

Kate Chopin'in Kısa Öykülerinde Yeni Bir "Ben" in ve "Kimlik" in Doğuşu

The Birth of A New "Self" and A New "Identity" In Kate Chopin's Short Stories

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ÖZET

19. yüzyılın sonuna doğru Amerika'da sosyal eşitsizlik ve ekonomik zorlukların etkisinde kalan yazılar gündeme taşınır. Bu eserler sosyal protestolar içerir. Irk ayrımı ve cinsler arası eşitsizlikler Kate Chopin gibi Güneyli yazarların eserlerinde ele alınmıştır. "Uyanış" adlı romanı ile ünlenen Amerikalı yazar Kate Chopin yazdığı öyküler ve gerçekliği savunan denemelerle gerçekçi yazının savaşımını sürdürmüştür; bütün kadınların cinsel özgürlüğü ve hayatı vardır diyerek yaşadığı dönemde feminizmin edebiyattaki en önemli temsilcilerinden biri olmuştur. Kendi özgün biçimini geliştiren Chopin öykülerinde ataerkil toplumun kadına biçtiği rolü yadsımış, özelliklerine sahip olamamış ve seslerini duyuramamış kadınların egemen kültür tarafından dışlanışlarını ve nasıl temsil edildiklerini simgeleyen kadın tipleri yaratmıştır. Gerçek doğasını tanımaya çıkan bu kadın karakterler "ben kimim?" sorusunu soran ve bağımsızlığını kazanma sürecinde geleneksel rollerinden sıyrılarak benliğin romantik ve idealist yönü ile duyumsal tatların tümüne düşkün hedonist ve gerçekçi yönünü yansıtlar. Bu çalışmanın amacı baskılananın karşı koyduğu bu öykülerde egemen kültürle çeşitli sorunları olan kadın kahramanların benlik arayışları ve üstlendikleri geleneksel rollerden sıyrılma mücadelelerini vurgulamaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kadın, ataerkil toplum, evlilik, aşk, tutku, bağımsızlık, özgürlük.

Çalışmanın türü: Araştırma

ABSTRACT

It was a common belief of 19th century Victorian society that unrestrained sex was a danger to the social order, as it was supposed to threaten the mental health and procreative capacity of human being. The sexual desires of women were increasingly regarded as inappropriate and unnatural and were denied. In other words, sexual desires and passion hardly existed for most of the 19th century American literary heroines. In contrast to this general tendency, Kate Chopin (1851-1904) repeatedly deals with tabooing subject of women's sexual urge and sensual experiences. Although Chopin matured in a traditional, southern, upper-class society, which greatly repressed women, her personal desire for autonomy emerged in conflicting emotions throughout her life. She manifested these contradictions in her personal life and her writing. Throughout Chopin's life, beginning with her childhood in Saint Louis and progressing to her experience as a wife, a mother and finally a writer, she maintained an independent spirit; yet, she always struggled with the repression she felt as a Victorian female. This paradox shaped her literature as she progressed as an autonomous woman. Famous for her novel *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin has always been underestimated as an author of short stories many of which nearly excel her so-called "master piece". Not only *The Awakening* reveals her close examination of female sexuality but also several of her short stories challenge cultural assumptions about the role of sex in a woman's life: Kate Chopin's protagonists commit adultery, renounce sex, or ever turn their affections towards another woman respectively. In American Literature, because of their economy, Chopin's short stories can be considered to be more successful than her novel as she uses fewer words to express the same theme. She was known as an author with strong views about woman, sex and marriage- views that were well in advance of her times and challenged the prejudices and sexism of her society. Love and passion, marriage and independence, freedom and restraint-these are themes of her work distinctively realized in story after story. When Edna Pontellier, the heroine of *The Awakening* announces "I would give up the unessential; I would give y-my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin, 2004; 80), she is addressing the crucial issues for many of Kate Chopin's women- the winning of a self, the keeping of it. So do the Chopin women differ from the women of sentimental fiction. In sum, through her stories, Kate Chopin undermines patriarchy by endowing "the other", the woman, with an individual identity and a sense of self, a sense of self to which the letters she leaves behind gives voice. Her writing challenged the American literary tradition by her bold expression of woman's longing for sexual and personal freedom in a way that was previously unknown. The aim of this study is to present the limitations on women in the traditional role of wife in conventional marriage and the narrow confinement of and the limited range of possibilities for self-fulfillment for women in society through the characters of Chopin's daring stories.

