

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

IV

This dissertation is an attempt to present comprehensively a critical study of the thematic concerns of Kate Chopin as revealed in her stories and novels. As a writer she cannot boast of a vast body of literary achievements, but whatever she wrote within a few decades is worth reading. If her published works are any indications of her hidden talent, then they are like the fragrance of some unknown and beautiful flower, wafted away on the morning breeze. ~~Chopins~~ career was relegated to a back seat and she went into obscurity for some years, due to public censure and social taboos. Yet, as a 'pioneer' woman writer, she deserves a place high up amongst the women writers of the nineteenth-century.

The social and familial environment is a significant influence on the development of her artistic personality. Her spiritual heritage is derived from both her parents --

father an Irish newcomer and mother of creole stock. Kate was close to both parents and their influence in moulding her character was immense. She inherited poise and gentility from her mother and calmness and self-reliance from her father. However, having lost her father and brother at a young age, she grew up in a subdued but warm atmosphere, peopled by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. The old lady insisted that Kate speak French and she taught her to face life and its problems without trace of consciousness, hesitation, or embarrassment. These qualities are reflected in ~~Chopin's~~ stories as well as her novels. Kate Chopin's marital life with Oscar Chopin too, was a happy one. Their conjugal understanding is represented by the 'Ratignolles' in the novel "The Awakening". Her strong personality was given free rein by Oscar, who was a tolerant and understanding husband. At no point did Kate feel the "male possessiveness" in her life. And this is one of the themes dealt with in the man-woman relationship evident in all her works.

Socially Kate Chopin developed at a time when American society was quite orthodox in its views regarding women and their roles were well defined specially in relation to men. Women were encouraged to self sacrifice rather than self-realization. They were expected to present the 'mother' image and be satisfied within the confines of hearth and home. But this is just what Chopin's women protagonists--Athenaise in "Athenaise" and Adrienne in 'Lilacs' --are not satisfied with. They seek something beyond the conventional security and fulfillment of marriage. Then self-assertion ~~becomes~~ so strong that these women seek a new outlet for their urges, be it in the form of music

or painting or merely an extra-marital affair, as happens in the case of Mrs. Baroda in "A Respectable Woman" or Edna in "The Awakening".

A sensitive writer, Chopin strikes universal chords in her stories. Her feeling for character is supported by an almost instinctive grasp of form and pace. Qualities like intensity, courage, vigor and independence place her on par with Cable, Jewett and Mrs. Freeman. Her ability to present female psyche in connection with male-female relationships is remarkable as is evident from the stories, dealt in Chapter II. "Love on the Bon-Dieu", "A NO Account Creole", are stories that deal with the conventional love theme, where the boy meets girl, the two fall in love and live happily ever-after. But Chopin's later stories, specially those in "A Night in Acadie" reflect a maturity and a need in her women character, who refuse to live a life of partial fulfillment. "Going Away of Liza" for the first time speaks of a wife who leaves her husband. Azelie runs away, from a loving but possessive husband because, the 'idea of being married' does not suit her. On the other hand in "A Point at Issue" the two protagonists are happy enough to marry as they have given enough thought to the subject. Marriage to them is an alliance, where the "individuality" of each partner will be respected sacredly. Thus, we see that Chopin's women characters move in the direction of self assertion, looking for autonomy and identity.

Mildred Orme in "A Shameful Affair" and Mamezelle in "A Sentimental Soul" are two remarkable women who break all social norms awakening to both a spiritual and a

sensuous emancipation. Mildred is sexually attracted to a farm labourer and even finds satisfaction when he kisses her. She is not ashamed of this untoward action, as it fulfills her instinctive sexual urge. In a society where women were expected to suppress their sexual feelings and hide them as 'love' the story of Mildred Orme was bound to give rise to speculation. This was not surprising because Kate Chopin always wanted a free literary expression. Having formulated her opinions on idealism, moralism and certain Southern problems, she turned to what she really wanted to write about: the impulses which are found in men and women all over the globe, especially love and sexuality. She describes the woman, in her stories, giving a true picture of the fundamentals of her existence. Chopin's own experience as a woman, a wife and a mother went a long way in expressing the female mind.

One can find in all these works, Kate Chopin's interrelatedness with her own life and time in terms of society, family, man and woman, their desires and failings. Her later stories reveal her broad perspective of the human mind, especially a woman's. Love, children, home, familial security and an attentive husband are factors desirable to any woman. But, there is a stage when she seeks something beyond all these. At such a time she seeks to transcend these everyday relations to something beyond--from autonomy to identity or selfhood --as Marianne in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe". She refuses to become a traditional housewife and joins the Cherokee's for a hunter's life instead. Dorothea of "The Unexpected" abandons her rich-fiance' when he becomes ill, refusing to serve as his nurse, for a life time.

inspite of the attraction of his wealth. In "The Story of An Hour" Chopin gives her most startling picture of female-assertion when Mrs.Mallard is given the news that her husband is no more, she weeps at first, and then feels a sense of exhilaration and freedom. She realizes ~~tha~~ she is "free, free, free!"

