

The Relational Ecology of Social Existence:

An Eco-Feminist Reading of Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract

Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, has always been methodically examined through the lens of psychoanalysis, feminism, and cultural studies, with remarkable emphasis on feminine double consciousness against the shackles of societal norms and patriarchal conventions. The interaction between several characters, mainly Mrs. Pontellier, Mr. Pontellier, Robert, Madame Ratingolle, and Mademoiselle Reisz reveals the extent to which the rules of Man are prevailing and subjugating authentic identities. With a dearth of comprehensive studies from an ecofeminist perspective, this paper aims to broaden the literary scope by employing ecocriticism in connection with ecofeminism to unleash the true identity of a woman living in 19th-century America. By situating Edna at the forefront of emphasis, this study attempts to examine the influence of her surrounding environment, shedding light on human-human connections and human-nature interactions. While Edna's aspiring to achieve an autonomous and authentic identity by identifying herself with the sea and other natural landscapes, the fourth wave of eco-criticism, combined with the ecofeminist approach, reveals that it is necessary to balance the human-nature relationship to maintain an unswerving position in the inner and outer worlds. Nature, for the oppressed, can be a refuge only for those who attempt to raise themselves over and beyond conventions. Through the adopted approach, this study lays the groundwork needed to explore, analyze, and understand the position of women with respect to Nature and how both shape and influence one another, calling for a nuanced, balanced understanding of women's emotional ecology and the inner landscape.

Keywords: Material ecocriticism, eco-feminism, trans-corporeality, sea symbolism

الملخص

لطالما خضعت رواية رواية كيت شوبان "الصحوة" (*The Awakening*) لدراسات منهجية من منظور التحليل النفسي والنسوية والدراسات الثقافية، مع ترکيز ملحوظ في الوعي المزدوج الأنثوي في مواجهة قيود المعايير المجتمعية والأعراف الأبوية والذكورية. يكشف التفاعل بين عدة شخصيات، أبرزها السيدة بونتيليه، والسيد بونتيليه، وروبرت، ومدام راتينجول، والأنسة رايز، عن مدى هيمنة القواعد الاجتماعية في إخضاع الهوية الأصلية. وفي ظل ندرة الدراسات الشاملة من منظور النسوية البيئية، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى توسيع نطاق البحث الأدبي عبر توظيف النقد البيئي بالتزامن مع النسوية البيئية للكشف عن الهوية الحقيقية لأمرأة تعيش في أمريكا في خلال القرن التاسع عشر. ومن هذا المنظور، تسعى الدراسة إلى تحليل أثر البيئة المحيطة بالشخصية الرئيسية "إيدنا Edna" المحاطة، مع تسليط الضوء على الروابط بين البشر وتفاعلات الإنسان مع الطبيعة. وتtempts "إيدنا Edna" إلى تحقيق هوية مستقلة وأصلية من خلال تماهيتها مع البحر والمناظر الطبيعية الأخرى. وتكتشف الموجة الرابعة من النقد البيئي، مقرنةً بالنهج النسووي البيئي، عن ضرورة موازنة

العلاقة بين الإنسان والطبيعة للحفاظ على حضور راسخ في العالمين الداخلي والخارجي. فالطبيعة، البيئية والمتمدنة، بالنسبة للمضطهدين، لا يمكن أن تكون ملاداً إلا لمن يسعون إلى تجاوز التقليد والارتفاع بأنفسهم فوق القيود. وبالاستناد إلى هذا النهج، ترسى الرّاسة أساساً لاستكشاف مكانة المرأة تجاه الطبيعة، وكيف يُشكّل كلّ منهما الآخر ويؤثّر فيه، داعيًّا إلى فهم دقيق ومتوازن للبيئة الاجتماعية-العاطفية للمرأة ومحيطها الداخلي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد البيئي المادي، النسوية البيئية، العبور الجنسي ، رمزية البحر

Introduction

Adam and Eve walked through the Garden of Eden and committed a sacrilege upon eating the forbidden apple, resulting in their fall from God's grace and their attempt to cover their bodies with fig leaves, despite the extent to which their situation was exquisitely Edenic. Odysseus' homeward journey, Oedipus's barren land in the terrains of Thebes, and Lear's up-for-grab land in Britain while trying incessantly to realize the punitive reality of their truth represent different frameworks within which ecological heritage and eco-critical consciousness are maintained and sustained. Northrop Frye employed seasonal archetypal patterns in the 1950s as a mode of criticism. So does Meeker, a remarkable eco-critic, who utilized forces of nature to underscore their power of superseding humans through forms of regeneration, survival, renewal, and destruction. Not so far from these depictions are Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, whose depictions of nature reflect duality in Chopin's *The Gulf of Mexico*, showcasing the immeasurable chances of emancipation and the perilous depths of self-deterioration. Much like the moors in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* which represent the turbulent relationship and passion between Heathcliff and Cathy, echoing the inner turmoil of Mrs. Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, as a protagonist, and her quest for self-exploration and identity. In the transcendental musings in *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, humanity's solidarity is celebrated in the vastness of the environment, yet Chopin's ambivalent Edna seeks transcendence in the sea, reflecting her isolation. Throughout *The Awakening*, Chopin stretches her arm to develop a strong connection with Mary Shelley, who employs natural elements as an ally and antagonist in her feminist narratives. Not only do these literary figures resonate with eco-critical analyses, but sages such as Henry David Thoreau and Rachel Carson have also pressed humanity to perceive itself as an integral part of a broader ecological spectrum. In Chopin's magnificent and captivating narrative, duality is depicted in a fertile, foundational ground for eco-critical readings, where nature extends from being a mere backdrop yet a force that shapes and directs the protagonist's journey. Through emphasis and association with the ebb and flow of the sea, the portrayal of New Orleans' suffocating heat and the soothing beauty of Grand Isle represent more than environmental sceneries; rather, they take the role of active agents in Edna's journey through her inner self, blurring the lines between environmental influence and human emotion. Chopin's novel anticipates obscured boundaries in a patriarchal society and intertwines with Edna's environment, emphasizing the author's nuanced engagement with ecological themes and eco-critical readings.

Resorting to ecocriticism as a recent and holistic critical theory, this study aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* by delving deep into the depicted tension in the narrative, inviting readers to reveal how the natural world affects and is affected by human experiences. Through meticulous applied eco-critical examination, this study seeks to shed light on Edna Pontellier's interactions with the skies, the sea, and islands to reflect her quest for liberty and the wider struggle of all women, mainly in terms of agency in a bourgeoisie, patriarchal society. The study also aims to expand the existing literature by filling the gap and offering an eco-critical reading of the novel, adding to available studies that have analyzed Chopin's work through psychoanalytical and feminist lenses. Notably, research to date has only focused on Edna's character as well as other

minor characters in the novel and their experiences in their surroundings, shedding light on their psychological decay. Existing research has also examined the novel from an ecological perspective without detailed emphasis on the association between ecofeminism and trans-corporeality to uncover the tension between societal constraints and ceaseless autonomy, as explored through the theory of ecocriticism. Based on the aforementioned notions, this study endeavors to undertake an eco-critical reading of Chopin's *The Awakening*, offering in-depth insight into the relationship between humans and nature through the lens of ecofeminism. This study urges readers to rethink their place in their surroundings and their connection with nature. Hence, the current study contributes to broadening readers' understanding of how selfhood is inseparable from the surrounding environment, whether cultural or natural, and how the individual is but a product of this interaction.