Keywords: Woman, patriarchy, marriage, love, passion, independence, freedom.

The type of study: Research

INTRODUCTION

A popular local colorist during her life time, Kate Chopin is now recognized as a major figure in nineteenth century American fiction and as well as in feminist literature. She took an individual step towards women's liberation by exploring and representing the complex range of human emotions in

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several of her short stories many of which were to push out the boundaries of what were considered as acceptable subjects for fiction (Baxter, 1996; 233). Chopin's writing challenged the American literary tradition by her bold expression of woman's longing for sexual and personal freedom in a way that was previously unknown. Many of her heroines were preoccupied with the desire to escape the confines of a stifling marriage. She admired independent and active women, and, by refusing to make men the central target of her women characters' despair, she focused more directly on the institutions and social frameworks in which women were trapped (Taylor, 1989; 161).

As a woman, Chopin saw the destructive effects of the "cult of true womanhood" and started writing as a way of expressing her frustration and disappointment with life. She was different from the typical author of the late nineteenth century and she dared to write of the private needs of women. By not only admitting the possibility that women have strong sexual needs of their own, but stating it as pure reality (Krauss, 2008; 4). Chopin, a master of the short story genre consistently used her fiction to fight for greater freedom and fulfillment for women in their social, sexual and spiritual roles and clearly expressed her expanding thoughts on the female condition in her short stories. As Sandra Gilbert says in her introduction to *Kate Chopin: The Awakening and Selected Stories*: "From the first, they were studies of emancipation and often specifically of female emancipation" (1984; 20).

SEARCH FOR A NEW IDENTITY AND A NEW SELF

The Story of an Hour which Kate Chopin wrote in 1884 is the most prominent example of a woman who is trying to ascertain her identity. Evans sees this story as a way of letting out the oppressed feelings by relieving disappointments and enslavements (2001; 125). The story is about Louise Mallard's unexpected response to her husband's sudden death in a train accident. Having heard of the sudden death of her husband, Mrs. Mallard finds out that she will get rid of her bounds and live an independent life from then on. She is given that chance, quite by accident, and the story tells of the hour in which this freedom is given her. Throughout the story Chopin skillfully exposes her character and communicates the significant change she goes through during this one hour.

As Papke states *The Story of an Hour* details a very ordinary reality and analyzes that moment in a women's life when the boundaries of the accepted everyday world are suddenly shattered and the process of self-discovery begins (1990; 62). Mrs. Mallard, grieving alone in her room, slowly recognizes her freedom both in soul and body. She understands the destruction of oppressive patriarchal marriage and womanhood ideology. She is trapped by conventions like many women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She has been denied any opportunity for self-expression of freedom of choice. She has been expected to be an "angel in the home" who should know her place in the society and who should be a conventional woman, but after Mr Mallard's death, she finds her "self" which has no value in the world of men. As her whispering "Free! Body and Soul free" reveals, the metamorphosis is not only spiritual but also has a physical quality.

The story ends surprisingly when she discovers her husband is actually alive. After seeing him safe and healthy, Mrs. Mallard's heart fails. The doctors announce she died of "heart disease- of joy that kills". Mary E. Papke suggests that what murdered her was, indeed, a monstrous joy, the birth of individual self, and the erasure of that joy when her husband and necessarily, her old self returned (1990; 134). Through Mrs. Mallard's death Chopin raises a lot of questions about marriage. As Howard contends, she questions the married state making it clear that marriage confines the wife's freedom, stripping her of the chance of being herself (1997; 3).

