



A Study of the Women Protagonists in Kate Chopin's Select Short Stories from Feminist Point of View

Dr. S. Urmila

**Assistant Professor of English,
Queen Mary's College, Chennai.**

Introduction

Women's Studies is an umbrella term that is used to include the study of women of all classes, cultures and creed. Earlier Feminists criticism focussed on the problems of women belonging to the upper class, white, educated and heterosexual women. There was a shift of focus later to include women of colour, middle class, uneducated, working class, lesbian and queer women as well. From feminism, it moved to 'womanism' as put forth by Alice Walker. It focussed on the connections between gender and sexuality, the notions of beauty and job roles and the impact of all these on the economic independence of women. Recently Gender Studies aim to advocate social change.

Kate Chopin rose to fame because of her contribution to short story writing, in addition to the novel. She belonged to late 19th century America, though her novel was recognised in the late 20th century. Her stories were about women from the Southern region and Chopin was well known for her contribution to the 'local colour' genre. In her short stories she presents the different sentiments as experienced by women, though the common thread running through almost all her stories is the urge for freedom among the women of the South. Though her short stories were well received during her lifetime, the novel 'The Awakening' was recognised nearly fifty years after her death. This was because it dealt with the sexual and artistic awakening of a woman and became a controversial novel for the representation of sexual frankness and inter racial marriage.

Kate Chopin portrayed New Orleans culture in her writings which she began after her husband's death. Her role model in life was her great grand mother who was an epitome of great strength and potential as an independent woman. She ran her own business and raised her children alone after being separated from her husband. Kate Chopin also became more independent after her husband's death. She was a different person in that she wore fashionable clothes, did horse riding astride and smoked cigarettes, very much in contrast to her surroundings. She was considered a rebel as her behaviour was different from what was expected of a woman in the 19th century America. The autobiographical element is evident in the depiction of the female protagonists in her short stories.

The pursuit of independence and liberty is reflected in many of her stories that acquired regional colour. At St. Louis she gathered women to have intellectual discussions and she was a trendsetter in starting a 'literary salon' for this purpose. Like Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin's writings paved the way for feminist consciousness in course of time. Women were excluded from the literary scene earlier. With the rise of Feminist movement in 1960s, Kate Chopin's writings contributed greatly to the affirmation of this consciousness in America. In this sense Kate Chopin is a pioneer among women writers.

Analysis of stories

Chopin explores the 'themes of perception, appearance, identity, desire and freedom' in her stories. It is exhibited in the leading women characters of her short stories. Five of Kate Chopin's popular short stories are chosen for analysis.

As the very title suggests 'A Respectable Woman' throws light on the conflicting mind of Mrs Baroda, who initially has a different image of her husband's friend Gouvernail. When they converse, she has an urge to touch the face of Gouvernail but resists. Her perception of Gouvernail was that she would not like him. During their meeting she develops a liking towards him. However she maintains a restraint thinking that she is a respectable woman. She feels she is bound by societal norms.

The observation made by Mrs. Baroda to her husband Gaston later, 'I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him (Gouvernail).' opens up several interpretations for readers to guess what goes on in the mind of Mrs. Baroda. It may be that she has overcome her feeling of attraction towards Gouvernail. She even wishes that he never visits them again lest her desire for him would be irresistible. Or it may be that she wants to be true to herself that she has overcome her consciousness that she is a respectable woman and that she can defy social norms.

There is some ambiguity as far as the ending of the story is concerned. The fact that she says she will be nice to him suggests a certain admiration she has for Gouvernail. It is possible that she acknowledges her secret love affair as she feels he has given her a new identity and that has given her the courage to rise above the social code. That she had a conflict earlier whether to follow her conscience or social norms cannot be denied. All the same her self introspection brings in a new perception that she can be true to herself. Her perception of what a respectable woman is undergoes a change. That Mrs. Baroda doesn't give in to her desires when Gouvernail is around affirms that she continues to abide by societal norms. She knows that if she places her personal feelings above the social code of behaviour she will not be considered a respectable woman.

The short story 'The Storm' is about the renewed infatuation between Calixta and Alcée who had been in love but later on parted ways to marry different persons. Clarisse was in love with Alcée and suspecting his intentions, had proposed marriage to which Alcée agreed while Calixta had yielded to Bobinôt's proposal.

In a metaphorical sense, the external storm on an evening provided a situation for both Calixta and Alcée to express their love for each other. In order to escape from a storm Alcée seeks shelter at the home of his former lover, Calixta. Her husband Bobinôt and son Bibi had gone to the market and there was a delay in their return due to a storm. Calixta tries to collect the clothes hanging outside when her former lover Alcée is at the gate to find shelter. After a long gap of six years, their proximity at home reignites their passion. This physical contact arouses "all the old-time infatuation and desire for her flesh." Alcée asks, "Do you remember—in Assumption, Calixta?" They make love as they cannot resist their passion. They recall the times when they had gone to distant places and how they enjoyed each other's company.

Both of them know fully well that they cannot continue their relationship, though they wish so. But they feel that their physical separation is just temporary. Alcée wants his wife to be away for sometime and writes a letter expressing his love for her. Contrary to his perception, Clarisse wishes to extend her vacation so that she can enjoy the freedom a little longer. Calixta doesn't harbour any sense of guilt when her husband returns home. Alcée leaves before they return.

