The Achievers Journal
Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture

P- ISSN:2454-2296, E-ISSN: 2395-0897, Vol 9, Number 1, 2023 pages 1-7

Silent Image of Marital Suffering in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour": A Reading of the Female Psyche

*** Prabhakar Upadhyay**

Article Information

Article History:

Received: 02-02-2023

Accepted: 12-04-2023

Published: 20-4-2023

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license

This article is published with open access at http://theachieversjournal.com

Abstract

"The Story of an Hour" is a short story that explores the female psyche in a marriage. The story portrays a lady whose husband has died recently in an accident. The social norms expect wailing and sobbing over death. Chopin chose to be silent about the exact nature of the protagonist's marriage, yet, the protagonist's dilemma and momentary exhilaration in the death of her husband suggested that she was living a life of unhappiness. This story does not reveal the nature of the relationship between the husband and wife. But, the implication of silence goes beyond the expressed content of the story. A writer uses silence as a literary device to enhance the effectiveness of the text. Silence is revealed sometimes through characters where readers find breaks, gaps or pauses in their speech as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Sometimes, it is used by a writer to hide crucial information from readers. For instance, Chopin indicates in the story about the trouble but does not say explicitly. Readers are left to guess the exact nature of the protagonist's marriage. She desires freedom and feels it momentarily after the death of her husband. It is not the question of whether her husband loved her or not. The matter of interrogation is why did she feel like that? This paper investigates the psyche of the protagonist in "The Story of an hour". It enquires how does Chopin use silence to reveal the loss of female individuality in a marriage? In this study, silence denotes something hidden or unspoken.

Keywords: feminism; Chopin; genderisation; silence; female psyche

The Achievers Journal: Journal of English Language, Literature, and Culture (2023), 9(1), 1-7

Copyright © 2023, Prabhakar Upadhyay

* **Prabhakar Upadhyay**, (PhD Research Scholar), Department of English, HNB Garhwal University (A Central University), Srinagar Garhwal-246174, Uttarakhand (India), Email: prabhakar.pk310@gmail.com

Introduction

Silence in literature has been used as a literary device to create an impact of ambiguity. Works belonging to Feminist Literature, Postcolonial Literature and Dalit Literature bring to light the discussions which have been ignored until now. These branches of literature facilitated a voice to the class of people who were silenced in history. Gender discrimination, racial discrimination and caste discrimination all have been part of the broader narrative where the say of a particular community remained muted. Different societies adopted different forms of discrimination based on which a certain section of society was being oppressed. They were denied their identity and remained unrecognised by society. They were never given the opportunities to manifest themselves socially and politically. Culturally, discrimination remained in vogue based on class, gender, race and caste.

Chopin was a free woman. After the death of her husband, she continued to live her life cheerfully. She valued her feminine individuality. This approach of hers towards life reflects in her artistic writings. She was writing about feminist issues even when there was little trace of the feminist movement in American society. Feminism as a political movement gets its hold on society in the twentieth century. At the time of Chopin, females' conscience about their existence was still sleeping. They had to be considered in relation to their husband and family. Chopin's writings launch a female protagonist who walks ahead of the time in their society paving the path for other women to follow her footprint that will lead them towards their freedom from archetypal gender sex roles attributed to them. "The Story of an Hour" is a very short story depicting one hour in the life of the protagonist.

As a theoretical tool, the feminist theory and psychoanalytical theory are applied to investigate the social status of a female and the psyche of a woman. Feminism exposes the forms of power which cause the unequal and inferior status of women in the patriarchal society. On the other hand, Psychoanalytical theory "offers a systematic accounting of the psychic apparatus (especially the unconscious) and a theory of the mind and human psychic development (Castle 163). Psychoanalytical interpretation of the text offers a "distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind which corresponds respectively with text's "overt content" and "covert content" giving primacy to the latter (Barry 100). It reads closely the hidden motives and feelings of the author and the characters. It uncovers the silenced psyche of a woman buried deep in her unconscious mind.