Another story that reflects the hardships a woman has to endure is, one of Chopin's most famous works of short fiction, *Desiree's Baby*. The main character of the story, Desiree, an orphan girl, turns out to be a beauty as she grows old and attracts the interest of a young farm owner, Armand Aubigny. In the story, Aubigny has an "imperious and exacting nature" and a strict rule with the negroes of the plantation. Desiree loves her husband dearly in spite of his rough and harsh ways. But when their baby is born "not white", Armand has rejected both her and their child. He accuses her of being of black descent and makes her leave. The story ends with Desiree's disappearing into the bayou with her baby. For Desiree there is no where to go and her suicide with her son is the inevitable result of the despair she feels, knowing her

husband will never accept her or the child because of the drop of black blood in their veins. Her husband, along with the society in which they live, will not accept her or her son because of their supposed racial identity, and Desiree's hopeless view of the life in front of her drives her into the bayou.

Ironically, only days after Desiree leaves, the husband discovers a letter written by his mother to his father:

But above all, she wrote, night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belong to race that is cursed with the brand of slavery (Chopin, 2004; 2007).

With this revelation, readers are left with the irony that it is Armand who is of mixed race not Desiree. Robert D. Arner explains Desiree's situation by stating:

The story makes clear that Armand does not really love Desiree, he thinks of her as a possession, a rich prize to display to his friends and to flatter his vanity. And Chopin as a narrator comments on the crucial and unfair nature of the fate of the heroine – a fate brought on by the cruelty and unfairness of the racial categorization and stereotypes she saw in the society around her (1996; 141).

As it is emphasized Desiree is not very much different from a merchandise that is bought and sold because she is beautiful and attractive and is left in the middle of the street when she no longer is useful and considered as a threat to the honor of men. In this story, Chopin portrays the male dominance openly but cunningly besides the main theme of blending white and black races. While a man can build his own name and honour, a woman can realize her identity only through being a property of her husband.

Like in *Desiree's Baby* in *At the Cadian Ball* woman is an object at the disposal of men. The story which takes place at a ball comprises different love stories intermingling with each other. Bobinot loves Calixta but Calixta is interested in Alcee Labelliere who is an owner of a big farm. At the end of the ball appears Clarrissa who is socially equal to Alcee and consents to his proposal. Subsequently, Calixta has to accept Bobinot's offer. In her book, *Kate Chopin*, Barbara Ewell depicts Calixta's situation from a female perspective by stating that she can charm Alcee, but she cannot claim him. Her failure is the conventional punishment for a woman who dares to be openly passionate; she is deserted by the rich hero and deemed lucky to get anyone, even stodgy Bobinot (1986; 81).

In both of the stories Chopin tries to show how male society dominates the fate and happiness of females and how influential the patriarchal order is in the lives of women. Chopin puts forward very clearly that the most important factor which plays a great role in decision making is the social conditioning. Although Alcee is interested in hot spirited Calixta, he chooses self-spoken, respectable lady socially his equal. On the other hand in *Desiree's Baby* Desiree is thrown onto the streets when she cannot fulfill her traditional duties.

Another female character that Chopin depicts is *La Folle* in *Beyond the Bayou*. Chopin's giving black women a speaking voice in the story is something worthy. In doing so she asserts the worth of the black's world and her right to write about it. The story is about a black woman who has no social place to live in. She is oppressed, silenced, and denied identity. Through the story, as place is connected with social status, Chopin gives us a detailed description of the physical surroundings, the conditions that surround *La Folle* and restrict her freedom. She lives in a cabin standing on a land that does not belong to her. Related to place Chopin underlines *La Folle's* great desire to change her place and great desire to change her life and herself. When she calls for help and hears no response, she determines to act and be herself. *La Folle's* crossing the bayou is an act and to which a number of values can be attached. Firstly, this act seems to be symbolic of breaking race barriers, subverting the hierarchy that keeps her in the lower class, rejecting the designations of whites, and determining to be herself. This act of crossing the bayou marks the beginning of a new era in *La Folle's* life, it is an initiation into a new world in which *La Folle* is a subject.

