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## POWERLESSNESS OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF MADAME BOVARY, ANNA KARENINA, AND THE AWAKENING

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### ABSTRACT

More or less every society in the world presents a constricting environment for women; and restricted by the traditional roles of lover, wife, and mother women often have little or no physical, social, or intellectual freedom of movement. Literature extensively discusses women's issues, even though varied in themes; some works provide self-realization for women and urge them to discover their dignity. Most of the writers create female characters such that their social and psychological problems allow the feeling of alienation. Both sociologists and psychologists use the concept of alienation to explain certain social and individual phenomena and alienation in literature can be feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, self-isolation, and social isolation. Classic examples of this type include *Madame Bovary*, a marvellous French work by Gustave Flaubert, *Anna Karenina*, a masterpiece by the prominent Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, and *The Awakening*, work by American author Kate Chopin. In these three novels, we can trace the slow evolution of women's capability to detach themselves from male dependency, and notably all the three authors employ sexuality and infidelity as themes of assertion and independence. The female protagonists of these novels outstandingly reject women's stereotypes and social expectations, and the rewards of their struggles are social alienation and self-destruction. These novels fascinatingly depict anxieties, the sense of rootlessness, powerlessness, meaninglessness, depersonalization and the rejection of the cultural values and social norms with no alternative.

Keywords: social alienation, self-destruction, powerlessness.

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### INTRODUCTION

When talking about gender stereotypes, we normally think about oversimplified concepts of male and female behaviour. All around the world, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries, men still have superiority, and everything depends on them for they are leaders of the family who has the responsibilities of making money, providing security and assuring the well-being of the families. In addition, society views men as

courageous, intelligent and strong, while women as submissive, weak, and dependent. Women have to conform to men's requirement and have to suffer due to the conventions made by society. Literature extensively discusses women's issues, even though varied in themes; some works provide self-realization for women and urge them to discover their dignity. Most of the writers create female characters such that their social and psychological problems allow the feeling of alienation. Both

sociologists and psychologists use the concept of alienation to explain certain social and individual phenomena and alienation in literature can be feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, self-isolation, and social isolation. Classic examples of this type include *Madame Bovary*, a marvellous French work by Gustave Flaubert, *Anna Karenina*, a masterpiece by the prominent Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, and *The Awakening*, work by American author Kate Chopin. The female protagonists of these novels outstandingly reject women's stereotypes and social expectations, and the rewards of their struggles are social alienation and self-destruction. Even though these novels have different historical and culture background and have written in different places and times, 1856, 1866 and 1899 respectively, they portray the mainstream problems imposed on women. The three nineteenth-century female protagonist, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary and Edna Pontellier fail in their struggles out of the boredom of married life and commit suicide. Being capricious and showing their own will in a patriarchal society they become victims of their societies, and their comparable lives and final solutions lead to fascinating questions regarding women's lives and their quest for meaning in life. These novels fascinatingly depict anxieties, the sense of rootlessness, powerlessness, meaninglessness, depersonalization and the rejection of the cultural values and social norms with no alternative.

Russian writer, Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy had a deep interest in seeking a greater understanding and justification of life and is often cited as pinnacles of realist fiction. Regarded as one of the pre-eminent authors of all time, he used ordinary events and characters to explore topics like war, religion, feminism, etc. All his works are characterized by uncomplicated style, careful construction, and deep insight into human nature. Like many other great Russian writers at that time such as Ivan Turgenev and Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky he utilized literature to reflect society and politics, and to criticize the government. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the classic story of doomed love narrates the life of passionate Anna Karenina: her unhappy married life, her tragic affair with

dashing Count Vronsky, and her determination to live life on her own terms which result in her final destruction.

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert, a leading exponent realistic school of French Literature, in his most famous work *Madame Bovary*, deconstructs the prim, idealized vision of the perfect nineteenth-century woman, simply by giving thoughts, feelings, and desires to the heroine. He presents the protagonist simultaneously as a perfect woman and a nightmare woman of his period. Through the life of Emma Bovary, who becomes extremely disenchanted with the provincial stifling role she is forced to play, before and after her marriage, Flaubert tries to show an objective, intimate perspective on the troubles of womanhood during a restrictive and judgmental time period. Emma, a sensitive, romantic and intelligent woman who desires for elite, passionate, romantic, and adventurous life lacks the power to fulfil her dreams. She ends her own life for revolting against the society which restricts her powers.

