culture” (Moi 1736).

Feminists who relentlessly worked for equal rights of women are generally discouraged in their endeavour by nasty proclamations such as-they hate men, family system, show contempt for husband and promote lesbian culture. Critics of feminism cleverly steered safely through their evaluation sailing on the sympathy of American women for family system and apathy for their fellow, depressed women and also hatred toward feminists for spoiling of their culture.

The idea of lesbian culture is very distasteful to a well-respected elite class who is otherwise modern in its approach. Feminists are projected as demonic destroyers before angelic Christians who find Feminists as destroyers of the family system by abortion.

Feminazi is also a very nefarious term because the statement of Limbaugh shows infamous neologism that foregrounds abortion. He detects feminists as Nazis and gracefully fuels the holocaust of aborted children. Militant women are the women who are labelled as entities hungry for power and believe that men are not necessary for women and practically speaking, they are labelled as haters of men.

Christina Hoff Somers also observes:

Gender Feminists condescend to patronise the benighted females who cannot help wanting the wrong things in life. Their disdain for the hapless victims of patriarchy is rarely acknowledged. (258)

Earthy Young also has assumed that :

By focusing on women's private grievances, Femininity not only promotes a kind of collective feminine narcissism but links itself to the myth of female moral superiority and the demonization of men. (6)

Simon De Beauvoir also felt the need of "deploying new and powerful ideas to generate insights in intellectual fields" (204). Critics have denounced feminism for promoting a lethal belief that one should not think or analyse or highlight or question our vague assumptions. All these arguments give a comprehensive picture of feminism as antigen and as an agency to teach corrupt practices to women.

### **Introduction:**

Toril Moi introduces feminists from various perspectives and analysis offered by critics as one 1) who "hate men and consider all women innocent victims of evil male power. 2) feminist are dogmatic, inflexible, intolerant and are capable of questioning their own assumptions. 3) Feminists are a bunch of fanatics, a lunatic feign, penne hungry minority whose ideas do not merit serious assessment" (Moi 737).

Toril Moi takes up this controversial subject of women issue for discussion as it requires a speedy diagnosis in the aftermath of growing need for intellectual growth and autonomy of women. Toil Moi also finds that unbiased, neutral and honest people shrink away from feministic admiration as it makes them unfair towards sincere and committed men. Moi supports and favours feminists as they have a central tendency to voice the grievances of women especially those which were never heard by anyone or ignored since time immemorial Moi raises one, very important issue i.e. feminism is not exclusive for women's agenda; it is also not particularly against men and society; it is also not concentrating its focus on liberating women from motherhood and domestic roles. Moi especially, suggests that feminism is misunderstood and deliberately misinterpreted to undermine the efforts of those who are sensitised by un addressed agony of women.

The sensitive soul who could not accept the induced affliction on women and advocated their share in governance and government. The people who also believed that women with their virtues enjoy priority over animals and are no less than men in their

contribution to home and society came in support of women's rights which they themselves naturally could not claim. Social reformers and progressive people felt the need for the growth of women in intellectual spheres so that it may initiate the betterment of the entire family as a woman is always the fulcrum of family and also if extended family i.e. society. Women by sagacious people in the past were conceived and perceived as a treasure of unlimited possibilities but for their sons not for themselves or for their daughters.

Chopin in *The Awakening* introduces the idea of liberal space, autonomy and individuality for women. Chopin is not a feminist in estimation of an average reader as she leaves only one option of suicide for her heroine, Edna who after many digressions from tradition ends up in demise but Edna fits in definition of Toi Moi who espouses the cause of women for individual identity and exercise of choice. Edna makes her choices, she finds herself, and she rejects the idea of a husband as a guard, saviour, bread winner or a companion.

Edna quenches her thirst for a spiritual companion in Robert and a sensual Partner in Alcee A robin; she earns money makes her small home but by her own efforts; she rejects the ownership of husband over her and above all, she surrenders to the sea instead of asking forgiveness from her husband. She believes in equality with her husband as a human and accords no divine status to him asking any forgiveness from him.

### **Feminism in *The Awakening*:**

Edna is presented in '*The Awakening*' as a woman of unique substance, a lady class apart from the crowd of obedient cows. Edna's suicide is answered by Chopin. It may be intentionally a choice or it may be a weariness as Edna was also wearied to come to shore. It may be her refuge in the sea whose seductive voice always entices her to take relief from his dream of life. "Edna resolves to commit suicide, failing to embark upon her paradoxical behavior" (Gilmore 62).

Gilmore here clarifies that Edna is whimsical in her impulse. She has been committed to one resolve throughout her life i.e. to act on impulse without reflection. Chopin here sympathises with Edna as the latter is never counselled to reflect, analyse and articulate her opinion. Edna lacks sound judgments as she is romantic, not realistic in her approach and her romanticism along with waywardness exhibit her unschooled disposition, her lack of worldly wisdom and childish innocence and unlimited curiosity to explore however, intimidating is the enterprise.

Edna has lived a life of dependence and despondency. She never since childhood has enjoyed autonomous status in any task of life. Her assertion for self results in her defiance of all that is conventional, irrational and bestowed on her out of proportions. Edna like a child is curious enough to explore, to delve deep down in forbidden area and she tries like a child when confronts the challenge. Her suicide is her childish regression to embrace the sea as amniotic fluid and death as mother's womb. She never grows up to accept challenges and also her criticism. Chopin is a feminist to pity Edna who neither embraces her faults, her criticism, regresses like a child nor asks forgiveness like a mature human. Chopin underlines the raw self of Edna which takes a beating with seasoned authorities of society which have established certain norms for women and are very strict with the practice of such norms by women.