Literature Review

Much of the literature on Chopin's *The Awakening* has examined the novel from feminist and psychological perspectives. To start with, Panhwar et al. (2017) employed psychological perspectives, mainly Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relations in *Analyzing Edna's Character in Chopin's novel The Awakening through Sullivan's Theory of Inter-Personal Relations* to analyze Edna's character. The study reveals that Edna's personality is multi-layered, mainly in her relationships with people surrounding her, whether males or females. These relationships have a direct impact on "her mind" (p. 81). Regardless of her controversial inter-personal relationships, Edna's character reflects someone who is "strong-willed and ostentatious," (p. 84) making decisions independently and resisting societal restraints and familial obligations. Expanding this view, Saoudi (2023) examines the themes of individuality and convention in Chopin's *The Awakening* by employing a Hegelian dialectic approach. This study analyzes the "vacillations of the heroine between rebellion and conformity" (p. 196), revealing the devastating outcome of death. Convention is represented by "stringent social norms, patriarchy, matrimony, and women's conformity with them" (p. 196). As for individualism, Saoudi (2023) claims that this theme is portrayed through Edna's character while grappling with surrounding struggles to "put her inner self first, her misogamy, and her extra-marital romances" (p. 199). When individuality and convention seem to be in active interaction, the balance is tipped in favor of norms because of "Edna's compliance and ambivalence and Robert's wavering and estrangement" (p. 199). Furthermore, Dey (2022) elaborates on the conflicting discourse on sexuality and gender, which was prevalent in 19th-century American society. By considering Edna Pontellier, who is torn between passive femininity ideals, motherhood, and sexual emancipation, her transgression is questioned. Dey (2022) reveals that Chopin successfully unshackles the patriarchal configuration of a woman's identity, whose life is restrained by hostile oppression from society. Failing to find a common ground between her self-actualization and societal conventions, Edna is forced to "annihilate her own self" (p. 331) in an attempt to find salvation.

From an ecological and ecocritical perspective, Sun and Wei (2023) illustrate how Chopin's novel can be a representative of the interconnectedness between animality and humanity through the use of different bird metaphors. This study demonstrates that *The Awakening* is distinguished for providing "a different formulation of animality from a female perspective, which disrupts the androcentric discourse" (p. 41). Throughout the novel, Edna's self-perception of various birds serves a witness to her evolutionary awakening "as a woman-animal with biological instincts and a human being with subjectivity" (p. 41). In fact, Edna's awakening illustrates the recognition of humanity through animality, eventually breaking not only the binary opposition of human and animal but also dissolving the hierarchical dichotomy of men and women. Sun and Wei (2023) further illustrate how Edna achieves humanity through animality by drawing on a parallel between Edna and the parrot. This

parallel does not happen by coincidence but is considered an implicit suggestion that the caged parrot can be perceived as an embodiment of Edna shackled in the house; thus, showing how the two creatures, whether human or animal, are confined beings, exposed to oppressive structures regardless of their innate animalities. Accordingly, the oppressed ‘Others’ as the parrot in the cage and Edna in the house do not appear with no complete animality or subjectivity, which, are rather shackled. This leads to the realization that animal instincts of parrots are never tamed but are only restricted by human authority, and the same applied to Edna from a feminist perspective.

In a similar manner, Sun and Wei (2023) reveal that the animality of the pigeon aligns with Edna’s awakened self after leaving Grand Isle, leaving her struggling with her sexual desire toward Robert. The arousal of Edna’s sexual desires or her animal instincts therefore motivate her to move into the pigeon house. This longing for flying out of Mr. Pontellier’s house is more evident when Edna praises the bird’s wings and its potential to soar above the level plain of prejudice and tradition. Hence, Edna embraces her animality and explores her humanity gradually. Her evolutionary awakening and transmutation as a living species embody her freedom from patriarchal structures and witness a disruption of the binary opposition between humans and animals (Sun & Wei, 2023). From a broader perspective, Ewell and Menke (2010) have examined Chopin’s novel in their article “The Awakening and the Great October Storm of 1893.” The authors claim that while Edna dismisses Robert’s story as flippancy, the 28th of August plays a transformative role in the story because whether or not Edna is completely possessed by the gulf spirit that Robert highlights, she definitely is never completely released from the spell of that night. Examining the backgrounds of Chopin’s novel, Ewell and Menke (2010) reveal that some components of the novel can be linked to a singular hurricane that devastated Louisiana coast in 1893, and it was known as the “Great October Storm” (p. 2). This storm had damaged places such as the Grand Isle, and this might have influenced Chopin, especially in terms of losses: “the loss of places saturated in memory, the destruction of which prohibits any hope of return or recovery” (p. 4). *The Awakening* itself starts in mid-summer, possibly in July when Edna first learns how to swim. Associating Edna’s final swim with the sea’s awful power, Chopin signals how intensely Edna’s revolutionary will to control her soul challenges the social institutions, eventually resulting in a personal storm that will bring about drastic and holistic changes. In the ocean and far from the shore, Edna “treads a liminal space in which she exists after life and before death; she sees present, past, and future” (George, 2016, p. 41). For Edna, the Gulf represents a calm atmosphere where echoes of home are heard. Grand Isle also represents a place where she discovered her passions and feels free. Upon returning to the Gulf’s shores on the last day, Edna’s thoughts of self-possession had already gone beyond her potential to hold tight, and the warming ocean had already been brewing the storm that would devastate any relic of that possible world (Ewell & Menke, 2010). The events of this storm echo the “sensuousness and in-betweenness of Edna’s last swim” (George, 2016, p. 41).

Elaborating the argument developed by Ewell and Menke (2010), George (2016) in “The Whole Island Seems Changed”: A Bioregional Approach to Kate Chopin’s Fiction” argues that former authors have contextualized Chopin’s novel as a response to the 1893 storm, allowing for an insightful understanding of Chopin’s motivations to experiment with the representation of geographic scale. George (2016) extends this notion by revealing that Grand Isle does not only evoke natural landscape but represent the history of the place for middle-class Creoles from New Orleans. According to Klein (2013), “Edna’s relief from an oppressive social regime is dependent upon the readers’ as well as Edna’s ecological consciousness – an ecological consciousness that reads the ocean in spring for its signs of regeneration” (p. 32). Furthermore, George (2016) demonstrates that Chopin’s novel represents a vivid illustration of cosmopolitan interests of regionalist literature. These interests are evident in the author’s narratives of New Orleans’ descriptions and events as well as in the

“representation of class, gender, race, and place as entities which can be at least temporarily unfixed” (p. 39). This unfixing is facilitated by Chopin as she ceaselessly negotiates geographic and bioregional scale and contingent readership networks within the site of the text. Hence, the shared experience of womanhood among Chopin’s characters, mainly across race and class, reflects Chopin’s representations of ephemeral places which offer an opportunity to depict alternative experiences.

