

## Escape from Servitude of Marriage to a Heaven of Freedom in Kate Chopin and Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories

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### Abstract

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This paper questions the patriarchal institution of marriage and critically examines Kate Chopin and Katherine Mansfield's feminist perceptions of marriage. Like other first wave feminists, they denunciate marriage for domesticating, objectifying and marginalizing women. The fictional women in their short stories accordingly rebel against the social order relegating them as wives and mothers, ensuring their submission and loyalty to their husbands, and stereotyping them as objects of sex and pleasure. Their conception of inter gender relations undergoes a substantial change in the course of the struggle they wage for freedom from the constraints of marriage. They have become aware that the solitude and loneliness of spinsterhood, divorce or death are more tolerable than the servitude and subservience of marriage.

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**Keywords:** First Wave Feminism, Patriarchy, Marriage, Gender Relations, Freedom, Struggle

### 1. Introduction

Women's writing subjectively reconstructs gender relations based on the ideals of equality, freedom and autonomy. Marriage life instantiates an intergender relation w needs to be reconsidered in the light of feminist norms. This paper argues that Chopin and Mansfield consider marriage as plague women should avoid; Kate Chopin in *The Story of an Hour* (1894) and *Regret* (1897), and Katherine Mansfield in *Marriage a la Mode* (1921) and *The Married Man Story* (1923) create fictional characters of various perspectives towards marriage. The paper explores how each character perceives marriage life; and how their perceptions of self and Other contribute to revolutionizing domestic roles and liberating women from the dominant ideological and cultural expectations about their gender. The paper further critically contests that the selected works promote and epitomize the anti-marriage ethos of the first wave feminism.

#### 1.1 Review of Literature

Kathrine Mansfield and Kate Chopin's selected short stories: *Marriage À LA Mode* (1921), *A Married Man's Story* (1923), *Regret* (1895), and *The Story of an Hour* (1894) reflect upon female experiences in a patriarchal society, where women are not only marginalized but also isolated. Ren Aihong (2012) characterizes female protagonists in Mansfield's short fiction as being:

Estranged or isolated by society, in particular women. *Bliss* is about a young woman struggling to understand her own newly discovered sexuality, *Miss Brill* concerns an impoverished, lonely spinster; and *Pictures* a struggling singer who is forced to turn to prostitution." (106) Aihong further characterizes them as being "alienated and victimized by the male-dominated society, and yet in order to survive in the cruel world, they must depend on men for economic and emotional support" (104).

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He indicates that the relationship between man and woman is structured by the hierarchies of: master and slave, poor and rich, masculine and feminine, superior and inferior. The wife is usually subjected for domestic and sexual exploitation, which is considered a kind of physical bondage for her married character. Mansfield specifically depicts the burdens of motherhood and housekeeping women endure.

Keith Gregor (1997) celebrates the role women writers play in revealing "a hidden sympathy between women" (60) and expressing "positive femininity through hostile and denigrating representations of women." (61) He contends that women in Mansfield's works are aware that they are not inferior to men any more, and the time when they were systematically enslaved and imprisoned by their authoritative fathers or husbands does not exist any longer.

Ya-Ju Yeh (2013) questions the actual concepts of ideal domesticity and ideal household which assign the roles of a daughter, wife and mother to women. She argues that a woman is defined by her "biological and maternal functions, which are further interlocked into where these took place: a woman raised children and stayed at home. In brief, reproduction is naturally bound up with the interiorization of women's bodies." (3) The concept of home, she adds, has different connotations for men and women because while it connotes comfort for man, it tends to render women as creatures created solely for the comfort of man.

