

Trapped between Desire and Duty: Neurosis as a Lens for Edna's Struggles in *The Awakening*

Amrit Prasad Joshi¹

ABSTRACT

This article examines Kate Chopin's The Awakening (2011) through the lens of neurosis, concentrating on Edna Pontellier's actions and reactions as she navigates the incompatible demands of societal expectations and her personal desires. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, this article explores Edna's journey as a reflection of the continued neurosis characterized by repression, anxiety, and emotional turmoil. Edna is portrayed as a woman torn between her roles as a wife or mother or both and her yearning for personal freedom and self-expression. This inner conflict propels her beyond the circumference of the circle of the societal expectations, leading her to a suffocating atmosphere. The analysis reveals the devastating consequences of attempting to assert individuality, especially by women, ignoring the long cemented patriarchal framework. It stresses the tension between her longing for autonomy and the limiting social norms of the 19th century America, leading to her ultimate psychological breakdown. By framing Edna's conflicting acts as a manifestation of neurosis, this article exposes how Kate Chopin portrays the cost of non-conformity and the psychological toll of seeking individuality in a patriarchal society. The article also explores how personal experiences and the cultural conditions collectively generate neurosis. This perspective underscores the intricate interplay between personal psychology and societal restrictions, offering new insights into Edna's tragic life trajectory and Chopin's critique of gender norms.

Keywords: neurosis, societal expectations, gender norms, repression, anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (2011) has continued to remain a landmark text in American literature, drawing both appreciation and criticism right from its first publication in 1899. At its centre lies Edna Pontellier, a young lady whose emotional turmoil and resistance to the societal conformity reflect the tensions faced by women in the late 19th century in America, particularly in upper middle-class families. The novel is celebrated for its bold and explicit exploration of gender roles, identity, and agency or autonomy. However, it has also been criticized as detrimental to the society, with critics condemning both Edna's inability to keep her family united, and keep her alive. Edna's decision to prioritize her individuality over her roles as a wife or mother has sparked extensive debate. To add and aid to the extensive analysis of the novel from the perspectives of feminism and cultural lenses, its psychological dimensions, particularly Edna's neurosis, are worthy of further exploration. This article attempts to discuss how Chopin's portrayal of Edna's 'awakening' and her eventual swim in the sea can be considered as a manifestation of neurosis.

The concept of neurosis, earlier developed by Sigmund Freud and later expanded by Karen Horney, offers a captivating framework for discussing Edna's psychological journey. Neurosis is

¹ A teaching assistant in the English at Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.
Email: joshi_amrit@hotmail.com

noticed with reference to inner conflicts, emotional instability, and the struggle between societal conformity and repressed desires., Karen Horney (1937) describes a neurotic personality as someone “who lives among us, with the conflicts which actually move him, with his anxieties, his suffering and the many difficulties he has in his relations with others as well as with himself” (introduction, p. vii). Edna’s life is filled with the tensions: she longs for freedom and self-expression, but is required to remain tied to her roles of wife and mother. Her efforts to resolve these conflicting urges manifest the symptoms that we can align with Horney’s notion of neurosis, including anxiety, mood swing, and a gradual retreat into isolation. In addition to its psychotic and neurotic depths, the novel reveals the rigid patriarchal structures of its period. The two forces acting simultaneously – Edna’s internal conflict and the societal expectations – make a good site of exploration for a psychoanalytic reading of the novel. This article also hints at Chopin’s broader commentary on the cost of defying societal norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH RATIONALE

Critics and readers have interpreted *The Awakening* exploring it from various perspectives, including feminism, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis. This brief review is the synthesis of the contributions of some critics to frame the novel’s psychological and societal dimensions, focusing on Edna Pontellier’s struggle with neurosis. Edna’s abrupt choices, like abandoning her family and home, and breaking ties with conventional and well secured family-life, hint at Edna’s neurosis. Her mind set for such an abandonment seems impulsive, and stems from emotional needs rather than rational working out. This is the product of Edna’s increasingly erratic and emotional turbulence as she struggles with the tension between her societal roles and her desire for autonomy.