However, little is found regarding Chopin’s ecofeminist approach to her novel. Only one study by Pathak (2020) has shown that multiple natural images are depicted in the novel, including water-oaks, the ocean, and serpent “to wield substantial power over Edna’s psychological awakening” (p. 168). Other than bringing in resemblance between Edna and animals, Chopin (1899) mentions natural season to depict the boundaries between Edna’s personal self and the natural world. Indeed, the protagonist’s psychological and social realities are deeply interconnected with natural patterns. Edna passes through a period of lingering glow in autumn, which reaches extremities in winter, and then drowns in the sunshine of an early spring day. By vividly employing the imagery of sea/ocean in the novel, Chopin (1899) directly connects Edna’s gradual awakening to nature. For instance, Pathak (2020) reveals that Edna enjoys a sense of liberty and empowerment only in the water, which instills confidence in her against patriarchy. This sense of liberty to break from the shackles of traditional societal norms is evident in the sense of eroticism she experiences for the sea. Besides, Pathak (2020) claims that the image of the serpent combines beauty with danger, inviting readers to connect the two sides of a woman.

In light of existing studies, this research aims to fill a gap in the existing body of literature by exploring Chopin’s novel from an ecofeminist perspective and connecting this approach with the concepts developed during the third and fourth-wave of ecocriticism.

Methodology

Nature, from an ecological perspective, is present as an entity that influences humans and which humans, themselves, can influence and shape, whether by mistreating it or shaping its processes. Such an interactional process between Nature and Man involves an interconnectedness between cultural and anti-cultural laws. According to Lagergren (2006), “Nature can then be described as the environment in which we dwell. Mountains, animals, and flowers as well as humans are part of nature, whereas the rules set up by man constitute culture” (p. 3). The environment is thus the surroundings or conditions in which a person lives, including one’s home, workplace, school, community space, and any place where a person spends the majority of his time. By struggling to deal with Nature, Man’s interaction becomes problematic due to Man’s applied culture. Eco-critically, Man’s struggle with Nature is examined as an attempt to reveal how Nature influences Man’s culture and thinking processes. A nation’s cultural behaviors and knowledge systems provide valuable lessons to discover alternative modes of seeing and being with nature as a shared ecological relationship (Steele et al., 2023). As such, Nature becomes not separated from everything in a particular place, embedded in the cultural, ecological, and political histories of the present and the mechanisms of still yet possible futures. In Chopin’s *Awakening*, Edna Pontellier rejected her husband’s large house and moved to a “pigeon house,” as she calls it, trying incessantly to defy the shackles of her relationship with her husband’s huge and swanky house where she feels herself more of a property than an individual. She preferred a “little four-room around the corner. It looks cozy, so inviting and restful” (Chopin, 1899, p. 91). For Edna, she feels “tired looking after that big house. It never seemed like mine, anyway – like home” (p. 91). This statement suggests Edna’s longing for ‘home’ rather than ‘house.’ Mr. Pontellier has failed to offer her that quality, which any woman would seek upon getting married. It is the place that matters, not how much it is stuffed with fixtures, as the husband believes.

Interestingly, eco-critics emphasize how Nature is represented, valued, and shaped in a text. Through an exploration of the Man-Nature relationship, emphasis is on the natural system which involves the laws of Nature, and the human system which embodies the culture or rules of Man (Alias, 2010). Within this anthropocentric lens and beyond, eco-critical readings of texts scrutinize how Nature's laws affect and shape man's existence, cultural attitudes and practices, and notions of authority. It is revealed that "cultural dimensions of literature do influence and are influenced by environmental issues (Oppermann, 1999, p. 15). In this sense, ecocriticism emerges as an interdisciplinary study that tackles the possible associations made in a text among notions of people, society, self, place, and physical natural systems, as Khan (2019) argues.

Eco-criticism emerges as a multidisciplinary approach that meticulously examines the intricate interplay between literature and the environment. This field posits that literature is a powerful tool to shape environmental consciousness (Rishma & Gill, 2024). Through an eco-critical analysis, the various ways in which humans understand and connect with their natural world are examined, shedding light on the continuum of human-nature interactions, which range from exploitative domination to harmonious co-existence. Developed firstly by Gotfelty (1996) and Buell (2005), ecocriticism represents a field of study, offering a unique approach to meticulously examine the interconnectedness between nature and culture based on combined ideas from cultural studies, ecology, and environmental philosophy.

Following its inception and development, the fourth wave of eco-criticism expands the boundaries of its analysis by integrating humanist notions and addressing new ecological problems. Moreover, this wave intersects with the Anthropocene approach, analyzing the influence of humans on Earth's ecosystems and suggesting different ways to relate to the environment. Accordingly, a new approach to material ecocriticism has paved the way for a neologism introduced by Stacy Alaimo (2010) in *Bodily Natures*, "trans-corporeality," referring to "an intermeshing and inter-dependency between all human bodies and non-human material bodies" (Alaimo, 2010, p. 3). The concept of trans-corporeality aims to close the socially-constructed, theoretical gap among all living beings by examining the "material flows" between humans, places, and beings based on analysis of the interactions made between language, environment, and bodies. For instance, Edna develops a strong attachment to the sea, where her individuality and identity are attuned and unified. Through a trans-corporeal analysis, an understanding of the natural world and how human beings are governed by their culture is promoted.

Alaimo (2010) further emphasizes in *New Materialism* the interconnectedness between the human body and the material environment, as both cannot be separated or disentangled. The human and his surrounding environment are trans-corporeal, serving as a basis for a "new materialist and post-humanist sense of the human as perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" (p. 187). Jane Bennet (2010), a material eco-critic, argues for the presence of "vibrant matter," which consumes and absorbs the agents of their environment in the trans-corporeal process. The new materialists have suggested a more developed approach: perceiving material agency as a form of expressiveness, serving as an eloquent about the unbreakable connection between life conditions and life forms. Such expressiveness develops based on exchanges and shifts between corporeal bodies and their natural and social environments, influencing "emergent landscapes of interacting biological, climatic, economic, and political forces," (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2). Notably, this expressiveness produces configurations and discourses that readers can perceive and analyze as stories, materializing before and alongside human culture and communicative approaches. Life is thus perceived as a material entity where all living beings are engaged in communicative modes of expression. The meaning becomes "an organizing principle of nature" (Maran, 2010, p. 461), implying that the natural environment is, in itself, a text. In Chopin's novel, the bourgeoisie system poses a

sense of oppression and exploitation to the lives of those of lower social classes. Patriarchal norms also prevent women, in particular, from expressing themselves and having agency over their bodies and their lives. The novel depicts how characters interact based on power relations promoted during the 19th century.