Liu Xi, Huang X (2015) explores the inner sensations and mental activities of women in Katherine Mansfield's works which, she believes, are manifestations of social changes as well as radical feminist views. The radicality of the feminist thought she disseminates in her stories, Lui Xi stresses, has "greatly shaken the conventional patriarchy and obviously stimulated the modern women's strong desire for their thorough liberation." (846)

Wan (2009) emphasizes that Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* epitomizes conflict between life and death; and it gives more weight to freedom than to love or marriage. Louise Mallard's pursuit of freedom, therefore, brought her into conflict with the nineteenth century American society which opposed any rebellious attempt by women to assert their intellectual and social autonomy. Wan also expounds that Kate Chopin dissociates her view of life from the naturalistic inclination of religion, idealism and socio-economic determinism; instead, she identifies with the existentialist attitudes of Louise Mallard who "has a real existence only when she follows her own laws, and through conscious choice, becomes her own creation with an autonomous self." (168)

Though such a developmental freedom, Wan believes, may strengthen the self, "it is accompanied by a growing sense of isolation and aloneness, and even anguish." (168) Yet, Mrs. Mallard is not represented as a tragic hero because the joy, which kills her, emanates from her thirsty for immortal freedom rather than from the good news about her husband. Wan characterizes Louise Mallard as a foil of her sister Josephine. While one is naturalistic and dependent, the other is existentialist and autonomous. Unlike Mrs. Mallard, Josephine is a traditional woman who believes that "women should attach themselves to their husbands." (167) for whom they devote their lives and feel grateful. Proceeding from her conventional thought that Mrs. Mallard dies out of grief and sorrow over the death of her husband in the railway disaster, she breaks the shocking news to her sister in broken sentences. Unexpectedly, Louise Mallard grieves and observes mourning, but, at the same time celebrates her freedom by whispering "free, body and soul free." (168)

Juárez (2015) explores the New Woman ideal Kate Chopin develops in her short fiction. Chopin's fictional characters are subordinated and defined by traditional public and domestic spheres. While the public sphere is the true husband's haven, where he should devote his time and energy to create wealth and ascend the social ladder, home is the true wife's safe haven where she can demonstrate her fidelity, docility and domesticity. Chopin's female characters resiliently abandon their traditional sphere, challenge their typical images as true women and pursue "new positions and abilities never performed before since men had not allowed them to act following their own dispositions." (1) Immersed in the New Woman ideal, they create an alternate sphere where binary gender oppositions are deconstructed; and rights are equally allocated.

The opportunity of being a New Woman, Juárez thinks, is given to Mrs. Mallard, who courageously faces "her new life, to look ahead and build by herself what she always dreamt of." (24) Other women in Chopin's short fiction meet the characteristics of the New Woman whose independent souls are: Able to manage their lives while looking for their own interests and desires. Some of them wished to accomplish their goals; others changed radically their lives; even, there were some of these women who stayed by the side of their families, but as well indicating they had their own willingness and determination to decide what kind of life was better for them. (Juárez, 33)

Rennemo (2015) presumes that Chopin's narrative works critically reconsider feminine and masculine roles, redefine female identity and view marriage as a form of oppression against which women should rebel. Rennemo compares Chopin to a scientist who is primarily interested in "how different women responded differently to a variety of situations. Her writing is a laboratory where she experiments with personalities under different social and political conditions." (76) Though Chopin's fiction portrays young unmarried, married, divorced or widowed women in various ways, they are framed within marriage which is perceived as the ultimate goal for most of her female protagonists despite the constraints it imposes upon their freedoms. These stories, Rennemo concludes, promote the feminist morale which considers marriage as an instrument for the degradation of women, perpetuation of gender roles, and reinforcement of women subordination.

## 2. Analysis and Discussion:

Feminists ascribe women inferiorization, oppression and subordination to the patriarchal institutions which, in their belief, cultivate sexism and gender ideals. The female protagonists in Mansfield's *Marriage A la Mode* and Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* perceive marriage as an oppressive dominating institution primarily employed to suppress women's freedom and will. This accounts for the death of Mrs. Mallard in Chopin's story when she realized that she is still married and bound to Mr. Mallard; the few moments Mrs. Mallard cherishes as a free woman serve as a catalyst for her recognition of:

this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will--as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under the breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body. (378)