Feminist critics have taken the novel as a critique of patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles. Martha J. Cutter (1994) regards Edna as a personality of feminist resistance, trying to tackle the constraints of domesticity and motherhood. She sees Edna as a heroine with “strong desires and voices” (Cutter, 1994, p.18). Likewise, Patricia S. Yaeger (1987) views Edna as “her own subject” in a novel “about sexual liberation” (p.197). Thus, the critics view Edna’s efforts to live with no or little interference from others as a desire for autonomy, but her failure in achieving so underscores the societal limitations. Edna’s efforts to live as an individual stem from her awareness of what she lacks, not what she has.

Likewise, critics have also tried to explore the novel highlighting the socio-cultural aspects, indicating it as a critique of gender roles and societal expectations. Hugh J. Dawson (1994) views Edna’s passing “in less than a year’s time, from her accumulated frustrations she feels in her marriage to apparent suicide” (p.1) and, further, describes her as, “an intelligent woman stifled by the conventions of the Creole society” (p. 1). Edna’s psychological breakdown reveals her inability to adapt to the rigid social codes of the Creole culture. Echoing the idea, Maria Anastasopoulou (1991) writes that rites of passage are ceremonies observed across societies to facilitate and regulate individuals’ seamless transitions between life stages, ensuring smooth social integration and preserving societal structures. Anastasopoulou explores the situation of Edna’s inability to make the passage, and describes Edna as an American Protestant, who “is awakening into defying the rules and laws of the Creole community of New Orleans, into which she has been introduced by marriage” (p. 20). Thus, the implied death of Edna is probably the outcome of her failure to fit in the Creole society.

The Awakening is also viewed as an example of naturalism through its persistent portrayal of human behaviour, social constraints, and environmental influences. Delving into Edna’s emotional upheaval, the novel hints at how heredity and environment shape a person’s decisions. Donald Pizer (2001) notes the novel’s division into two significant parts:

...an initial section in Grand Isle, Edna awakens from her earlier death-in-life existence as a middle-class Creole wife and mother, and a following section in New Orleans, where she

attempts to translate her rebirth into the actualities of her life. In Grand Isle, both nature and society appear to endorse the process of self-transformation she will fully undertake in New Orleans. (p.6)

However, the depiction of Edna's eventual swim reflects the deterministic ethos of naturalism, stressing how individuals are toothless against the forces of nature, society, and their wishes. Maria Fletcher (1966) seems to have lost hope in the fate of women like Edna as she writes, "Impetuous heroines may be somewhat rebellious and unconventional than in the past, however, such unconventionality usually brings trouble rather than happiness" (pp.118-119). Echoing this idea, the unembellished, honest narrative of Edna's plight reveals the broader human condition. In a similar fashion, Nicole Camastra (2008) emphasizes the novel's grounding in realism through its exploration of Edna's experiences and the socio-cultural forces shaping her world. The novel is observed as "a work of realism depicting the moral conflict that faces Edna Pontellier: selfhood in opposition to family" (Nicole Camastra, 2008, p.154). Through the meticulous depiction of the tension between societal expectations and personal desires, the narrative represents the realist tradition while also enriching it with emotional and sensory experiences.