Haraway (2008) illustrates Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality by introducing the term "nature-culture." Based on material ecocriticism, there is a direct entanglement between the living and the natural, the things and words, the rules and actions, and the organisms and artifacts, equally and critically analyzed. In light of this reflection, human agency is not excluded from the non-human world agency. Indeed, human actions, or stories, constitute formative patterns that are always co-active. As Bennett (2010) says, "Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter" (pp. 12-13). Thus, it can be assumed that "in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web might well be to harm oneself" (p. 13). Humans, thus, do not simply claim or possess agency, yet they contribute or are present in a network of agencies. Material eco-critics believe that networks of agencies are apparent in what is known as narratives.

Alaimo (2008) further advocates for a reconsideration of nature as more than a "passive resource for the exploits of Man" (p. 244). The reality, based on this dynamism, emerges "as an intertwined flux of material-discursive forces, rather than as complex of hierarchically organized individual players" (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014; p. 3). Echoing these notions, Barad (2007) claims that meanings, realities, bodies, and identities are in active and reciprocal engagement with each other, supporting the conceptual understanding of material ecocriticism that rejects the exclusion of humans from the surrounding environment and natural world. It is at Grand Isle where Edna feels a strong sense of liberation and emancipation, contrary to the so-called suffocating atmosphere of New Orleans. Hence, ecocriticism becomes a powerful tool that drives changes in society by being "the study of literary representations of nature and the environment and the changing values associated with them, especially evocations of nature that might inspire changes in attitude and behavior" (Culler, 1997, p. 4).

In the same light, Dean views ecocriticism as the study of culture and cultural products, which can never be separated from the relationship between humans and Nature. In accord with the majority of mainstream eco-critics, Schlenz (1996) aims to view ecocriticism as the "dynamic interconnection with worlds we all live in – inseparably social and material worlds in which issues of race, class, and gender inevitably intersect in complex and multi-faceted ways with issues of natural resource exploitation and conservation" (p. 25). This view aligns with Alaimo's (2010) assertion on the impossibility of separating the human body from the environment it dwells. Similar to Barad (2007), Alaimo (2010) calls humans to explore their place in the world by accepting the notion that the human body "is a site of emergent material intra-actions inseparable from the very stuff of the rest of the world" (p. 156). It is therefore a call to examine, through critical analysis, how material human practices influence and shape human and non-human worlds. To think corporeal is then to see how humans are constituted by the world around them. Thus, Sen (2018) concludes that "ecocriticism acknowledges that the world is composed of the social sphere and the ecosphere, that the two are interrelated, and that the former cannot be considered outside the context of the latter" (p. 145). Addressing the fragility of life brought by Man's culture, eco-criticism, in its fourth wave, seeks to wage a war against the infiltration of factors such as sociopolitical, economic, and cultural structures. Edna finds herself unable to compromise or communicate with her surroundings, contrary to Madame Ratingolle who represents a typical conventional housewife.

Ecofeminism emerged as a branch of feminism, which perceives environmentalism and the relationship between women and Earth as a solid ground to analyze texts (Zein & Setiawan, 2017).

The concept of gender is utilized by ecofeminist thinkers to analyze the relationship between humans and the nature surrounding them, as contended by MacGregor (2006) in *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care*. In fact, the term “ecofeminism” was first coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) (Merchant, 1992; Warren, 2002). D'Eaubonne (1974) claims that adopting a feminist approach in ecology does not help maintain power and superiority in terms of gender; rather, it advocates for an egalitarian, collaborative society in which no superior group is found (Merchant, 2005). These days, different branches of ecofeminism have emerged, and they include spiritual/cultural ecofeminism, liberal ecofeminism, material ecofeminism, and social ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism analyses and the modes of application to social thought usually embody social justice, political philosophy, religion, ecofeminist art, contemporary feminism, and poetry (Merchant, 2005). By employing an ecofeminist analysis, the relationship between nature and women in culture, religion, literature, and iconography can be examined. Ecofeminism also highlights the parallels between the subjugated state of women and the oppressive practices against nature (Zein & Setiawan, 2017). These parallels include yet are not limited to perceiving women and nature as property. While men are considered the curators of culture, women are perceived as the curators of nature. Adams (2007) claims that ecofeminism emphasizes the interconnectedness between women and nature in the sense that the power of industrialization and scientific advancement resembles that of patriarchy, whether in respectively controlling nature or women. To categorize ecofeminist works, Charlene Spretnak (1990) suggests that it is essential to deeply examine the political theory and history, explore nature-based religions, and scrutinize environmentalism.

Referring to d'Eaubonne (1974), ecofeminism establishes connections between the subjugation of all marginalized groups, including the poor, women, children, or people of color, and the exploitation of nature, including land, water, and air. D'Eaubonne (1974) also argues that oppression and colonization from patriarchal societies have resulted in social injustices. One prominent understanding of ecofeminist theory is that capitalism demonstrates patriarchal values, revealing that the effects of capitalism and evolution have not benefitted women but contributed to a degrading split between culture and nature. In this light, Shiva (1990) claims that the coherence of socially-labeled values associated with femininity like nurturing are present among women and in nature as well. Women have a distinctive connection with the environment through their daily interactions. Shiva also (1988) argues that alternative modes of knowing, which are developed by capitalism and scientific approaches, have failed to remove the stereotypical images against women and nature. In the essay titled *Ecofeminist: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health*, Gaard and Gruen (1993) describe an ecofeminist framework that has four characteristics: 1) the materialist model of the universe that emerged from scientific advancement and the reduction of all things into mere resources, 2) the rise of patriarchal notions and the establishment of gender hierarchies, 3) self and other dualisms and the inherent power ethic it entails, and 4) capitalism and its claimed intrinsic need for the destruction of nature to create wealth.

Based on the aforementioned details, ecofeminism argues for the presumed low status of nature, women, and even animals as the basis for any literary analysis. Combining ecological and feminist approaches provides an opportunity to show and readdress the oppression of women and nature, and this is summarized by Gaard (2011):

“Eco-feminists have described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and nature that are significant to why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns. For example, the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing

whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body while simultaneously elevating all those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture and the mind. One task of Eco-feminists has been to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth” (p. 28).

Accordingly, eco-feminism is concerned with a feminist analysis of how women and nature are represented in literary texts. To proclaim that oppression in any form is directly or indirectly linked to the dualistic hierarchies present in the patriarchal mindset, patriarchal systems often contribute to widening the gap between binaries, such as mind/body, male/female, spirit/matter, etc., by creating scientific and religious bogeys. Over time, ecofeminism has become a multi-faceted theory that aims to examine how literature depicts, critiques, and redefines the relationship between nature, gender, and society.