In 'Pair of Silk Stockings' she portrays the conflict that Mrs. Sommers experiences between family life and personal satisfaction. Belonging to a poor family she goes to buy some clothing for her children. She is tired and worn out as she goes about her errands. She is usually good at finding bargains and saving money, always looking for a good sale. That day she finds a pair of silk stockings which she desires to buy for herself. As she tries them, she realises that they look nice on her. She cannot refrain from buying them. Mrs. Sommers finds a pair of gloves next. She wishes to buy them too. After getting gloves, she wants to have lunch at a nearby restaurant. Her desire for petty pleasures is unabated. She pampers herself so much that she even plans to go to the theatre. Finally she plans to travel in a cable car wishing her journey to continue for ever.

Here again Mrs. Sommers experiences the conflict between her personal identity and family responsibilities. She is unable to resolve this conflict and it is symbolically stated when she wants to continue her travel, meaning to say that she wants her personal freedom to be there forever. However the story ends with ambiguity that exposes the fact that women continue to live with such a struggle. Though she wants to enjoy freedom trying to satisfy herself with little pleasures, she fears going home as her guilt reminds her of her roles as wife and mother.

'The Story of an Hour' is about Mrs. Louise Mallard, a young woman, who hears of her husband Brentley's death in a train accident. Richards, Mr. Brentley's friend gets the information and Mrs. Mallard's sister Josephine is worried about how to break the news as she suffers from a heart problem. As soon as she hears

the sad news, Mrs. Mallard shuts herself up in a room and requests Josephine not to disturb her. She knows she will cry seeing her husband's dead body and recalls his tenderness towards her. All the same she stares through the window and draws solace looking at the trees and birds.

It is very strange that she is excited about her anticipated freedom and enjoys the felling of how she is going to lead a 'FREE' life thereafter. When being brought downstairs by Josephine where Richards is waiting, the door bell rings. To their awe, Mr. Brentley appears, not even aware of the train accident. Louise Mallard falls to the ground and the doctor who declares her dead says she died of excitement. Chopin leaves it to the readers to guess why Mrs. Mallard died of heart attack seeing her husband. In addition to being a heart patient, the realisation that her much anticipated freedom is going to be taken away with the arrival of her husband, led to her death. Though it sounds extreme, it throws light on the fact that even in a relationship between husband and wife built on love and kindness, there has been a certain domination of the man over the wife, who seeks freedom. In this case she dies of heart attack not out of her happiness, as readers may assume, but at the feeling that her freedom is going to be curbed forever. It may appear to be far-fetched yet the writer tries to drive home an important point that women of South were so desperate to enjoy that freedom.

Kate Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" examines 'the arbitrary hierarchies of race, gender and class in the antebellum South'. Désirée, the young girl after whom the story is titled, was an abandoned orphan. It was a mystery as to from whence she came. Eighteen years ago, as a toddler she was found sleeping against a stone pillar on the Valmondé estate. Some believed she must have wandered there on her own, but many believed that she had been brought to Louisiana "by a party of Texans". She was adopted by wealthy plantation owners, that is, the Valmondé family. As Madame Valmondé, had no biological children of her own, she loves Désirée very much.

Armand Aubigny, the owner of a neighbouring plantation falls in love with this girl. Though they had known each other from childhood, Armand Aubigny's feeling of love for her appears to be something impulsive. When he saw her standing one day "against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before", he falls in love with her. Their passionate love leads them to a happy married life.

Their marriage which was so sweet earlier, turns bitter and resentful when they have a baby who appears to be of mixed race. Armand's mother finds a difference in the baby's appearance when she visits them after a month. Armand, who did not care to find out anything about her origin, now suspects Désirée of having Black ancestry. Désirée being completely shattered, walks off into the wilderness with the baby, never to be seen again. To his utter dismay, Armand finds that his mother is Black as he comes across one of her letters. It is kept out of the readers' knowledge what exactly was different about the change that had taken place in the baby's appearance. All the same, what happened to Désirée and her baby is left to the conjecture of the readers.

Insights

Kate Chopin is a prolific writer who has contributed not only several significant short stories but has created an awareness regarding the feminist consciousness. An analysis of the select stories throws light on the different aspects of women, family, conflicts, personal space, freedom, social norms, roles and responsibilities, sexual desires, racial identity that form the common thread. Almost all her short stories have a mysterious ending or an ambiguous ending as Kate Chopin leaves it to the readers to guess. This is unique about Kate Chopin who has been a kind of social reformer, trying to effect a change in the society to improve the lot of women. She leaves it to the readers to judge for themselves as to the fate of the women protagonists thereby making them reflect on the condition of women from several angles.

Realism was the hallmark of many writers of her time and Kate Chopin was no exception to this. She portrays the problems faced by women in family and society as she saw in her life. Southern and Creole culture form the backdrop of her stories. Though fictional, there is an element of truth in novels and stories. Women of her time and place were relegated to a secondary position. Their roles were confined more to the household than public life. The duties of a wife and mother are spelt clearly by patriarchal society. Some of her women characters show open defiance towards the social norms while others suffer silently. When the concept of feminism was in a fledgling stage, these women writers who showed an inclination towards such feminist consciousness were called proto-feminists. In this respect, Kate Chopin occupies an important place in American Literature.

SOURCES

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