Building on this literature review, which highlights the feminist, socio-cultural, naturalistic, and realist interpretations of the novel, it is obvious that Edna's struggles are deeply rooted in an intricate interplay between her desires and societal grip. Her resistance to patriarchal structures and societal norms can be better analyzed through psychoanalytic lens as it has been clearly observed that her behaviour is shaped by a deeper psychological conflict and environmental determinism. These perspectives collectively point to neurosis as a compelling lens for examining Edna's journey, including her eventual demise. With focus on neurosis, this article explores Edna's personal awakening and her failure to reconcile individuality with societal conformity, revealing that Edna's neurosis is not just a personal affliction but a reflection of the tension between individuality and societal expectations. In the light of the review, this article seeks to address the following questions: How does Edna's neurosis manifest in her actions and decisions? To what extent does this neurosis reflect the tension between desire and duty? This neurosis-based interpretation of Chopin's *The Awakening* resonates with the modern-day need for discussions not only about the characters in the novel but also about real-world issues such as mental health, gender roles, and the quest for individuality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This article examines the complex character of Edna Pontellier from the perspective of neurosis, drawing on the concepts of Karen Horney, Sigmund Freud, and Cathy Caruth to explore the conflict between desire and duty. The article exploits Karen Horney's (1937) argument that neurosis is not only a symptom of individual pathology but also an outcome of societal pressures and interpersonal relationships. Edna's desire for autonomy and her retreat from family and society can be taken as the manifestations of her neurosis. Sigmund Freud (2010) views the roles of unconscious desires as a means of expressing repressed thoughts and feelings. Edna's relationships with men, such as Robert and Alcee, manifest unacknowledged desires for sexual autonomy, which she cannot integrate into her normal life. Cathy Caruth (1996) offers a compelling lens to explore an individual's state of mind in relation to trauma. An individual's inability to fully understand the psychological 'hurt' at the moment of its occurrence leads to trauma. Edna's failure to reconcile her duty and desire into a cohesive identity, from Grand Isle to New Orleans, significantly contributes to her erratic actions and emotional turmoil. By employing these psychoanalytic lenses, this article explores the complexities arising from Edna's desires, societal roles, and neurotic tendencies, which shape her eventual fate.

ANALYSIS: EDNA'S NEUROSIS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Edna Pontellier is first introduced to readers in the company of Robert Lebrun, who shares no familial or marital ties with her. Chopin (2011) describes the scene of the two as ‘the two seated themselves with some appearance of fatigue’ (p.3). From the beginning, Mr. Pontellier hints at subtle deviation he has noticed in his wife, Edna, saying, “What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat,” together with a disapproving comment that she is “burnt beyond recognition” (Chopin, 2011, p.3). Right from the beginning, Edna’s actions seem to have deviated, possibly with her little or no awareness of it. Karen Horney (1937) argues that “a neurosis involves deviation from the normal’ (p.21). Although Robert seems to be a mere companion, possibly hired to entertain her, as implied by Mr. Pontellier’s remark: “send him about his business when he bores you” (Chopin, 2011, p.4), their interaction reveals a mutual interest: “Each was interested in what the other said” (, 2011, p.5). Despite Edna’s attempts to fulfill her roles as a wife and mother, her husband criticizes her perceived shortcomings, asking, “If it was not a mother’s place to look after the children, whose on earth was it” (, 2011, p. 10)? Though Edna goes to check on her son, but refuses to respond to her husband’s reproach. Later, she sits alone; awake, past midnight, consumed by a vague sense of unease. Horney identifies two characteristics of a neurotic personality; “certain rigidity in reaction and a discrepancy between potentialities and accomplishments” (p.22). Edna’s increasing restlessness and emotional conflict align with these traits, as she feels an indescribable oppression working on her consciousness.

Karen Horney (1937) theorizes that neurosis arises from a conflict between an individual’s emotional wants and societal norms, leading to unreasonable behaviour patterns. Edna’s behaviour illustrates the conflict between her passionate desires and rigid societal norms of her time. To refer to the continuously increasing awareness of her own status, Chopin (2011) notes, “Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (p. 25). Edna’s such actions and behaviours obviously tally with Karen Horney’s neurotic personality as someone living “with his anxieties, his suffering and the many difficulties he has in his relations with others as well as with himself” (introduction, p.vii). Torn between her craving for personal freedom and the cultural expectations enforced on her as a loving wife and caring mother, Edna exhibits behaviour that may appear unreasonable, but shoots from a deeper psychological struggle. Her psychological wants – freedom, individuality, and amorous love – often clash with the conventional roles she is anticipated to play. For instance, her growing attachment to Robert Lebrun reflect her yearning for emotional and physical connection outside her matrimonial relationship, a desire reasoned unacceptable by the then communal standards.