Delving into representations of nature and culture in literary texts implies having a profound awareness of the complex interaction between nature, bodies, and political discourses. As Tuana (2008) states, “There is a viscous porosity of flesh – my flesh and the flesh of the world. [...] I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that affect the interaction. These membranes are of various types – skin and flesh, prejudices and symbolic imaginaries, habits, and embodiments” (pp. 199-200). All these membranes play a pivotal role in fostering mediated interaction. They also shape the way the body as a frame of embodiment is perceived. In this regard, the human self becomes an entity where interacting agencies pose authority, rendering it active rather than a “fixed, immobile, and self-referential identity” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 9). Being the epistemic and cultural aspect of living in the world, the human self is better understood through an array of cognitive, social, psychological, political, cultural, and political dimensions. Apparently, this view brings to the forefront of eco-critical readings a set of questions: Should we view ourselves as colonies living in one society and following one set of rules? Where do we draw a fine line between one human and another? Perhaps, the emphasis should be directed toward the outside and its impact on the inside and the sentient, where humans are “carnally immersed” (Abram, 2010, p. 123). Extending Alaimo’s theorization, Abram views the body as a “sensitive threshold through which the world experiences itself” (p. 230), driven by natural-cultural convergence and socio-political dynamics. Consequently, eco-criticism and ecological perceptions allow researchers and scholars to reimagine the self, reconsidering its place and position in the world.

In the end, literature is concerned with how humans exist, live, and work with and against nature. As Alaimo (2020) contends, “the pursuit of self-knowledge, which has been a personal philosophical, psychological, or discursive matter, now extends into a rather scientific investigation into the constitution of our coextensive environments” (p. 20). The idea of being alone in the universe is therefore nothing but a delusion. Likewise, as Hekman (2010) says, “The social is not separated from the natural [...] but rather they continually interpenetrate each other” (p. 14). Because matter is constructed by power and knowledge in this world, it is transformed into the maker of social reality, whose symbolic formulations are depicted in literary and cultural texts. Through texts, ecocriticism sheds light on how human beings narrate stories of co-dependence, co-existence, survival, and extinction. Through texts as well, material ecocriticism reveals that we are invited to recognize the fact that we “live in multiple worlds, some of them of our own but many of them not” (Sullivan, 2013, p. 147). This practice of eco-critical reading is an active participation in the differential becoming of the world, where everything is reciprocal, and where the *us* and the *it* “slip-side into each other” (Bennet, 2010, p. 4).

Analysis

Analyzing the relationship between Man and Nature entails an examination of the rules set by this Man, those which shape his character, behavior, and interaction with the surrounding natural landscape. In Chopin's *The Awakening*, the novel is set in 19th-century America, published in 1899. The depicted society is a Victorian, patriarchal one, where Creoles live. This society includes two distinct spheres: a female world that emphasizes domesticity and affective family relationships, and a public world whose center is the male, being executioners of production processes and political frameworks. Mrs. Pontellier, who is known as Edna throughout the novel mainly after she awakes to her individuality, was born to satisfy the needs of her family members. Her body was an integral part of the patriarchal system, serving as mere property, and this reflects the concept of material ecocriticism (Alaimo, 2010). Patriarchy in that society was put into practice through several oppressive behaviors, one of which is proclaimed by Leonce, Mrs. Pontellier's husband, as he regarded Edna as a vulnerable piece of personal property. Following her marriage with Mr. Pontellier and living in a luxurious, stately, and spacious house in New Orleans where several helpers and maids assist in organizing the house and maintaining cleanliness, Edna's struggle with patriarchal norms changes her life drastically. Whenever Edna shows some kind of resistance, Mr. Pontellier rushes to remind her with a reproaching tone when she ignores her habitual duties saying, "If it was not a mother's place to look after children, who's on Earth was it?" (Chopin, 1899, p. 12). A typical male figure, Mr. Pontellier was the embodiment of patriarchy and its best representative, managing his brokerage business and traveling very often to support the family financially, not emotionally, as expressing emotions was a mere weakness for a man living in that environment. "He thought it is very discouraging of his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (p. 6). Thus, what irritates a patriarchal man is *ignorance* and only *neglect*.

Upon moving to Grand Isle to spend the summer vacation, it became evident that "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of the Creoles" (p. 10). She was supposed to mingle with certain people on Tuesdays as part of her social duty, as her husband's social prestige necessitates. In this sense, Bennet (2010) claims that there are structural parallels between material forms in Nature and those in Culture. Indeed, Mr. Pontellier was a strict follower of social norms and customs, and Edna must be home, looking beautifully dressed and serving as an elegant hostess who entertains and welcomes the guests while Mr. Pontellier attends to his business matters. Doesn't this practice affirm patriarchy that pushed Edna to the extreme in self-humiliation? Doesn't this echo ecofeminists' view that women are as devalued as nature? It appears that Edna has lived for long years just playing the role dictated by patriarchy. She was a faithful servant of that system, whose oppression was the reason for her fall.

Furthermore, materialism is highly associated with patriarchy, as both emphasize ownership. For instance, "Mr. Pontellier was very fond of walking about his house examining its various appointments [...] He greatly valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his" (Chopin, 1899, p. 57). The emphasis on his value of ownership reflects the broader concept of *coverture* that disregards women of any entitled property, rendering them subordinate to males in societal and legal terms. This behavior implies that Mr. Pontellier's attachment to material objects, including his home, reflects a larger cultural perception that men attain status and identify themselves by what they possess, even their wives. Every patriarchal man wants, even his wife, to be perfect in everything, and this is evident in Mr. Pontellier's attention to detail.

The house that Mr. Pontellier incessantly cares for is luxurious, well-designed, and adequately furnished representing his sought and exercised sense of authority over the domestic life within.

However, Edna, as a woman, shares an opposing attitude, where the house becomes a site of imprisonment and stereotypical confinement, and this reflects a broader societal constraint imposed on women through oppressive patriarchal norms. This is why her eventual rebellion is against these norms and expectations. This fanciful house mirrors the strict patriarchal norms imposed against women back then. Rather than sitting there “inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate” (p. 7), Edna prefers to sit outside, allowing the mosquitoes to entertain her and nip at her “bare insteps” (p. 7), aligning with the concept of trans-corporeality that was developed by Alaimo (2010). Although mosquitoes bit her arms, Edna was not disturbed; rather, it was merriness that overwhelmed her. Indeed, it was at Grand Isle that “she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (p. 16) – the reserve of Man’s culture, which urges humans to return to Nature’s meditating and liberating embrace. However, the luxury of the house in New Orleans does not benefit her in communicating either with herself or with others surrounding her. It is a place that seems to be bound only to suffocation. This notion resonates with Lagergren’s (2006) emphasis on the interconnectedness between Nature and humans, revealing how the Man-built house is not one convenient for women’s individuality and autonomy.

Not only does Mr. Pontellier represent the typical patriarchal man, but other characters in the novel help understand the real-life depictions of domesticity. Madame Ratingolle can be taken as an example of a woman who is a traditional housewife and caretaker of her house. She even expresses her dislike of Edna’s manner upon deciding to move to a new house, saying “In some way, you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection, which is necessary in this life.” (p. 112). Madame Ratingolle’s words seem to touch the tip of the issue by describing Edna as childish and thoughtless. Women are considered unthoughtful and inconsiderate for making big decisions like that. In Edna’s case, it was not passion that drove her to choose a husband but the need to get married as this is the *custom*. Edna sought refuge in nature at Grand Isle, any place far from societal commitments and familial responsibilities. From an eco-critical perspective, the suffocating grandeur of Leonce’s house can be an emblem of the alienation that women are forced to experience. She also found it relieved to “pick “a few sprays of jessamine” (p. 61) and inhale the “odor of the blossoms” (p. 61) to find energy to survive the harsh reality in New Orleans. It was also the morning that was “full of sunlight and hope” (p. 122) that showed Edna no denial, “only the promise of excessive joy” (p. 122). Edna’s return to individuality and autonomy parallels ecological calls for reconnecting with Nature, as affirmed by Steele et al. (2023).