Kate Chopin, the U.S. author of short stories and novels, had different lifestyles throughout her life, and that provided her insights and understanding which permitted her to analyze late 19th-century American society. She with substantial concentration and emphasis wrote about women's lives and their constant struggles to form their own identity within the Southern society of the late nineteenth century. Because of its challenging and adulterous content, her novel *The Awakening* first published in 1899 was considered scandalous and widely criticized at that time. This book depicts the story frustration of a late twenty-year-old American wife and mother, Edna from the old Kentucky bluegrass country. She very well knows that the social conditions in which she lives will never allow her real desires to get fulfilled, which leads to a frustrated married life and alienation from society. In this novel, we can see her growth in understanding and self-awareness and her rejection to live a powerless life which leads to her final self-destruction.

More or less every society in the world presents a constricting environment for women; and restricted by the traditional roles of lover, wife, and

mother women often have little or no physical, social, or intellectual freedom of movement. This fact creates a dilemma for those women whose imagination and creativity require outlets other than that society allows them, and it results in a major conflict for Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and Edna Pontellier. Emma lives among citizens who obey the mores and rules of the French *bourgeoisie*, while society expects Edna to follow the duties and responsibilities of a Creole wife and mother and the fetters of Russian social system confines Anna. Especially the marital status of the three women becomes the cause and the reason of their boredom; and they become capricious and live according to their own will, which results in their alienation from society. Charles (as a doctor), Léonce (as a businessman) and Alexis Karenin (a government official) have an excessive concern about upholding their social status and give priority to their work. These three novels present married women with their oppressive problems, and the feeling of alienation troubles their lives which finally lead to suicide. Here the protagonists who represent women of seemingly different milieu rely on the same solution to a similar problem.

Emma Bovary, the sensitive, romantic and dreamt bourgeois heroine unceasingly attempts to free herself from her unexciting existence and searches for an imaginary life. She diverts her attention to romantic novels and tales of chivalry to gratify her desires for travel and adventure and her cravings for life's passionate experiences. She becomes so fond of the imaginary world that she fails to adjust to reality and the desires and illusions which controlled her life inevitably break when she finally faces reality. Emma's expectation that marriage would bring a luxurious life falls short when she marries Charles Bovary, a provincial doctor, whom she marries to escape from the dull routine of her Father's farm. For her Charles symbolized romance but later she finds him the epitome of all that is dull and common. Emma's powerlessness truly began with her union to Charles, whose mediocre existence became an embarrassment to her but she lacks the ability to break free from it. Charles had none of the qualities Emma wished to have in her husband: he didn't

have turbulent passions, refinements or interest in mysteries. Moreover, he failed to understand her and thought she is happy in the dull, uneventful life of domestic routine. But "she was waiting for something to happen" (Bovary, 48) to escape from the dull life and even though she has no idea what it would be like, "each morning, as she awoke, she hoped it would come" (Bovary, 48). She wishes upward social mobility; she aspires to escape the middle-class life and wanted to become a part of the upper community and spends money extravagantly in an attempt to create an environment of elegance and refinement.

Even though several people in town remarks her to be an intelligent woman being the part of a patriarchal society which considered female to be inferior in intelligence, her intelligence and sensibility find no outlet for expression. Living in a conservative society where conformity and domesticity are considered as ideal feminine virtues to conceal from the world, and from herself, her active sexual strivings and intellectual ambitions. Yet at heart, she knows that she does not belong in such a banal life, and she craves for the adventure found in a sophisticated city like Paris. We can consider Emma as,

a young woman far superior in intelligence and sensibility to her acquaintances, ambitious, sighing for life in Paris, suffering from frustration [who has] unwisely married (Margaret Tillet, 5).