To understand the story, one needs to understand the psyche of the protagonist and her social standing as a woman. In the essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) John Stuart Mill criticises the social status of women:

> All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralists tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (27)

Here, the only affection she is allowed to have is either of her husband or her children. Whatever pleasure she is privileged with depends entirely on her husband. Mill suggests that women ought to enjoy equality in the social sphere, especially in marriage, and condemns "forced repression" and "unnatural stimulation" (38-39). In her *The Second Sex* (1949), Semone de Beauvoir claims that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (330). She unveils the "social constructionist" theory of the patriarchal society (Castle 95). Another feminist, Kate Millet is interested in the power structure at work within the patriarchal society which conditions genderisation and is responsible for the oppression of women (96).

Women in Marriages

In India and the other part of the world, women's supposed position is to be the caretaker of the house. As a mother, she is supposed to take care of her children while as a wife her liabilities are towards her husband. She is the homemaker, Laksmi of the house. The Fortune of the house depends on women. She leaves one identity to embrace another one. All the sacrifices to be done in marriages are by women. Though in a patriarchal society girls are trained to be good housewives, some of them have their idea of life. While some women are satisfied with their position thinking that they are "serving their families and communities as chief minister of the domestic hearth" (qtd. in Foulton 1), others seek betterment or liberation from current social genderisation. Unsatisfied with their traditional upbringing they nurture their ambition in life.

In the case of the present story, Louise aspires to her lost individuality in her marriage. She may or may not be content with her husband, however, she feels frustrated with the social condition of marriage whereby her husband's will is imposed upon her. Louise's bounding with her husband is not much strong, in a way she is weighing a marriage with little love. She does not hate her husband but she loves him only some time. The story "highlights the need for a world that respected women as valuable partners in marriage as well as capable individuals" (Robinson).

The Cognizance of 'Self' in "The Story of an Hour"

This story speaks about the unrealised freedom that the protagonist was seeking all along. Mrs Mallard is introduced in the story as a person who has a weak heart. She is not expected to take very well the cruel news related to the death of her husband. So everybody around her is worried that how should she be informed about the train accident in which her husband died? Finally, it is decided that Josephine, her sister should be the one who would break the news to her. She reveals the truth in a concealing way. The societal norm is that a wife would drown in the heaviness of sadness. As expected "she wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment" (369). Her reaction to the news reveals a new woman emerging within Mrs Mallard that was suppressed in her deep psyche until now. Papke writes, "her first response to the tragedy indicates a second Louise nestling within that social shell" (52).

In the beginning, readers have introduced to a woman who "was afflicted with a heart trouble" (369). The heart trouble indicates that Mrs Mallard is an old woman. On the contrary, she is a young woman "with fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression" (370). Here, the phrase "heart trouble" is used as a symbol which suggests that Mrs Mallard is shattered within herself. She is leading an unhappy marriage. The protagonist reacts traditionally. She goes inside her room to mourn the demise of her husband alone. The way she acts shows that she is puzzled and enters the room with a hazy mind to contemplate: "there stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul" (369). With these lines, Chopin implies that her married life has been a burden to her. Readers find here the submersion of Mrs Mallard. It is the indication of the awakening of the self-consciousness of a woman, that is, a new self emerges in the form of Louise who dreams of freedom: a long life without any restrictions.

The words "window", "comfortable" and "roomy armchair" suggests a contrary meaning in the narrative. So far, her married life has been torturous and unbearable to her. She has been confined within the territory of her husband living inside the house. The window suggests an outside world waiting for her to explore and the 'comfortable roomy armchair' suggests that from now her life is going to be spacious where she will be the centre of the world. She has to worry about no one but herself. Her suffocating life is over and outside world is before her:

> She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

> There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window. (Chopin 370)

Louise's affliction is not because of her husband who is kind and gentle towards her which the author reveals later on in the text: "She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her . . ." (Chopin 370); after all, "she had loved him—sometimes" (371). It is the marriage itself that is oppressive in nature. It is a social contract which robs the individuality and identity of a woman. A careful observation of the narrative tells that "Chopin uses Louise to criticise the oppressive and repressive nature of marriage, especially when Louise rejoices in her newfound freedom" (Robinson).