In light of Alaimo’s (2010) concept of trans-corporeality, human bodies are not separated entities, mainly from their surroundings. Rather, they are entangled, permeable, and co-constituted by material flows, including water, air, and organic matter. In Edna’s case, picking sprays of jessamine and inhaling their scent represents a trans-corporeal exchange as she absorbs vitality and sensory energy from nature to counteract her emotional exhaustion in the artificial and oppressive environment of New Orleans’ high society. Seeking relief in the odor of blossoms can be therefore perceived as a material connection between Edna’s body and the non-human world, implying that her overall well-being is ecologically oriented or situated. In a similar manner, the morning described as hopeful and shiny provides Edna with a renewed sense of possibility, which stems not from human systems such as marriage, which evidently failed her, but from Earth itself – warmth, light, and air are transformed into agents of existential and psychological renewal. This is how the human body becomes an open entity that is influenced and shaped by its material surroundings. From the lens of ecofeminism, it can be argued that Edna’s emotional dependence on nature symbolizes a symbolic revolt against the capitalist and patriarchal constraints of the society in New Orleans, which are rooted in female subservience and emotional suppression. As Edna seeks autonomy through flowers, sea, and sunlight,

she reclaims individuality and subjectivity, and this allows her to align herself with a non-oppressive, organic world. This understanding aligns with Gaard's (2011) argument that women seek sensory and spiritual liberation through nature to break the shackles of the male-structured domestic world. Accordingly, the moments of ecological entanglement of Edna's body in the act of practicing psychological resistance reflect the eco-ethical imperative suggested by ecofeminists and trans-corporeal theorists, claiming that autonomy and freedom are interconnected with ecological belonging rather than social conformity.

Reinforcing Edna's identification with the sea, sky, and natural elements in Grand Isle, Mademoiselle Reisz is one of the female figures in the novel who inspired Edna to seek freedom and defy norms. Miss Reisz's nature is akin to the untamed wilderness that resists oppression, exploitation, and colonization, and this is asserted by Maran's (2010) emphasis on the significance of communicating with the natural world rather than exploiting it. After listening to Miss Reisz's music, whose "struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column," (p. 29) Edna found herself engaging in aroused passions "within her soul" (p. 29), which were compared to the way the waves "daily beat upon her splendid body" (p. 29). Such an early encounter in the novel between Edna and Miss Reisz set the ground for an intimate, though short-lived, relationship in the later course of action. From the moment Edna was fascinated by Miss Reisz's music and personality, she considered her the model for female self-actualization. Indeed, Mademoiselle Reisz might have been one of the "pseudo-intellectual women-super-spiritual superior beings" (p. 76), as noted in a conversation between Dr. Mandelet and Mr. Pontellier. Mademoiselle Reisz refuses to perform the role sanctioned for a woman in that society, and this results in exclusion on both material and social levels. Such disentanglement from the collective body of Creole society aligns with the trans-corporeal theory in reverse she engages in acts of resistance against the toxic flows of gender norms, conformity, and social expectations that seem to shape the bodies and behavior of women. The establishment of a non-normative, embodied existence allows Mademoiselle Reisz to become an ethical embodiment of resistance, akin to environmental bodies that resist exploitation, as illustrated in Alaimo's metaphor. In the eyes of the society she lives in, she is a pollutant, implying a sense of deviation from norms.

On several occasions, Miss Reisz can be perceived as the "actual" free self of Edna's symbolic one. Indeed, Miss Reisz's abrasive character, hatred of domestic roles, and work as an artist render her a lesbian in 19th-century society. This perception is reinforced by Chopin's depiction of Mademoiselle Reisz using mythic language. The lady appears to be associated with witchcraft and magic. After playing music,

the shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic – turbulent, insistent, plaintive, and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. [...] It floated out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air. (p. 73)

This passage illustrates how music serves as a trans-corporeal agent: It starts with Mademoiselle Reisz's body, evident through her fingers while playing the piano, then moves outward, filling every corner of the room, deepening the shadows, and eventually floating out. Such depiction echoes a trans-corporeal flow – a material affective movement in which human feelings become an integral part of ecological and atmospheric systems. In fact, the music extends beyond the confinements of the place, entering the shared, breathable space between people and the environment. As a listener, Edna is intensely touched, as her body and psyche are elevated with the emotional turbulence of the sound. It can also be assumed that music interestingly creates a moment of ecofeminist sublimity. This is evident when Edna's inner world and natural surrounding intertwine. As she listens to music, Edna's intuition and emotion are elevated, and this state has not been experienced by the protagonist before due to

the long devaluing nature of male-centric systems. The transformative role of music, mainly in spreading into nature across the river and over housetops, symbolizes feminine expression that flows into natural landscapes and counterfeits an alliance between nature and woman outside social restrictions. Thus, the air in the room becomes a medium through which music, emotion, and selfhood interweave and move. The sound waves that travel through the air get intermingled with the breath and atmosphere, and this suggests that identity and emotion are not contained with the self but are co-produced with the surrounding environment. The musical moment plays a temporal role in suspending the constraints of gender roles, time, and space, facilitating their dissolution as Edna senses her emerging autonomy. The ecological and atmospheric realm becomes a site of potential liberation for those confined by societal expectations. The music that the lady played became a tangible entity, mainly the one titled “Solitude,” allowing Edna to feel connected to her while reaching a moment of catharsis.

Robert, the desired lover and inspirer, also plays a critical role in shaping Edna’s *Awakening* and spiritual connection with the sea. He is the salvager, the savior, the redeemer, yet the executioner, the scourge, the terminator. Edna’s relationship with Robert is steered by hidden passions and thoughts. While being around Robert, Edna feels well-cared for and valued. Her sexual consciousness gradually awakens yet without a clear closure due to Robert’s departure. Indeed, the most bizarre social self that a person might have lies in the mind of the one they are in love with. This social self has a direct influence on the most powerful euphoria and dejection. When Robert leaves Edna, her subsequent despair is laid eminent. Supporting Edna’s ego’s growth, Edna finds herself attracted to Robert who is only two years younger than her yet has different traits and attitudes in comparison to Mr. Pontellier.