Commenting on the story, Lipsitz points out that white racism systematically prevents black people from representing themselves and their own interests (1993; 129). In *Beyond the Bayou* Chopin's treatment of the theme of self-identity reflects her belief that identity is both vital and attainable. Her stories show that identity is paramount and central to one's existence, accordingly, her characters relegate love to self-assertion (Bauman, 1997; 71).

Kate Chopin's female characters are often trapped between limiting choices, many must choose between her life of an artist and the life of wife and mother. As an author, she simply drew attention to the restrictions put upon women in her time, which made it impossible for them to live full lives.

In Chopin's next story *Wiser than a God*, the dilemma between woman and traditional society is more evident. In this story the author creates a truly self sufficient woman, Paula van Stoltz. A promising piano player, Paula, comes from a poor but cultivated background. One day she is asked to play at a ball held at the house of the rich Brainards, whose son soon falls in love with her and proposes. In the beginning, she is prone to accept the offer expecting that marriage will bring security and respect. However, in order to devote herself entirely to her art, she decides to reject the offer, thereby rejecting the social code of female commitment to marriage. Paula is a type of woman who wants to be active and she denounces the passive role for women in a male dominated society. Conscious of her choice, she lays down her rules; aware of her "self", she molds her own destiny.

Chopin's handling of Paula's situation reflects not only her respect for the decision of a young and independent woman but also her impartial treatment of the sexes. Paula's choice is an exhibition of struggle over the traditional standards in which Chopin is deeply interested Paula's rejection of traditional female roles is a good example of revolt against the patriarchal order and its view of woman as an object (Fluck, 1982; 159).

The other example of a truly self-sufficient woman in Chopin's *The Kiss* is Nathalie. It is the story of a woman who has not internalized the moral values of her time. Like Paula in *Wiser than a God*, in *The Kiss* Nathalie tests the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women and explores the psychological and societal ramifications of her actions and desires. The heroine of the story, Nathalie who is clever enough to realize that a person can't have everything in this world, chooses money while planning to keep her contact with the man she is in love with after her marriage to Mr. Britain.

That is unacceptable treatment of marriage in America in 1890's. She is not to be afraid to deceive her husband and hungrily await Harvey's kiss. As Lattin states that Harvey's suggestive and permissive attitude towards Nathalie indicates that she has experienced her sexual awakening with him long before marriage. She seems to be perfectly aware of her needs and does not feel ashamed of her sexuality (1982; 224). But when Harvey refuses to kiss Nathalie, stating that "*I've stopped kissing women; it's dangerous*" (Chopin, 2004; 217) the heroine realizes that she cannot have both passionate love and unlimited riches in her marriage; she must choose between the two, a choice many other women have been faced with, as well.

Following *The Kiss*, Chopin published the story *Her Letters*. It is Chopin's first story to deal explicitly with unfaithfulness, and it is her first to present an unapologetic adulteress (Evans, 2001; 121). This story focuses on an unnamed high society man and woman living in the city; it opens as the woman sits at her writing desk in front of a fire in her luxurious apartment. Buried within her desk is a packet of love letters exchanged years ago with a lover, and she contemplates whether to burn them in the fire or to preserve them to read again in the future.

For this unfaithful woman, the letters are her only link to a time in her life that was filled with true happiness and "*untempered passion*". These letters keep her secret, physical but at the same time real inner-self. They stand as witnesses of her true nature. She does not feel the passion for her husband that she once did for the lover of her letters.