This elaborate description of Mrs. Mallard's tumultuous state of mind unfolds the autonomous and self-assertive character she has obtained following the news about her husband's death. She as well asserts the worthlessness of love for women on the ground that it is used as an instrument for disempowering and trapping them in marriage. Though she admits she sometimes loved Mr. Mallard, she wonders "what did it matter! What could love the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!" (379) The conception of love as a mystery or a trap triggers her awakening to the bounds and constraints marriage has placed upon her. Sheila Cronin, as cited in Wood (2016), reaches a similar conclusion that "since marriage constitutes slavery for women, it is clear that the women's movement must concentrate on attacking this institution. Freedom for women cannot be won without the abolition of marriage." (1) Realizing that the authoritative will of her husband fully controls and bends her, Mrs. Mallard questions the possessiveness of marriage which allegedly furnishes women with the means of respect, protection and happiness according to the traditions and customs regulating marriage in the American society during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Likewise, the fictional character of Isabel in Mansfield's *Marriage A la Mode* resolutely counteracts her traditional marriage with a liberating view of divorce. Unlike most 19<sup>th</sup> century women, Isabel considers divorce an escape from the loneliness of her marriage life and restrictions of the patriarchy culture. The divorce letter she receives from her husband consequently brings about a state of astonishment and confusion as it is evident in her wondering questions "What on earth had induced William ...? How extraordinary it was...What could have made him ...?" (563) Soon she feels "confused ... even frightened" before she "flung back in her chair and laughed till she couldn't stop laughing." (563).

The mirth and laughter Isabel produces can be taken either as a challenge to the stratifying and subordinating potentials of marriage or as a resolution of her dilemmatic conflict between family and friendship. The marital transformation and awakening she undergoes owes to her movement into a new house and her socialization with friends in the new neighborhood. That she never regrets being divorced signifies her rebellion against the marriage bond and her assertion of her autonomy and freedom. Mansfield in *A Married Man's Story* creates a fictional husband with a very critical though conservative concept of marriage. On one hand, he acts as a traditional authoritative husband who expects his wife to be a duteous passionate mother.

Though she loves and nurses their baby as any other mother would do, he represents her as an impassionate mother who lacks strong maternal feelings. Unlike other young mothers, he believes she is ill-prepared to toss, kiss or cuddle her child. In his patriarchal perspective, womanhood denotes the feminine virtues of feeling, nurturing and caring. For his wife to be a mother, she has to be a passionate caregiver. Her impassionate nature accounts for his suspicion that she cannot be "the type of woman who bears children in her own body." (611) His impassionate and solemn nature as a father, however, consists with and fulfills the expectations about manhood. He, for instance, does not love or look after his son. Rather, he confesses that he "cannot connect him with my wife and myself; I've never accepted him as ours." He as well compares him to a young crab or a bundle devoid of feelings.

In addition, he subordinates his wife's voice to his voice to signify gender hierarchies. He proceeds from the patriarchal ideology which presupposes that women are silent and invisible partners owing to their unnoticed voices, roles and figures. Thus, if they attempt to speak up, they will be ignored; and if they come into sight, they will not be noticed. This clearly shows that patriarchy intends to mute women voices and veil their figures. To start a conversation with her husband, the wife hesitantly wonders what he is thinking of and whether he feels cold. The answers he gives to her queries are respectively "nothing" and "no". Such negative short answers disappoint the wife because they bring the conversation to an end before it even starts.

When she persistently tells him that she is going to bed, he ignores her implicit quest to go with her and alternately reminds her to turn out the gas in the hall. On other occasions, she wonders whether he thinks the grass is damp; whether it is time for tea; and whether physical beauty is really important. He distressingly answers her questions by pretending not to hear what she said. Though she rehearses her questions, he repeatedly ignores them. The response she makes to that purposeful ignorance of her voice is compared to a patient informed by the surgeon that "it will certainly be necessary to perform the operation – but not now." (614) this figurative image entails that because the questions women raise neither appeal to man's interest nor trigger their curiosity, they are given deaf ears.

Women figures and beauty as well are ignored and unnoticed by their husbands. In Mansfield's *The Married Man Story*, the husband frequently lets his wife sleep alone despite his awareness that "nobody is going to come behind her, to take her in his arms, to kiss her soft hair, to lead her to the fire and to rub her hands warm again." (614) He also realizes that she lonely lies in her cold bed, "staring into the dark, with those trustful bewildered eyes." (611) Nonetheless, he does nothing to ease her loneliness and bewilderment. In turn, the wife considers any sort of affection, caring or playfulness by her husband as a miracle that is not going to happen.