However, Robert’s presence does not ensure comfortability all the time, even though he “does not lead the way; however, he directed” (p. 30). There are instances when Edna feels irritated because of his behavior. One instance is related to Robert’s physical intimacy. He is used to the Creole-touching style, as he leans on her. With such bodily gestures, Edna moves aside, reflecting a sense of oddness and indifference. Regardless of her cold attitude, Edna’s behavior shows her strength in rejecting any action she does not consider convenient with her own code of manners. Another idea that illustrates her relationship with Robert and his role in strengthening her ego is associated with the imposition of the will. When Robert starts teaching Edna how to swim, Robert somehow forces her to learn this skill, though she does not actually like it. When Edna cannot refuse his invitation to swim, she feels perplexed. There is this conflictual case between Robert’s ego and Edna’s. Her ego, even though becoming stronger over time, is still considered inferior to Robert’s ego due to Edna’s uneasiness and confusion in that environment and its pressures. However, it is an eventful truth that Edna’s satisfaction and inner strength are associated with Robert’s presence. “No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbing of desire” (p. 34), which were experienced every time Robert sat next to Edna. These feelings light the candles of her soul, allowing her to perceive things differently around her and get accustomed to mingling with people of different natures and behaviors. The same feeling of passion and relaxation that is aroused during Robert’s presence triggers feelings of loneliness and emptiness when Robert is absent upon his departure from Grande Isle to Mexico. It is thus merely justified that Grand Isle is a place where souls unite, not bodies, where one finds a true mate, not a stranger disguised as a husband. Grand Isle seems to overwhelm Edna with its sky, moon, and coziness, allowing her to dig deeper and deeper into her soul while attempting to find her refuge. Moving back to New Orleans poses myriad struggles, mainly as Edna unwaveringly puts her *Awakening* into practice. Grand Isle represents a place where flutters of love rise, where Robert first says, “I love you” (p. 132), and where Edna openly opens her arms and soul welcoming Robert with gratification,

only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream. Oh! you have made me so unhappy with your indifference. Oh! I have suffered, suffered! Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. (pp. 127-128)

Edna's statement does not only serve as an affirmation of her love, but it also reveals that Robert is the *One* whose role is pivotal in Edna's awakening that has been sleeping mutedly lulled by patriarchal norms. With Robert, Edna can firmly be aware of her personal desires and needs which Mr. Pontellier neglected and disapproved of throughout their marriage. She also cultivates her head and heart to resist her husband's attempts to sway her *Awakening*. This can be clearly understood when Edna says, "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (p. 127). He must not be "watching" (p. 31) any longer. Her impulse was leading her somewhere else, toward Nature. At every instance of confusion, mainly following any kind of service even if it is religious, Chopin displays Edna's contemplation at the sea, "how still it was, with only the voice of the sea whispering through the reeds that grew in the salt-water pools" (p. 41). To find pleasure, sitting under "the orange trees, while the sun dipped lower and lower" (p. 44) was what foreshadowed Edna and Robert's closeness. To find peace, Edna always walked down the beach "mechanically" (p. 135), her legs directing her.

However, things start to collapse inside and outside Edna when Robert decides to leave her, uttering his last farewell. She hates "noise and confusion" (p. 50), as they upset her to the extent that dressing becomes a trouble for her. His written words reflect those of someone who discovered that his superego is domineering to the extent that he cannot ignore his surrounding environment and its cultural values. Regardless of the extent of his love, Robert lacks the courage to translate his love into actions, and this makes her whole existence "dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing" (p. 53). This garment does not fit Edna's reality as a mother-woman. As she accepts his decision, Edna feels intensely hurt, suffering from the vulnerability and fragility of her condition. She considers life "very dull without him" (p. 54). Consequently, she seeks sensual happiness around Arobin, yet she ends up getting rid of her growing ego. In previous days, her ego, which was slumbering contentedly under the pervasive role of patriarchy, is metaphorically discovered by Edna through her unwavering attempts to float in the sea. This eco-critical sea, as Alaimo (2010) asserts, is an active agent that allows Edna to accomplish her awakening, illustrating how material anthropocentric interdependence challenges the idea of Man's power over Nature.

Upon experiencing a dulled sense of existence, Edna's psyche and body become worn down by these systems. Chopin's use of 'faded garment' alludes to a strong corporeal and material concept, as highlighted by Alaimo (2010). This expression reveals that Edna's autonomy and subjectivity are not only emotionally affected but also physically felt, strengthening the interconnectedness and intercorporeality between relationships, emotions, and bodily states. Comparing Edna to a faded garment also evokes an ecofeminist imagery: a once-livery creature reduced to obsolescence by societal expectations and patriarchal rejection to support her subjectivity. Accordingly, Edna's identity becomes expendable within the confinements of a system that strongly upholds norms and prioritizes social conventions over authentic interactions. This image can be directly linked to Alaimo's (2010) concept of material flows. The faded garment represents the end of emotional and material flow, where desire, affection, and vitality cease circulating. In light of the concept of trans-corporeality, Robert and Edna experience emotional stagnation, which can be perceived as a form of energetic entropy resulting from societal refusal to legitimize emotional and physical individuality. In Edna's case, her dullness is not internalized failure but a somatic implication or consequence of living in an environment where emotional expression is unyielding. This metaphorical decay is facilitated by oppressive cultural norms that turn Edna's body into an expendable object, just as nature gets

commodified and degraded. By denying reciprocity, corporeal dullness is experienced, and this mirrors how ecosystems and the feminized body fade under the rule of patriarchy.

Notably, Edna's self-identification with natural elements such as the sea, sky, and sunlight is intensely corporeal rather than representational. The world around her is no longer perceived as a backdrop to her life but as a vital and ongoing flow in which she is immersed. The sea extends from being a mere scenery to be viewed as agentic, requesting from Edna to wander her soul in the abysses of solitude, and this mirrors Alaimo's emphasis on body entanglement. Furthermore, Edna's spiritual home is not that space where domestic and patriarchal codes prevail. However, it is found in the naked communion with nature, reflecting an ecofeminist principle that views nature and the female body as mutually subjugated and exploited. As Gaard (2011) asserts, the natural world is not viewed by ecofeminists as a resource to be depleted but as a co-participant in the development of one's identity. Through Edna's transformation into a newborn creature, the re-inscription of identity is facilitated outside the confinements of gender roles, situating freedom in the non-human world.

Feeling like a soaring bird, Edna's individual utopia is where she constructs her spiritual home, one that is not distorted by norms.

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water. (p. 136)

The image of the bird with a broken wing strongly aligns with the tragic bind of ecofeminist autonomy. Edna seeks autonomy, and this is juxtaposed with the pains inflicted by societal restrictions. This image thus plays a critical role in warning individuals, mainly females, that seeking subjectivity and liberation in a patriarchal society comes with a cost, yet this should not hold an individual from seeking freedom nonetheless. As such, the gleam of sunlight, the clamor of water, and the voice of the sea all interweave into a seductive, unstoppable flowing movement. These forces are dynamic, and they act upon and through Edna's body. Oppermann (2014) highlights that material ecocriticism attends to the expressive potential of matter. The light and the sea are not passively described in Chopin's novel; rather, they are presented as active agents that participate in the ontological transformation of Edna's character and whole existence. Returning to elemental spaces therefore represents an act of reimagination and resistance as well as an interconnectedness with the flux of nature. The sensory symphony of touch, sound, and light demonstrates how the social and spiritual worlds are shaped by active, material forces that shape selfhood.