Edna’s rejection to adhere to domestic tasks further highlights her agitation against social conventions. Despite attempting to care for her children, she eventually distances herself, demonstrating a mounting detachment from maternal obligations. This tension climaxes in moments of impulsivity, such as her choice to move out of her husband’s house or her solitary walks along the beach late at night. Thus, Edna’s actions reflect the neurosis caused by the gap between her emotional needs and societal constraints. Her struggle underscores the emotional toll of quashing individuality in a rigidly patriarchal society, finally leading to her tragic departure.

Sigmund Freud (1961) talks about ‘compulsion neurosis, addressing the notion of compulsion and repetition as behaviours that go beyond the pursuit of pleasure or avoidance of pain. He argues that neurosis “makes the sufferer therefrom aware that he is ‘compelled by something’ to make this or that gesture or this or that turn or else he feels uncomfortable” (p. xiv). Edna’s behaviour can be taken as acts that are compelled by deeper, unconscious drives rather than merely seeking pleasure. Foreshadowing her neurotic suffering, Chopin (2011) writes, “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague

anguish” (p. 11). Though unaware of it, Edna has already been in the state of psychological turmoil, which Chopin (2011) claims, “It was strange and unfamiliar, it was a mood.” Relationship with Robert and Alcee can be considered as compulsive attempts to assert her autonomy from her defined role as a wife and mother. Edna’s growing closeness with Robert is hinted at when Chopin writes, “Robert and Mrs. Pontellier sitting idle, exchanging occasional words, glances or smiles which indicated a certain advanced stage of intimacy and camaraderie” (p. 19). Edna is hopeful that this intimacy might be of great meaning to her life, probably unaware of its consequences.

On the same track, in *The Interpretations of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud (2010) theorizes that frustration or repression of sexual desires may manifest as neurotic anxiety when the energy associated with such desires is not adequately expressed or resolved. In this spirit, he says, “I regard coitus interruptus as one of the aetiological factors in the development of neurotic anxiety” (p. 180). In the novel, Edna’s marriage to Leonce is emotionally and physically unfulfilling. Freud’s claim that sexual repression contributes to neurosis resonates with Edna’s restlessness and dissatisfaction. Edna’s flirtation with Alcee Arobin and her feelings for Robert signify her attempts to express her libido. She allows Alcee to kiss her hands, and later reflects on it in terms of infidelity not to her husband Leonce, but to Robert;

The thought was passing vaguely through her mind, ‘What would he think?’

She did not mean her husband; she was thinking of Robert Lebrun. Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse. She lit a candle and went up to her room. Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her. (Chopin, 2011, pp. 147-148)

Edna’s such behavior reflects symptoms of neurosis. Such symptoms might have stemmed from unresolved desires and her acts against societal impositions. Due to the lack of adequate evidences that her neurosis stems from literal coitus interruptus, it can be strongly argued that her repression and lack of fulfillment in both her marriage and society parallel the unresolved tension, which is usually seen pivotal to neurotic disorder.

Furthermore, Edna’s ‘awakening’ characterizes a traumatic realization that she cannot assimilate into her life. Unfolding trauma as distinct from neurosis, Cathy Caruth (1996) notes:

Unlike the symptoms of normal neurosis, whose painful manifestations can be understood ultimately in terms of the attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict, the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way. In trauma, that is, the outside has gone inside without any mediation. (p. 59)

Unlike neurosis, where symptoms arise from efforts to suppress or twist conflicts, trauma is the direct and natural intrusion of a devastating event into the psyche. The traumatic event bypasses the mind’s usual processes for conveying meaning or integrating experiences into a consistent narrative. The development of Edna’s relationship with Alcee Arobin leaves the people of the conventional 19th century Americans shocked when Chopin (2011) writes that Edna and Alcee “became intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps. He sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first and brought the crimson into her face, in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the *animalism that stirred impatiently within her*{emphasis mine}” (p. 150). Edna seems ready to sever ties with the other members of her family as well. Her refusal to attend to her sister’s wedding is not easily justified. Edna and her father have a violent dispute as she refuses to attend to her sister’s wedding. Her father finds her behavior so odd that he thinks Mr. Pontellier has almost failed in his role to control his wife.