After the supposed death of her husband, left in solitude, Louise feels her lost identity once again. Eventually, her unconscious desire surfaces and the inner voice shouts: "free, free, free!", though fearfully, she welcomes this new feeling (Chopin 370). Now, her past self is dead with her husband and Louise sees life ahead: "she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome" (370-71). No one would impose will upon her; she is free now, responsible to no one but only to herself: "She would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination" (71). Louise celebrates her newborn self. Filled with extreme joy, she cherishes her "free Body and soul free".

Worried about her sister when Josephine asked her to open the door, she refused which symbolises her denial of her old self. She shuts out society so that no one could obstruct her exhilaration in the death of her husband. For a moment, she has been living her fancy how would she live her remaining life? She even wished for a long life for herself. Swollen with joy, she comes out of her room and descends the stairs with her sister as a victorious goddess. Josephine and Richard do not realise the tumultuous changes taking place in her mind. To them, she seems to grieve her husband's death but within she is fluttering with happiness and thus, she enjoys a forbidden pleasure (Hatif and Hatif 3). However, her joyous moment of future prospects does not last long; Brently Mallard appears before her and she dies "of heart disease—of the joy that kills" (Chopin 371).

Significance of Silence

"The Story of an Hour", as the name suggests, is a story covering one hour. In such a short time the author can't give a full glance at the protagonist's life. Why is she not happy with

her marriage? Who is responsible for her troubled marriage? Such questions have not been answered directly in the story. Her keen desire for freedom, her heart affliction, her feeling of joy and her wish for a long life after the death of her husband reveals the silent images of Louise's long-oppressed marital life. Chopin does not come up with a candid explanation for her condition in the story. But through the use of symbolism, she foregrounds the lack of happiness in her marital life. Louise's submersion in the thoughts of enjoying her individuality in future life highlights her suppressed aspirations in her deep psyche. Thus, in the story, the unsaid is crucial to decode the uncommon behaviour of Louise Mallard.

Conclusion

Chopin successfully depicts the inner conflict of Louise Mallard in the present story. She adopts a future-oriented approach and narrates the story through a minimalist method. Louise is seen contemplating the prospects in the absence of her husband in her life. In the same person, readers find the death and birth of two personalities. Mrs Mallard is submissive and frail and accepts all the conditions thrown upon her by the patriarchal society to satisfy her husband. Nevertheless, in her deep psyche, she searches for her selfhood. The author surfaces her unconscious desire for freedom and identity. Still, the tragedy provides her with the opportunity to celebrate the short-lived experience of freedom and happiness. Through the story, Chopin conveys that the death of Brently Mallard is necessary for the life of Louise who dies again when her husband re-emerges before her. Also, she has been spending her life in suffocation and mental oppression and conscientiously following the social norms for a successful marital relationship. Until now her life has been unkind to her which is why she feels no grief on the demise of her husband. For a moment, even if that was short, she lived a life of her own.

Works Cited

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Viva Books, 2017.

Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

Castle, Gregory. *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. Blackwell, 2007.

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." 50 World's Greatest Short Stories, Finger Print Classics, 2018.

Fulton, Erica. "A Mad Awakening: Female Madness and Depression in Gilman, Plath and Chopin." Professor Downing, Eng 562, 30 Nov. 2014. https://www.academia.edu/15731323/A_Mad_Awakening_Female_Madness_and_Depression_in_Gilman_Plath_and_Chopin. Accessed 2 July 2022.

Jassam, Aseel Hatif, and Hadeel Hatif. "Kate Chopin's The Story of an Hour: A Feminist Discourse of a Married Woman Reclaiming Her Lost Female Identity." Research Gate, Sept., 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348162781_KATE_CHOPIN%27S_THE_STORY_OF_AN_HOUR_A_FEMINIST_DISCOURSE_OF_A_MARRIED_WOMAN_RECLAIMING_HER_LOST_FEMALE_IDENTITY. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Mill, John Stuart. The Subjection of Women. Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1869. The subjection of women: Mill, John Stuart, 1806-1873: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Papke, Mary E. "Kate Chopin's Social Fiction." Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Kate Chopin edited by Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007.

Robinson, Ashley. "The Story of an Hour: Summary and Analysis." Prep Scholar, Dec. 9, 2019. https://blog.prepscholar.com/kate-chopin-the-story-of-an-hour-summary. Accessed 4 December 2022.