The hypnotic rhythm in the above image, while it comes with a sense of dejected lyricism, marks Edna's descent into the sea's abysses of solitude. In light of Bennett's (2010) views, matter possesses agency, and in Edna's case, the interplay between her cultural rebellion and natural surroundings creates material expressiveness, where the rules of Man and the laws of Nature co-create Edna's identity and meaning in life and in the text. It was the system of Man and his culture that tortured her to the extent that the system of Nature was the only remedy. It is also when all the reasons that eventually push Edna to drown herself in the sea are presented that her motivation to commit suicide is leveraged. Unlike the parrot at the beginning of the novel, Edna is the free bird in the cage in the last scene.

After falling in love with Robert being "awakened," Edna floats in the sea, realizing that "the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone" (Chopin, 1899, p. 136). Only at the sea could Edna feel alone, not lonely, for aloneness symbolizes her self-attuning, while loneliness refers to her isolation from her surroundings. Only there is Edna

able to make a choice for herself, once in a lifetime. This act of melting does only convey emotional detachment but also represents corporeal and ecological detachment, which mirrors how Edna's body and psyche become aligned with the fluidity and liquidity of the sea. Based on Alaimo's (2010) views, Edna's body in the sea is transformed into a contact zone: emotion undergoes dissolution as the body merges with nature. This realization illustrates Edna's detachment from the patriarchal world, which had succumbed her value and identity as a woman. Hence, she is re-absorbed into nature, which is no longer secured by Robert's emotional or social presence, and this highlights her transformation into an elemental being. Materially, the process of melting signals the flow and transformation of energy. It can be understood that there is a reflected sense of dissipation of emotional conflict, just like matter dissolved into a different state. Based on Oppermann's (2014) notion on material ecocriticism, the sea becomes a medium of ontological and emotional reconfiguration, and this provides Edna with an opportunity to be independent, fluid, and self-assertive. This sea, or the wider ocean, becomes a site of rebirth and reconnection with primal energies – an idea only possible by the emotional and material flows of water.

From an ecofeminist lens, nature and the female body are interconnected through marginalization and exploitation under the control of patriarchy. However, Edna's case presents a reversal: she finds liberation not through romance and pure love but through detachment from this love, as she seeks selfhood within the sea. This view aligns with Gaard's (2011) emphasis on the role of ecofeminism in empowering nature and women to resist domination. The act of floating in the sea conveys a sense of refusal of patriarchy, suggesting that Edna's loneliness is not imposed but self-possessed.

Edna's referral to the sea and her awakening to the Darwinian nature of the universe wakes up her freedom and points out the gender inequality and injustice of the natural life processes. To think of her children and further succumb to Darwin's survival ideologies eventually means ultimately giving herself over to a natural mechanism that humans can barely control and which, in the end, controls them. However, over time, Edna discovers that the door into the world is already locked and will always be inaccessible for one simple reason: she is a female. This is why the only refuge to overcome this dilemma is to take her life. The Darwinian sea, where life began, is the same natural landscape where a woman is captivated to re-create her own species. The sea represents the free, unstoppable character and sexuality that Edna embodies. Returning to the sea engulfs Edna, pushing her to swim courageously, signifying her rebellion till the last breath and implying that her feminine nature will always soar higher. Thus, Edna's death can be perceived as a natural process, reciprocal of her subjugated position in society. Edna's death in the sea becomes a celebration of her own self. It is the sea where her own self realizes its boundaries and potential as an individual in the first place. She does not belong to the herd nor does she succumb easily, where sexual politics is epitomized. Throughout her death in the sea, Edna attempts to embark on a journey where re-negotiating the survival of her species is further explored through an egalitarian approach. Far from the sea, whenever the weather "was dark and cloudy, Edna could not work" (p. 85). The sun played an important role in improving Edna's temper, allowing her to maintain "sureness and ease" (p. 85). Identifying with the sun, it was Nature that lights Edna's soul, not Man and his rules. This is how Edna could feel satisfied with her own work.

Immersing oneself in the expansive yet attractive emptiness of the sea allows Edna to drown herself peacefully – a peace attained once in an entire living. What truly attracts Edna is the following:

First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind beating in my face made me think--without any connection that I can trace of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass,

which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now. (p. 18)

Because it is said that *the sky is the limit*, Edna appears like a bird in a cage, trying to spread its wings. She puts effort into observing the world through her own lens and using her own eyes to understand what it means to be *alive*. This is why Chopin personifies the sea, saying,

But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. (p. 136)

The sea has power over Edna's life as if it is fastening a belt over Edna to let her get rid of her isolation in the world of Man and seek aloneness in the world of Nature. "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (p. 136). It was the sea that ultimately became Edna's forever companion, representing her autonomy and urge for expressing her feminine desire and equating her to Aphrodite, drowning in the water only to emerge as a full-grown woman in Man's culture. Hence, the sea catalyzes Edna's mobility in a society where patriarchy is the norm, allowing her to be in tune with her feminine instincts and needs. What other choices has she got? Resonating with her view when she first learned how to swim, Edna "seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (p. 31) – a place that is anything but intoxicated with authoritative power. The power she desired was that of Nature, not Man. Alaimo (2010) and Barad (2007) equally emphasize the human-nature interconnectedness, and Edna's hybrid identity, as a mother and as an individual, aligns with the ecocriticism's advocacy for transcending binaries and dichotomies to embrace a unified ecological approach.

Conclusion

Throughout the out-to-inner inquisitorial journey in Chopin's *The Awakening*, an eco-critical, ecofeminist perspective reveals that women's true refuge lies in returning to the laws of Nature and abandoning those of Man. If Edna is indeed liberating herself from the thorns of culture, patriarchy, and society, she demonstrates, in the pervasiveness of her ignorance, a plenitude of seductiveness and ambiguity. As a woman, she is neither corrupted nor culturally perfected. She is still pictured 'swimming' until the end. She represents a new-born line of species, driven by the forces of Nature and the material flows of agents to defy the pressures of Man. Her eternal resurrection lies in being in tune with everything – relationships, surrounding places, society, herself, and the natural landscape. Employing an eco-critical combined with an ecofeminist approach, it is revealed that the system of Man has conspired against Man himself, only to find a remedy in the system of Nature. Everything thus starts and ends in Nature, no matter how far someone drifts away. By lingering in a forbidden temple, Edna seeks individuality and liberation in the sea, sky, and vast landscape that does not restrain her, unlike societal and patriarchal norms. It is in the sea, where only the brave dare to vanquish cultural anchors in search of a harmonious identity. However, Man should always be reminded that a unified identity can never be attained except by being in tune with Nature, neither subjugating it nor controlling it. In Chopin's novel, Nature becomes a literal and metaphorical site of an individual's transformation, reflecting an inner desire for freedom from everything that burdens man, primarily Culture. Nature is therefore a space beyond Man's cultural systems and rules, and Edna's tension reflects a broader ecological conflict of dominance and harmony. By resisting anthropocentrism, we are reminded that to exist is to always resist – our way to dictate the trajectory of life. We belong to Nature, and to it we shall return. Nature is Man's most soothing ally.

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