

Women and Conflict in Selected Short Stories of Kate Chopin

Rinu Das

Kate Chopin was a South American writer who primarily wrote about women from feminist perspectives. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri on February 8, 1850. Well known for her short stories and novels Kate Chopin was mostly regarded as the pioneer of feminist writings. As Elaine Showalter found three phases in women's writing - feminine phase (1840-80), where imitations of norms and standards set by male writers were very much dominant, feminist phase (1880-1920), where women basically wrote with radical thoughts and often maintained separatist positions, and female phase (1920 onwards) where particularly female writings and female experiences were entertained. Chopin's writings fall under the second phase because her writings show the struggle of women for their rights. Kate Chopin's popularity reached a new height after the publication of *The Awakening* (1899). Her short stories were no less significant in their themes. Mostly she showed the psychological side of women folk - their mental state, their search for self-identity, struggle against gender conformity etc. Through this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the conflict situations the women have faced and its impact on their mentality. Four short stories by Kate Chopin are taken for this paper; they are "A Respectable Woman", "A Story of an Hour", "The Kiss", and "A Pair of Silk Stockings".

'Conflict'- the term itself signifies a "strong disagreement" or a struggle over something. It can be of two types, physical and mental. Physical conflict refers to an armed struggle over some common issues. But mental conflict signifies something that occurs in human mind. Sometimes human beings bear some "repressed fears" that end up causing severe problems within themselves. The most important thing is that out of these two - the mental conflict seems to be more harmful and dangerous than the other. Because physical conflict may be sorted out anyhow, but mental struggle often devours people from the core and if not settled in time the result may become devastating.

Objectives :

The basic objectives of this paper are -

To study the selected stories of Kate Chopin.

To show the writing style of Kate Chopin.

To highlight the mental dilemma or conflict of the women characters in those stories.

To explore the scope of psychological reading of these stories.

Methodology :

Basically this paper is descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary data are used to prepare this paper. Primary data comprise the texts of the stories and the secondary data comprise other books on the author and her writings and books on psychological theories etc. Internet is also used for some factual information.

"A Respectable Woman" was published in January, 1894. The story depicts the mental dilemma of a woman named Mrs. Baroda. Before the arrival of her husband's friend, Mr. Gouvernail, she unconsciously imagined an image of that person as "tall, slim, cynical; with eye-glasses and his hands in pockets." Moreover, she already decided in her mind that he was not that kind of a person to be liked by her. But to her sheer astonishment he appeared to be the opposite of what she presumed about him and "she rather liked him when he first presented himself." Though she loved her husband, Gouvernail's lovable personality also somehow impressed her. In that mood she decided to leave with Mr. Gouvernail for the city leaving her husband Gaston. Indeed she was in a confused state of mind, unable to decide her priorities. Sitting under an oak tree she found Mr. Gouvernail coming towards her. In the following confrontation between them that night he opened himself in front of her. His words were hardly going into her mind, as "she was not thinking of his voice, but only drinking in the tones of his voice." Her feeling for him grew stronger at that time, "She wanted to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon his face or lips."

But with the strength of mind she could resist herself from being close to him and that too without showing any rudeness, "The stronger the impulse grew to bring herself near him, the further, in fact, did she draw away from him." She was trapped between her responsibilities and her desires. But at last, like the title, she proved herself a respectable woman by preferring her social accountability. Her decision saved her marital relationship with Gaston at the cost of her desires. Considering the temptation of that night as "folly" she came to know the reality that "there are some battles in life which a human being must fight alone."

Chopin's another story "A Story of an Hour" was written on April 19, 1894 and it first appeared in *Vogue* on December 6, 1894 under the title "Dream of an Hour". This story is about a woman called Mrs. Mallard who wanted to free herself of her unfulfilled marriage.