The greatest influence in her life, romantic novels stimulate Emma to spend her whole life searching for perfection in love. Emma feels so discontented with her life that she commits two adulterous liaisons, and this momentary escape from the boring marriage has provided her with romantic bliss she has never found in her home. But she miserably fails to find happiness in her romantic relationship with Rodolphe Boulanger and Léon Dupuis. Rodolphe, who has the financial power to whisk Emma away from her dull life, deserts her, and, as a woman, she lacks the power to flee on her own. At first, Leon's and Emma's case seems similar, both has dissatisfaction with country life, and has a dream of bigger and better things. But being a man Leon has the power to realize his dream of moving to the city,

whereas Emma has to stay back, bind to a husband and child. We see that men in Emma's life treat her in a patronizing manner, partly, because of her beautiful appearance: Both her father and Charles Bovary see her as a flower too delicate to be left to languish on a farm, Rodolphe seduced her because she embodies more beauty than his present lover and later, at the opera, Leon become seized with emotion when he sees her in her stunning blue dress. Consequently, her appearance draws men to her in an effort to lavish her with their false sense of love.

Emma's spiritual defiance of the typical "feminine" role, her yearning to travel, to experience romantic love, and to be free from the clutches of a conventional marriage manifest themselves in her desire for a son. Emma faints when she gives birth to a girl.

Emma's tragedy is that she is not free. She sees her slavery as not only a product of her social class — the pithy bourgeoisie as immediatized by certain modes of life and prejudices — and of her provincial milieu — a tiny world where the possibilities of accomplishing anything of note are few ~ but also, and perhaps most importantly as a consequence of her being a woman.(Llosa, 140)

Now she has brought a new female into the world to endure the same fate. Even though she knows that she lives in a man's world, she often flaunts tradition and desires the same freedoms a man possesses, she represents, "someone who desires power but lacks the means to obtain it" (101). Emma observes that for a woman, "always there is a desire that impels and a convention that restrains" (Bovary, 101). No one notes her despair, and even Emma's attempt to seek counsel from parish priest fails miserably. After marrying Charles, the choice to commit adultery becomes her only way to exercise power over her destiny, which she chooses instead of being obedient to social rules and customs and it results in her tragic end. We can consider the catastrophic end of Emma as the culmination of both her unrealistic romantic expectations and the suffocating atmosphere for women in nineteenth-century France.

Anna Karenina, the wife of Count Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin a Russian nobleman who provides his wife a luxurious living, however, does not feel contented in her life, for she longs for love and romance from her husband which he fails to provide. The high society of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* doesn't treat men and women with equality, and this becomes evident in the adultery done by Anna and her brother Stiva Oblonsky. Even though, both Stiva and Anna commit adultery the consequences of their actions are exceedingly different. Stiva's feels that a man like him doesn't love his wife "[who is] the mother of five living and two dead children, and only a year younger than himself" (Karenina, 8) is not something to repent, and he only feels remorse for not succeeded in hiding it from his wife. It offers the reader a glimpse of the status of women in marriage and also exhibits the disparity between men and women for Stiva justifies his infidelity, and he finds it hard to accept that a man in his position would not commit adultery.

Dolly, Anna, and Kitty lack any real autonomy or socially recognized power, and we can regard them as powerless in the legal and civil sense, yet all three have, to a greater or less extent control and power within the household which has always been experienced by every woman. Even though like women in numerous societies, they too lead a life without any active participation in political and civil society, and regardless of their common plight as powerless women, there is a disparity in their situations. Each of these women has different and distinct forms of influence and lack of control, and interestingly each woman's particular power source of power also becomes her weakness. Dolly's maternal conscience and concern compel her not to take any stern action against her husband she says to Anna that "I can't cast him off: there are the children, I am tied. And I can't live with him! It's a torture to me to see him" (Karenina, 148). Being well aware that he husband doesn't repent and also that she sacrificed her beauty and charm serving her family she forgives her husband and thus betrays herself. She becomes ready to sacrifice her self-respect and suffer pain for her children and family, and Stiva's reputation and position in the society remain intact, while society ostracizes Anna

who lives the same situation. Anna's ability to elicit powerful sexual and emotional response also becomes her weakness that binds her to the fatal relationship with Vronsky and has to suffer the psychic pain due to the agonizing remorse at the loss of her son Seriozha. Kitty's youth and innocence make her impuissant to Levin's ideas. In the novel Tolstoy describes Kitty as preparing for the battle: first when she prepares to go to the ball where heart gets broken and second when she gets ready to nurse Nicholas, Levin's brother, in his illness. In these two cases, what Tolstoy perceives as the "battlefields" of a woman's life should really be marriage, nursing, and birth and this shows that basically, he associates everything that goes with family life is in female domain.