Noting that ‘Leonce is too lenient,’ and Edna’s father advises him to use authority or coercion as needed. Edna’s father tells Leonce, “Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife” (Chopin, 2011, p. 136). Thus Edna’s realization of her personal desires and individuality seems to clash with the rigid oppressive roles imposed by her society. Her desire for agency is an external realization that intrudes unmediated into her mind.

Edna’s ultimate decision to go for a swim, probably fully aware of the hardships as indicated by others, takes on profound psychological significance when viewed through the lens of neurosis. When Edna expresses her wish “to go down to the beach and take a good wash and even a little swim,” she is warned “The water is too cold,” and is advised not to “think of it” (Chopin, 2011, p. 218). She has been neurotic, possibly psychotic as well, when she says to herself, “Today, it is Arobin, tomorrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me” (Chopin, 2011, p. 219). While swimming in the sea, she thinks of her association with her husband and children, but holds an opinion “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul” (Chopin, 2011, p. 221). The idea that neurosis arises from the suppressed desires aligns with Edna’s awakening to her individuality and autonomy. She can neither fully suppress these desires nor fulfill within the rigid limits of her roles in her family and society. Such acts and thoughts can be seen as her response to the trauma of an unmediated, unresolvable realization – her awakening has no place in the world she lives. She turns to have a release from the recurring pain of her neurosis, embracing the eventual escape from a life in which her desires and identity are continually denied meaning.

CONCLUSION

Edna is portrayed as a woman capable of both making choices about her life and prepared to face the consequences. Her journey reflects a profound psychological struggle torn between her desires and duties. As Edna becomes trapped in an unresolved internal conflict, she develops neurotic tendencies. The theories of repression and unfulfilled libidinal energy highlight the roots of her neurosis. Likewise, the concept of trauma as an unmediated experience offers an understanding of her failure to reconcile her inner awakening with the external demands of her world. Her tragic end becomes an inevitable escape from the dual forces of desire and duty. By exploring how societal constraints and internal conflicts shape a person’s psyche, this study illuminates the psychological toll on women who struggle for individuality and autonomy. Additionally, this paper serves as an initial point for understanding literature as a space for examining an individual’s psyche and social structures, forging a meaningful connection between the literary world and the natural world.

REFERENCES

- Anastasopoulou, M. (1991). Rites of passage in Kate Chopin’s “the awakening”. *The Southern Literary Journal*, 23(2).19-30. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20078014>
- Camastra, N. (2008). Venerable sonority in Kate Chopin’s “the awakening”. *American Literary Realism*, 40(2), 154-166. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27747284>
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chopin, K. (2011). *The awakening*. Vintage.
- Cutter, M. J. (1994). Losing the battle but winning the war: Resistance to patriarchal discourse in Kate Chopin’s short fiction. *Legacy*, 11(1), 17-36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25679112>

- Dawasn, H. J. (1994). Kate Chopin's *the awakening*: A dissenting opinion. *American Literary Realism*, 26(2), 1-18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27746570>
- Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle*. Norton and Company.
- Freud, S. (2010). *The interpretation of dreams*. Basic Books.
- Fletcher, M. (1966). The southern woman in the fiction of Kate Chopin. *The Journal Of The Louisiana Historical Association*, 7(2), 117-132. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4230896>
- Horney, K. (1937). *The neurotic personality of our time*. Routledge
- Pizer, D. (2201). A note on Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening' as naturalistic fiction. *The Southern Literary Journal*, 33(2), 5-13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20078297>
- Yaeger, P. S. (1987). A language which nobody understood: Emancipatory strategies in the Awakening. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 20(3), 197-219. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1345675>.