In 'Lilacs', it is clear that Mme. Farival has lovers. As a French artiste living in Paris, she is in a way outside the realm of American literacy censors; but even so, she is "punished" in that, the convent, where she had gone to school, no longer permits her to come for her yearly retreat. Nathalie of "The Kiss", who is fully American also loses in that the lover she had planned to keep after marrying a rich non-entity refuses to acquiesce, is no more than could be expected in the America of 1894. What is new, however, is the author's amoral, detached attitude towards infidelity, and the wonderful light touch with which she ends such a story: "well, she had Brantain and his millions left. A person can't have everything in this world, and it was a little unreasonable of her to expect it."¹ "The Storm" is yet another story which shows her completely detached attitude towards generally accepted moral ideas.

¹ Chopin, Kate



Chopin's first novel, At fault is also concerned with love and morality and the obstacles which can be thought to stand in the way of happiness. Hosmer comes from the 'material' North, while Therese belongs to the ~~retiseent~~ aristocratic South. For her "love is not everything in life, there is something higher".² Her sense of morality is intertwined with her Catholic background. The very idea of divorce is repugnant to her, and hence she forces Hosmer to remarry his former wife Fanny. This course of action ends with Hosmer musing on the kind of morality which leads him once again into an unhappy situation. And it is not long before Therese too begins to wonder whether she has not been at fault in insisting that Hosmer remarry. Seeing the suffering she has caused, she is no longer sure of her moral ground. She champions the bond of love and commitment by which humans support one another in the struggle to do what is right. But this bond does not lead to fulfillment nor does it give immanent value to a relationship.

But it is with her ~~materpiece~~ "The Awakening", through Edna Pontellier, that Chopin is able to show powerfully a woman's arousal /awakening of the senses and emotions in relative maturity, her growing sense of her own power and freedom towards the assertion of an individual selfhood. Chopin in this novel is trying to focus on the fundamental problem of what it means to be a woman, particularly in a patriarchy.

² Chopin, Kate

To a certain extent, The Awakening shows Edna at the mercy of a patriarchal husband, a creole lifestyle and the circumscribed expectations of a particular class of Louisiana women. At twenty eight Edna has a loving husband, two beautiful children and the security of a home and happy marriage. But, she falls in love with 'another man', Robert Lebrun, while vacationing on Grand Isle. On her return to New Orleans, Edna becomes conscious of a new sense of dissatisfaction. Her husband, Leonce's 'affections' begin to irk her. Wilfully she contradicts his every wish and even command. She even discontinues sexual relations with her husband. She gives up her "reception days, severs contacts with her husband's business associates, renews her interest in painting and pursues new friendships".³ These acts of rebellion are Edna's mode of seeking 'emancipation' from those bonds which seek to tie her to her husband, children, home and a set society, where she has no identity of her own, except as "Mrs. Pontellier".

Further, Edna, unlike Adele Ratignolle is unable to achieve a satisfactory existence in a "Mother-woman" image. It is not that she does not love her children. She is ready to give her life for them, but she is not ready to give "herself". While Adele's entire

³ Chopin, Kate.

The Awakening, Bantam Classic Edition, October, 1981.

Washington D. C. p.74-75

sense of who she is depends upon her maternal capacity. Edna is still seeking the answer to her question, "Who am I?"

Quietly, Edna's awakening begins with a growing awareness of the inadequacy of her existence. She awakens first to a sense of vague dissatisfaction, next to the aesthetic joy of music and then to the physical pleasure of swimming. After this she feels a strong sexual attraction toward Robert and her full sexual awakening occurs only with Alcee Arobin. But Edna's sexual awakening follows her awakening to her own individuality, rather than the other way around. Chopin here illustrates that a woman cannot fully respond sexually until she has first achieved some sense of autonomy.

Unable to satisfy this newly felt sexual need through her husband, whose possessiveness is responsible for its earlier repression, Edna is unable to satisfy it through Robert too, as he is an honourable man, who flees to Mexico. Thus, Edna "gives herself where she chooses"--to Alcee Arobin. But Edna's demand to be recognized as an autonomous individual is tragically hopeless, since even Arobin believes he owns her. Finally, Edna comes to the conclusion that she is unable to have a full human existence. Rather than live a life, oscillating between two worlds, caught between "contradictory definitions of femininity and creativity and seeking either to synthesize them" Edna chooses to have none at all.

Thus, if we place in a continuous perspective the entire fiction of Kate Chopin, we find in her sensibility a progression towards maturity of vision and perfection of form. At the centre of her fictional world is the theme of man-woman relationship; which Kate Chopin has explored from a variety of angles and also in a variety of contexts. Initially, a large number of her stories deal with man-woman relationship in its conventional context, emphasizing romantic fulfilment of love, value of motherhood etc. Then we have a sizable number of stories which portray a woman's search for freedom within the institutional contexts of man-woman relationship. And finally in her later stories and her novels, Kate Chopin boldly explores the possibility of defining the authenticity of feminine self-hood in independent terms, beyond the confines of man-woman relationship itself. This certainly makes Kate Chopin a great precursor of the feminist tradition in twentieth century American literature.