Anna's most prominent qualities, her passionate spirit and determination to live life on her own terms she has to face the contempt of society. Even though dishonoured, she shows the audacity to face St. Petersburg high society and repudiates the exile to which she has denounced, and this becomes evident when she attends the opera being very well aware that she will meet with nothing but scorn and derision. We see Madame Kartasov defame Anna by saying that it will be a disgrace to sit next to her at the opera and her friend Princess Betsy being afraid of society refuses to visit her and says that people will "throw stones at her" (Karenina, 529) if she associates herself with Anna.

Karenin's whole existence consists of professional obligations; he remains a bland bureaucrat whose personality has perished under years of dedication to his duties with little room for personal whim or passion. Karenin's this dispassion disfigures his home life and serves as the backdrop to Anna's rebellious quest for love at any price. For instance, he even viewed his betrothal to Anna as an act of duty like everything else in his life and never admired Anna's uniqueness but only appreciated her role as wife and mother. Anna who yearns for a total escape into a love affair of unbounded passion discovers it in Vronsky who abandons social standing and professional status in pursuit of love, only to discover that Vronsky's passion has its limits. Anna remains powerfully committed to the governing

principle of her life that love is stronger than anything, even duty. She repudiates Karenin's plea to stay with him simply to keep the outward appearances of an intact marriage and family, and in the later stages of her relation with Vronsky, Anna mostly broods over the fact that he no longer loves her but continues with her out of duty only. Her expulsion from civilized society in the later part of the novel symbolizes her renunciation of all the social conventions we usually acknowledge dutifully. But her insistence on living according to the dictates of her heart in a male-dominated society resulted in her self-destruction.

*The Awakening*, the novel about unconventional love and women's freedom depicts the spiritual and physical "awakenings" of a young married woman, Edna Pontellier, vacationing on Grand Isle. Edna being trapped by the confines of her gender and her culture succumb in her efforts to establish an identity excluding her husband and children. Confronted with the perpetual dispute between society and self, Edna seeks solace by making her own personal space and eventually returns to the solitude of Grand Isle. Edna fights against the social and natural structures of motherhood, which forces her to be known by her title as the wife of Leonce Pontellier and mother of Raoul and Etienne Pontellier, rather than a self-defined individual. By focus on two other female characters, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz along with Edna, Chopin exhibits Edna's options of life paths. These women serve as the models and men contrast Edna with such women and obtain their expectations for her. But for Edna, these two role models lack the freedom and individuality she hopes for and realizes that her aspirations go against both society and nature. The ineluctability of her fate as a male-defined creature leads her to a state of despondency, and she emancipates herself the only way she can, through suicide.

Edna blessed with wealth, and the pleasure of an affluent lifestyle becomes a woman of leisure, except only in social obligation. Her gender greatly hinders this endowment because as a woman she has to rely on her husband completely. Her husband bestows her affluent lifestyle and fixes her place in society which she could not acquire on her own, and

this vulnerability prevents Edna from being truly empowered. For obtaining independence as a woman, and as a person, Edna must renounce the stability and comfort she has in the relationship with her husband. Edna's father has the firm belief in the patriarchal system, and he tries to enforce these beliefs upon his daughter throughout her childhood, and she chooses the older Mr. Pontellier because she thought that he has a different view on how a woman should be treated in a relationship. She wanted to defy her father, but Mr. Pontellier emerged as a strong believer in the patriarchal society, and her aspiration to marry a man, who would offer her a marriage of equality, and a sense of freedom become unsuccessful. Leonce Pontellier considers her as "a valuable piece of property" (Awakening, 5), that completes the perfect life for him. He never valued her feelings, he always talked to her with self-importance and can't accept the fact that his wife "evinced so little interest in things which concerned him and valued so little his conversation" (Awakening, 9). He feels that the only role she has to play is that of a mother and a loving wife. He can't even explain how dissatisfying it would be when "wife failed in her duty toward their children" (Awakening, 9).

