



**An Ecofeminist Analysis of the Sea Image in Kate
Chopin's *The Awakening***

陈敏 Chen Min

Introduction

Condemned and banished upon publication for portraying female sexuality and marital infidelity, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was not appreciated until the rise of the women's liberation movement in the mid-twentieth century. Now it is hailed as an early vision of women's emancipation, a case study of 19th-century feminism and a landmark work of early feminist fiction.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin not only delicately reveals the protagonist Edna's inner world of instantaneous changes and her awakening sense of freedom and rebellion, but also gives a detailed and delicate depiction of the nature, with abundant and exquisite use of nature imagery, trying to explore and reveal the mysterious affinity between women and nature and "convey her ideal of constructing an ecological society in which human and nature, man and woman live interdependently and harmoniously" (Hao 117). Chopin's reflection on nature and women coincides with the theoretical viewpoints of ecofeminism, which believes that there exists "closely-knit connections between women and nature" (Gong 128) and that the tragedies of women and the ecological environment are both caused by the traditional patriarchal system and the dualism fixed in civilization. This paper aims to offer a re-interpretation of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* by analyzing the sea image in this novel from the perspective of ecofeminism.

The image of the sea runs through the whole story, with Edna's every psychological change and growth in terms of self-awareness closely related to the sea. The sea directly stimulates Edna's awakening, serving as a source of enlightenment and empowerment. The dangerous side of the sea symbolizes the social obstacles and barriers faced by Edna. The sea is also a symbol of refuge and rebirth, where Edna finds eternal freedom and rebirth after death. All these show nature's profound impact on women and the two's closely-knit connections.

1.1 The Seductive Sea and the Awakening Edna

The image of the sea appears at the very first time Edna's awareness of freedom and rebellion begins to awaken. It is when Edna is still referred to as Mrs. Pontellier (only after she awakens is she referred to as Edna), and she is blamed by her husband for not taking care of the children, which actually is only an excuse for her husband to blow off steam. Hurt and depressed, Mrs. Pontellier sits down in the chair on the porch and starts crying. "There was no sound abroad except...the everlasting voice of the sea, that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night." (Chopin 7) At this moment, a "strange and unfamiliar" feeling takes over her. "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish." (Chopin 8) The soft voice of the sea soothes this deeply repressed woman and evokes some unprecedented thoughts and emotions in her. So here the emergence of the sea image indicates the sprouting of Edna's awakening.

The sea is a source of enlightenment, with its seductive voice and sensuous touch awakening Edna's sensual instincts and stimulating her deep thought over herself. As Chopin depicts exquisitely in chapter 6, "The voice of the sea is seductive...inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace." (18) The sea is like a loving and caring mother with a broad mind, listening to Edna's inner voice with understanding and tolerance; the sea is like the goddess of wisdom, having soul-to-soul communications with Edna; the sea is like a lighthouse, casting the light which "dawn[s] dimly within her" and "shows [her] the way" (Chopin 17). Inspired and enlightened by the sea, Edna begins to "realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 17).

The sea is a source of empowerment, with Edna taking a new acquaintance of herself and beginning to realize and believe in her own power through her success in learning to swim. When Edna finally learns to swim after thousands of attempts, she

feels “some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul” and is “intoxicated with her newly conquered power” (Chopin 37). The sea endows Edna with courage and strength, making her realize her own strength for the very first time, and that night Edna rejects her husband's request for the first time, marking her awakening sense of freedom and rebellion.

1.2 The Dangerous Sea and the Social Obstacles Faced by Edna

In the process of Edna's learning to swim, the sea shows its unknown and dangerous side. Once, Edna swim alone a little too far. When she looks back toward the shore, she sees a “unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her”, which to her is like “a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.” (Chopin 37). Then “a quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses” (Chopin 38). The dangerous sea symbolizes the social obstacles and barriers faced by Edna. Awakened alone, Edna is like an alien and outcast of that patriarchal society, and with her “unaided strength”, she would never be able to overcome these social obstacles and barriers by herself, which determines her doomed fate of committing suicide in the sea, fighting against the oppression of the patriarchal society alone with her own life.

1.3 The Sea of Rebirth and Edna's suicide

According to Greek mythology, the goddess Venus was born amid the waves of the Aegean Sea, so the image of the sea usually has the symbolic meanings of “the mother of all life” and “death and rebirth” (Guerin 161) in literature, and Chopin is no exception.

When Edna first learns to swim in the sea, she is described as a “little tottering, stumbling, clutching child”. The sea is like Edna's spiritual mother, and with the new-born sense of self and ego-strength, Edna is like a toddler, who starts to look at this patriarchal society in a brand-new way and trying her best to fight against it.

At the end of the novel, when Edna stands naked in the sea and is about to suicide,

she, again, is compared to “some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (Chopin 156). And the image of the sea is prominent in the final chapter, with plenty of exquisitely detailed portrayals of the sea. “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 for a spell in abysses of solitude.” (Chopin 155) After taking off the bathing suit which symbolizes the oppression of patriarchal society, Edna commits suicide in the sea. She fights against the oppression of the patriarchal society with her own life and breaks from it. She finds freedom and rebirth in the embrace of “the mother sea”. Her body dies, but her soul is free and eternal.

Conclusion

From the perspective of ecofeminism, through Chopin’s detailed and delicate depiction of the gorgeous scenery of the sea and the protagonist’s inner world of instantaneous changes in terms of self-awareness and self-growth, we see how the sea enlightens Edna and how close the connections between nature and women are. Women share the same fate with nature and have “a more natural and spiritual harmony with nature” (Gong 128). Feminine consciousness and ecological consciousness are intertwined within the fabric of this marvelous novel, conveying Chopin’s ideal of constructing an ecological and equal society.

Works Cited

- [1] Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening* [M]. New York: Bantam Classic, 1992.
- [2] Gong Yubo, and Jin Yonglin. “An Eco-Feminist Approach to *The Awakening*” [J]. *Journal of Beijing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)* 10.2 (2011): 128-131.
[宫玉波、金勇林. 生态女性主义视角下的《觉醒》解读[J]. 北京交通大学学报(社会科学版)2011年第10卷第2期,第128-131页.]
- [3] Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* [M].

Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2012.

- [4] Hao Yan, and Wei Xiangyu. "The Construction and Disenchantment of Patriarchal Order: *The Awakening* in the Light of Eco-Feminism" [J]. *Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Technology* 26.5 (2019): 113-117.

[郝燕、魏相宇. 父权秩序的建构与祛魅——《觉醒》的生态女权主义解读 [J]. 兰州工业学院学报 2019 年第 26 卷第 5 期, 第 113-117 页.]