The marriage of the wife in *Her Letter* is similar to that of Mrs. Mallard in *The Story of an Hour* – a marriage where man loves woman, but woman feels her passion, will and freedom stifled. So, it becomes a simple judgement written on the struggles between social and sexual roles and the hidden self is the reality that conventions and superficial perceptions only conceal and distort (Ewell, 1986; 106).

Chopin's next published story which carried the commentary on traditional and expected role of a wife is *A Respectable Woman*. The story presents Mr. and Mrs. Baroda as rich, elite owners of a plantation. It begins with Mr. Baroda's invitation for his old friend, Gouvernail to spend a few weeks at the plantation. As soon as he arrives Mrs. Baroda begins to realize that her puzzlement and agitation over Gouvernail is due to her sexual and romantic attraction to him. In order to get away from a dangerous situation she decides to go to New Orleans. Clearly, in Mrs. Baroda's world, to act upon such impulses would be outside of the realm of respectability for a married woman.

Staying faithful to her husband and not even entertaining thoughts of infidelity keep Mrs Baroda within the realm of respectability in her society. However, the story ends with Mrs Baroda's proposal the following summer to have Gouvernail out to visit the plantation again, stating "I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him" (Chopin, 2004; 213). Her assertion that she will be "very nice" to Gouvernail upon his return alludes to more than a simple relationship between hostess and guest. As Evans states that *A Respectable Woman* allows Chopin to deal indirectly with topics she might not otherwise have been able to discuss, topics like the erotic yearnings of respectable white women. It is clear that Mrs. Baroda has intentions for Gouvernail's second visit, intentions she is not sharing with her husband and that are not within society's definition of respectability for married women (2001; 247).

So, Chopin gives Mrs. Baroda the power to do as she wishes, free from punishment or chastisement, even if her choices aren't what society deems "respectable". It is an open questioning of female passions and it draws the delicate connections of sexuality,

The other heroine who tends to break the chains of traditional concept of women in society and initiates the way to female emancipation is Mildred Orme of *A Shameful Affair*. The story involves the dishonorable awakening of the clever but rather conceited young woman who spends her summer on a farm in Missouri. On that farm, she is bothered by a young man, Fred, first with his indifference then with his looks. The sexual and emotional feelings Fred arouses in her are completely unknown to Mildred. As the 19th Century Victorian society called sexual desires outside marriage unwomanly, Mildred feels ashamed of her feelings. But when she realizes that the young man does not take the initiative, she follows him to the river and borrows his fishing rod. While fishing together the young man can no longer resist the temptation, kisses Mildred and runs away by leaving Mildred stunned by shame at her own passionate response to the kiss. She has never experienced love or sexual desire before. Although she appears to be a rather liberal-minded and independent woman, which is suggested by her reading of Ibsen, her wish to spend the summer all by herself and her high esteem of intellectual skills, she is not able to free herself from the dominant moral codes of her time.

Consequently, she is unable to indulge freely in her delicious feelings, but fears them, and tries to suppress her passionate nature. For a traditional society, "the shameful affair" is "that stolen kiss" but in large sense it is also the social, cultural, religious and traditional taboos that conceals the pleasure of sexuality from women.

CONCLUSION

Kate Chopin was first woman writer in her country to accept passion as a subject for serious, outspoken fiction. Revolting against tradition and authority; with a daring short stories which we can hardly understand today; with an uncompromising honesty and no trace of sensationalism, she undertook to give the unsparing truth about woman's life. She, "pioneer in her time", deeply focused on the amoral treatment of sexuality, of divorce, and of woman's urge for an existential authenticity. She is in many respects a modern writer, particularly in her awareness of the complexities of truth and the complications of freedom. She took an individual step for women's liberation by exploring and representing the complex range of human emotions in several of her daring short stories. In her short fiction, as Koloski points out that she offers her readers not an ideology, not a coherent system for remarking the social world, but a strategy, a way of working with what she has, of bringing to life what she knows (1996; 13).

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