But most of the females of her society well played this role of a delicious subordinate woman and Edna notes that these women never complaints about their role and they simply accepts their fates. For them, their husbands and children meant everything and "[they] esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals" (Awakening, 18). Among the women who play a delicious role the most important was her friend Adele Ratignolle who becomes "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm" (Awakening, 18). Edna feels a reluctance to give up her individuality for her children, even though she would give her life to them. Edna, on the other hand, never desires to become a "mother-women" and neglects her children throughout the novel. She sees them as an impediment to her independence and feels relieved when they stay away, and irresponsibly leaves them under the protection of the pregnant Madame Ratignolle to enjoy the company of Robert. Once she says, "Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice

herself for her children, or for any one" (Awakening, 16). She never wanted to spend her life as a powerless individual. Edna can't live a life that confined women to the sphere of domesticity and consequently, has an unbearable feeling of emptiness. Edna readily gives up her life for her children but not her individuality.

The love of Robert Lebrun, a dramatic and passionate twenty-six-year-old single, whose affections and attention inspired several internal revelations in Edna. She becomes lively than before, and awareness of her independence and sexuality increased. She began to enjoy the moments of freedom, whether alone or with Robert and recognizing their intense the relationship between him and Edna, Robert honourably withdraws himself from Grand Isle to avoid consummating his forbidden love. After that Edna pursues an affair with the town seducer, Alcée Arobin, only to satisfy her sexual needs and being never emotionally attached to him, Edna maintains control throughout their affair. Even though Robert later returns and confesses his love he never dares to escape the ties of society, and now it prompts Edna's most devastating awakening. She eventually realizes that Robert lacks the ability to fulfil her desires and dreams and also haunted by thoughts of her children, Edna began to feel an overwhelming sense of solitude. She feels loneliness in a world in which she found no feeling of belonging; she finds only one answer to the ineluctable and heart-rending restrictions of society. She returns to the site of her first moments of emotional, sexual, and intellectual awareness, Grand Isle, and finally escapes into sea Grand Isle. As she goes inside the soft, embracing water, she ponders about her liberty from her husband and children, Robert's inability to understand her, Doctor Mandelelet's words of sagacity, and Mademoiselle Reisz's courage and the novel leaves the question, whether her suicide becomes a cowardly surrender or a liberating triumph.

#### CONCLUSION

In these three novels, we can trace the slow evolution of women's capability to detach themselves from male dependency, and notably all the three authors employ sexuality and infidelity as



themes of assertion and independence. The expression of sexuality presented in the three novels equates it to a form of liberation, the liberty to do as one pleases, regardless of gender, and society's moral, civic or religious judgement. This choice brings about the understanding that the suppression of women throughout the time span of the novels served to benefit male dominated society and the protagonists' adultery signifies their spurning of abnormal social norms that obstruct a woman from attaining complete human dignity. The women in these novels who showed freedom in their choices was brave and courageous and becomes the voice of women fighting against social conventions but their fight results in alienation, and they confide to suicide as a solution for the alienated person. The protagonists of these novels search for an identity that cannot be found due to choices they have already made and they also lack the ability to change the society. It becomes fundamentally impossible to create a new identity at this point in their life. They realize that their discovery of sexual desires, resisting their husband's rules, and the parting from home and family will not make them happy but only help to break social rules. Their new-found necessity for freedom and their love for their children create conflicting emotions within them; this conflicts and their perception that they can never completely release themselves from the clutches of patriarchy make them realize that they can never be contented being either the "patriarchal" woman or the "emancipated" woman. Their family and friends do not provide support for their emancipation and their own feelings of guilt for renouncing their children make them consider their choices, and this leads to their suicide, and it is not a romantic, heroic or pathetic end, but the depiction of a woman's need to find peace of mind.

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