At the beginning of the story she was told about her husband's death, "in broken sentences, veiled hints that revealed in half concealing." But she reacted in a different manner to the news. First she wept in her sister's arms and then moved into a room all alone where she could feel some kind of freedom. Her journey to the room can be seen as one into her soul. The newly sprung leaves of the trees outside her window seemed to resemble Mrs. Mallard's mental state. Both quivered in the open air and she, like the leaves also sprang from her unspoken repression. In her mind she got a particular strength to fight against the repression. At the same time some suppressed desires seemed to lure her and she felt like embracing them. She uttered "free, free, free!" under her breath. She could feel her hardship and those "bitter moments" of dissatisfaction and also "a long procession of years to come" - the time of her self-fulfillment. The newly achieved freedom from that suppressed conflict might not allow those intimate moments to enter. She was overwhelmed at the fact that she would be living for herself. But her dream of getting unbound freedom was shattered down when she saw her husband entering home completely safe and sound. Actually she had not expected her husband but a life of her own. That sudden appearance of Mr. Mallard hit her in such a way that she became unable to handle the moment with a weak heart and at last she gave in. As freedom was her destiny so she achieved the ultimate freedom in the form of "joy that kills."

"The Kiss" appeared in September 1894. This story speaks about a girl called Miss Nathalie and her feeling for Mr. Brantain. The story opened with both Nathalie and Brantain sitting in a room "full of deep shadows." Nathalie was aware about the feeling of Brantain for her and in return she also wanted to reciprocate. But between these two lovers there came Mr. Harvy who was a friend of Brantain and perhaps a so-called lover of Nathalie.

It is very much clear that Nathalie was not as happy with Mr. Harvy as she was in the company of Brantain. She readily became outspoken and he too felt a ray of hope although he showed initially a rather unhappy expression. No doubt Brantain was a selfless person to suggest her to understand Harvy, but obviously he also had a soft corner for her. Miss Nathalie had been in a state of dilemma as to whom she should choose as her partner. At last, she was firm enough in her decision to choose Brantain who was far better than Harvy - not possessive but selfless.

"A Pair of Silk Stockings" was Kate Chopin's one of the best stories. It was published in April, 1896. It is about the wishes of a married woman named Mrs. Sommers. Kate Chopin here presents a typical housewife who was always worried about her family's necessities rather than her own. The dominant concept of the "angel in the house" is evident here through the character of Mrs. Sommers. Fortunately she got an amount of fifteen dollars and as a result she wanted to make a smart investment out of it. Most of the time she ignored her dire necessities, but on that day she did not want to let that chance go.

Preparing for a shopping, she first entered a silk hosiery shop, where she bought a pair of black silk stockings for a dollar and ninety-eight cents. The lady who "knew the value of bargains", had not gone for a bargaining over that reduced price. Here, the silk stockings referred to an independent and free state of mind that kept her away from all the familial matters - as if a place for her own. Her longings seemed comparatively small, "what a very small parcel it was! It seemed lost in the depths of her shabby old shopping bag." For a long time she had not bought something expensive, so she bought a pair of polished boots and gloves.

The whole day was like dream for her - transient enough to live to the fullest. Towards home the same hectic routine of a housewife was waiting for her. But no one could decipher what she actually wished - the desire to have that time forever.

According to Sigmund Freud, those repressed fears and conflicts which are causing problems should be brought out freely into the conscious mind so that they can be faced openly. In all the stories above, the female characters have "repressed desires" of some kind. Mrs. Baroda's desire was to become close to Mr. Gouvernail. Mrs. Mallard wanted to be free from her husband, Miss Nathalie secretly loved Brantain, and Mrs. Sommers wished a life of her own. The probable reason of these mental conditions may be their unsatisfactory sexual relationships because in all the four stories not a single happy relationship between man and woman could be seen. Those unadmitted sexual desires led to an outburst of mental conflict and sometimes confusions. The women who faced the problem being outspoken overcame their conflict, e.g. Mrs. Baroda and Miss Nathalie; and those who failed to do so, had to pay the cost of their lives, e.g. Mrs. Mallard. So, the above reading of the stories made it clear that they surely have a scope of psychological interpretation.

To conclude it may be said that all the four objectives of this paper have been fulfilled. Kate Chopin was a prolific woman writer although she had never been mentioned as such in the history of American Literature. She admired the writings of Guy de Maupassant. While growing up she possessed an insight of human hearts that led her to analyze the contemporary American society.

Works Cited

- Berry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2011. Print.
- Choudhury, Bibhash. *English Social and Cultural History*. PHI Learning Private Limited: New Delhi, 2009. Print.
- Seyersted, Per. ed. *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Southern Literary Studies). Louisiana State UP: LA, 2006. Print.
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate_Chopin. Web.