On the other hand, the husband critically questions marriage which he reprimands as a deterministic institution binding men and women together. In his perspective, husbands and wives do not stay together for economic, sexual or reproductive purposes; rather they live together because "they are bound. And nobody on earth knows what are the bonds that bind them." (612) His investigation of the nature of those bonds brings him to a thought he entertained about "the second self" (612) inhabiting human beings and binding them together. Though he believes either partner should break the marriage bond and set the other free, he behaves as a naturalistic husband who realizes "the hopelessness of trying to escape." (613) This implies that husbands and wives are too powerless to change or challenge their predetermined fates. He further likens the confinement and boredom of people in marriage to those of snails in their shells, birds in their cages and prisoners in their cells, where they are stripped of freedoms and free will. His naturalistic concept of marriage accounts for continuing to live with his wife in spite of the incompatibility and boredom of their marriage relation.

Kate Chopin in *Regret* creates a fictional character of an androgynous woman whose gender identity is flowing between masculinity and femininity. Virginia Woolf as a first wave feminist promotes the androgynous consciousness in her emphasis that: In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female: and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man...If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. (10) Woolf's concept of androgyny signifies the displacement and deconstruction of fixed gender identities which cultivate essentialist and chauvinist notions that need to be dismantled in favor of a more heterogeneous gender consciousness. This suggests that people should identify with the androgynous feminine and masculine consciousness which inhabits their bodies and shapes their intellectual, spiritual and emotional formations.

The fictional character of Mamzelle Aurlie in *Regret* fluctuates between the unstable states of femininity and masculinity. Aurlie consciously assimilates the masculine identity as she wears a man's hat, a blue army overcoat and top boots; she shoots chicken hawks with her gun and oversees the slaves working her crops and looking after the fowls, cows and mules she keeps in her farm. She is practically the master of herself as well as her household. The freedom and autonomy Aurlie has achieved owes to the assimilation of her masculine consciousness which, in her case, predominates her feminine consciousness.

However, she unconsciously maintains and identifies with her femininity which she has repressed for a very long time. Aurlie's repressed maternal passions are released by Odile's four children who interrupt her loneliness when they stay with her for two weeks during the absence of their parents. Though she is physically and emotionally prepared to be a slave master or a plantation overseer but not a mother or a caregiver, she has to determine upon "a line of action which should be identical with a line of duty." (1) Realizing that "little children are not little pigs; they require and demand attention" (1), she passionately learns a few mother skills and sensibilities in order to meet the demands of her new role. It takes Aurlie some days, the narrator states, to "become accustomed to the laughing, the crying, the chattering that echoed through the house and around it all day long." (2) At night, she comfortably sleeps with "little Elodie's hot, plump body pressed close against her, and the little one's warm breath beating her cheek like the fanning of a bird's wing." (2) It seems that Elodie's warm breath and body have awakened Aurlie's maternal passions. This unexpected and unannounced awakening gets intensified by the loneliness and solitude she is going to feel after the children leave with their mother. No word is adequate to express her awakened maternal passions but crying. That she cries not softly like a woman but loudly like a man manifests the fusion between her feminine and masculine consciousness. Her regret not to have children of her own can be considered as another marker of her awakening. Yet, this does not mark a change in her attitude towards marriage which she conceives as a disrupter or shatterer of women's dreams of autonomy, equality and freedom.

### 3. Conclusion

The paper concludes that women in Chopin and Mansfield's stories reconsider their gender roles in the light of an awakened feminine consciousness which defies the domestication and subjugation of women in a patriarchal society. They as well reproach marriage as an institution primarily intended to reproduce the patriarchal ideology and maintain women's compliance and docility. While some female protagonists escape marriage through divorce or death, others remain unmarried for the whole of their lives. Marriage, for them, means loss of freedom and autonomy as well as vulnerability to emotional and physical exploitation. This perception evokes their sense of freedom and self-esteem when divorced or widowed.

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