Chopin is more interested in exhibition of failure and struggles of Edna in particular and of all women in general. She highlights how a woman thinks, thinks of her human instinct for respect and tendency to realize her individual self and how she loses her battle to stringent forces of patriarchy as she is not prepared to assert her ideology and she is also unripe in her rebellion that leads to her failure in life. Chopin is a feminist who conceives the idea of unfulfilled self in an elite woman rolling in leisure and luxury; she invites the attention of male folk who in their smugness and satisfaction of domestic roles for women overlook their need for self- respect and self-realisation. Chopin addresses society how a well- fed woman undergoes ennui. Chopin also captures the state of mind of Edna just before her surrender to the sea.

The narrator of *The Awakening* opines:

Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she disused. There was no human being whom she wanted near... leaving her alone. The children... sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her day... she was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach. (Chopin 188)

Chopin here shows how women need liberty, feeling of companionship, and children should not be binding on them to compromise their soul, their awareness into a servile status. Chopin here coincides with the opinion of Torill Moi on abortion. Women are silenced into submission for care of their children. Chopin here specifies that women are not meant only for child care, they too, can be employed in various occupations to realise their worth and potential. Chopin, a widow and mother of six children was not allowed any occupation and

she was also not trained or educated to undertake any favourite occupation so she had to write novels with or without her interest to eke out a living for her family.

Chopin becomes the precursor of women who are single anyhow and need social, financial and emotional independence to live without the male prop to lean on. Chopin in a feminist vein, shows how women terribly and compulsively crave for a life of their own choice and in case of denial, they vehemently assert for it. She also shows how women fail in their venture of independence, in their journey from appropriation to autonomy; women are cultured in conformity to conventions; they are never treated as individuals and lack education—intellectual and moral, they digress into death or desertion.

Edna is a human who can be put in a need of woman. She needs some solitude, some exploration of the unexplored which by the routine of humans, their mechanical hypnosis dwindle into nothingness she tries to associate with the elements of nature which fascinate her and invite her for their exploration; her vision is realised by women who explore today no space, undersea and deep in nature. Chopin wants women to explore, to energise themselves with energies suitable to humans. “The water of gulf, gleaming with million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea never ceasing, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (Chopin 190).

Chopin projects Edna as a woman who is a century ahead of her times. She thinks that a woman is entitled to live or die as per her consideration. Chopin also believes that woman can also try forbidden avenues like romance and race courses. Despite all feministic considerations, Chopin arranges a chosen escape, death for her rebellious and spirited heroine who tries every option to live a life of dignity and recognition.

Chopin becomes conventional to push Edna in her exit from world of mortal as the wish to fend off the condemnation by narrow minded moralists may have led her to mete out a kind of poetic justice. (Mal Zhan 34)

Poetic justice is a term which is unpalatable to Feminists because the unlimited aggression of men on women can not be balanced by one flaw of one woman. Chopin writes a novel of all times, she gains universal appeal and approval for her certificate to a woman to lay her heart and impulsive mind bare before the reader without any women like inhibitions and reluctance. Chopin is also interested in an experiment to expose latent sexuality of a woman to show that physical pleasure is not an exclusive prerogative of a man, even women can claim it as per their choice and surprisingly they don't need approval of men in such undertaking.

Bold experiment of Chopin especially in those times when American society was pressing upon women to observe family system and values in future generations hurled immense caustic remarks on her but an experiment is an innovation even in its failure. Chopin is not interested to show what Edna does or can do, her preference is to show why she does what she should not have done ethically and also why she prefers to give up than to mend what she willfully accomplished. Chopin shows all the strength and weakness of Edna just to instruct but never to doctor future generations as where the water is shallow and where is too deep neither for swimming nor for standing, the flow is so torrential that it might sweep them off their feet.

### **Conclusion**

Chopin disapproves of the demeanors of Edna but she composes a complete novella to show the mental struggle of Edna for respect and individuality. Respect is earned and is purely a human virtue manifesting human's mental strength. Edna strives ferociously for her aware self, her soul which accords her a definite identity other than borrowed from male relations i.e. father and husband.

Chopin, swayed by feministic impulse, garners sympathy of sensible and sensitive readers for Edna who view and understand Edna beyond her flirtation and deviation. Chopin pinpoints the oppression, agony, pain and pains of Edna who evolves and devolves in her struggle for her personal space. Chopin as a silent and sympathetic observer, allows Edna in her self- dialogue, to speak her mind without inhibitions, reluctance and guilt. Edna, like a rational human, takes risk for exploration of the purpose of her life, she fails in her risk and surrenders to the sea as a punishment incurred on her. Her peaceful demise, in contrast with her turbulence torpor and timidity to embrace the humility of her gesture as boldly as her defiance to the traditional ethics serves as an inspiration to the women who aspire to carve out a niche of their own making; her failure will also educate them to understand what to ignore and what to embrace in a serious undertaking of identity formation.

Chopin is not a prophet or agony aunt of humanity ,she is also not hellbent to prove Edna right and put her gestures in a justified position ,she genuinely shows the ugly side of undue duress on women with the idea that like other beasts of burden, they can carry the onerous onus on them uncomplaining and ungrudgingly. Chopin unfurls the possibility of defiance by women without any retreat to liberate the idea of autonomy by education, experience, exposure and enlightenment occasionally followed by employment. Edna's death



is a death of male chauvinism and birth of future possibilities as good as those which sprout in a seed after destroying the seedcoat.

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