

Analysing Edna's Character in Chopin's novel *The Awakening* through Sullivan's Theory of Inter-personal Relations

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Abstract: *This paper examines and evaluates the character of Edna in Kate Chopin's novel 'The Awakening' from psychological perspectives in the light of theory of inter-personal relations by Sullivan. This character evaluation is carried out with the help of the textual analysis of the novel. The theory puts light on the relationships between people and their significant part in shaping the personality of individuals through communications with other people (characters). This article helps in interpreting multilayered personality of Edna in the perspective of her relationships with other characters in the novel and their crucial impacts on her mind. Most importantly, despite Edna's controversial inter-personal relationships, the paper examines that Edna's character is strong-willed and ostentatious, who at least makes independent decisions and resists societal challenges and familial constraints.*

Key words: *inter-personal relations, Inter-personal theory, relationships and societal*

Introduction

Inter-personality theory of Sullivan (1953; 1954; 2013) has greatly helped researchers in analysing and characterising human disposition and personality in different phases of life of both people in real life and characters in literature such as stories and novels. Sullivan defines personality characteristics as *'the things which people can see, hear, and observe in their relationships with other people'* (Kurraz, 2015, p. 365). This is the central hypothesis of his

theory of personality. In a novel or story, personality has fundamental role so far behaviour and actions are concerned. In this regard, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* shows Edna as a representative with dynamic themes that characteristically show women dilemmas in the light of Sullivan's theory of inter-personal relationship. Edna is a complex character whose inter-personal associations are grounded on inner and outer characteristics of her own individuality and identity. Thus, Sullivan's theory is an effective tool to analyse Edna's character psycho-analytically. Human personality gets revealed through gradual process, peculiarly, via interactions and interactive ties. This idea reveals that personality traits are evaluated and judged through its inter-personal contacts and communication with people in surrounding.

The study examines Edna's dysfunctional part played in the web of personal and inter-personal attitudes, actions and relations from the perspective of Sullivan's concept of inter-personality. The area of analysis is based on three main concept of Sullivan's theory such as inter-personal relationships, dynamism and reactive anxiety and tension. According to Sullivan (1953), human character is intertwined in complex circumstances in which human life is characterised in bearable pattern of inter-personal environments (Kurraz, 2015). Sullivan's focus revolves around inter-personal relations and interaction which change from time to time under variable circumstances. Edna wrestles with her ego and id which make her personality a Pandora's Box. Thus, by interacting with different male characters, Edna becomes complex personality and pays the price.

This paper also examines Edna's dynamic traits of her personality in the form of self-dynamism and the conceptual images of the self and other characters. Despite the fact she has intimate relationships with different male characters, she remains alien to herself and others. Her striving for an independent identity and dignity is questioned by herself as well as by other characters that are in contact with her. She is conscious about her desire and societal norms and attempts to build her own image as a lady with sturdy determination and will. Eslamie and Mazandarani (2015) argue that to know one's own personality, one should essentially understand the societal context of individuals where they grow up and are brought up. In this regard, Edna's character develops and transforms from dual and indecisive personality to a completely self-compromised woman who can take decision for her being and leave her home and relatives without consultation with any one.

Furthermore, the concept of *dynamism* of individual self in Sullivan's theory is an important point of personality. Sullivan is of the view that self-system is associated to every man, whose power is conventional feature of personality which is reliant upon experiences (Sullivan, 2013; Kurraz, 2015). This system enables one to reduce anxiety and enables to cope up with dire situations. In this regard, Edna goes opposite to system, though she succeeds to guard her position and activities but fails in reducing her inner strains. Edna, in order to handle the

situations, builds up different inter-personal relationships. However, all goes useless which further diverts her personality leads her to a chaotic end.

Literature review

Harry Stack Sullivan (1892- 1949) the American psychologist, propounded a theory on personality and stated that individuals establish their personalities within their social contexts. Sullivan argues that a personality cannot be disentangled from the system of inter-personal association in which the person stays. Sullivan's theory of inter-personality focuses on different developmental stages such as infancy, childhood, the Juvenal era, pre-adolescence, early adolescence, late adolescence and adulthood (Feist and Feist, 2008, p.213). Most importantly, Feist and Feist (2008) argue that Sullivan's developmental stages are associated with concepts based on inter-personal relations regarding intimacy and lust. Sullivan (2013) argues that people attain sound healthy relationships with others when they go through the experience of both lust and intimacy toward the same person. However, if both lust and intimacy are ignored or dejected by the person associated cause tension. Tensions take place consciously as well as unconsciously. Tensions like anxiety, drowsiness, hunger and sexual excitement are either observed at conscious or unconscious level (Feist and Feist, 2008).

Tensions are categorized into two classes i.e. needs and anxiety. The need ignites tensions because it creates biological inequity between an individual and physio-chemical environment (both inside and outside of the organism) (Feist and Feist, 2008). Anxiety, on the other hand, is a force that hinders the sound inter-personal relations and blocks learning, memory and perception (Feist and Feist, 2008). Sullivan (1954, p.100) states that *"the presence of anxiety is much worse than its absence"*. Thus, he argues that tension hides or appears when shifted into action and causes energy transformation. The energy transformation characterized as a typical behavior patterns, which according to Sullivan are dynamism. Tension, thus, is of the most complicated of all the dynamisms. Dynamism leads to self-system. It is contrary to inter-personal experiences and raises sense of insecurity (Feist and Feist, 2008; Sullivan, 1954). Thus, these conflicts are resulted in denial and distortion of inter-personal experiences. Sullivan (1953) calls security operation as controlling brake on individual and social development. Sullivan (1953; 1954; 2013) held views that our mental maladies have inter-personal origin and can be comprehended through patient's social background.

These inter-personal muddles escort man to dissociated reactions preceded by schizophrenia. According to Sullivan (1953) loneliness, creepy emotions, low self-esteem, substandard reactions with others enhancing anxiety are result of detached reactions. People with detached reactions behave or act contrary to their normal activities. Therefore, Sullivan's inter-personal theory comprises the postulates that unhealthy personality. Its development is the outcome of dissociated reactions and difficulties (Feist and Feist, 2008). One may argue that Sullivan's theory of inter-personality, though is not appreciated by critics at large, has its own worth.

Analysis and Discussion

Chopin's characterisation of Edna Pontellier's personality

In novels, characters play a pivotal role in the flow of its plot. It is characterization that makes the story interesting and suspicious. Characters, mainly, in novels are trigger to promote and reverse the whole scenario of the story. Characters are delineated in the shape of inter-personal relationships with one another. It is an inter-personal relation with other characters in the novel that change identity, behavior, reactions and future of characters affected by relations. Kate Chopin's characters, too, internalize images moulded in the web of their inter-personal relations and actions. They encounter significant internal conflicts. According to Karami and Zohdi (2015) Chopin's female characters especially, are main protagonists who are encompassed with their psychological disorders. Chopin opens discussion with internal conflicts of characters and shows central role of women in explaining their future to get done their desire. Further, discussing Karami and Zohdi (2015, p.430) highlight that Chopin focuses that women would constitute their identities through their link with their husbands and society.

Edna Pontellier is the main protagonist in Chopin's novel *The Awakening* who is the main conflict and with whom rest of the characters are associated. Edna broadly suffered from indecisiveness and lack of interest in domestic life. This shows that she is psychologically disturbed due to the environment created by her and by networked characters. Some of the feminist scholars and theorists propound that Edna Pontellier, Chopin's heroine is an epitome of feminism. However, according to Tas (2011) that from Chopin's heroine Edna's attitudes, it is hard to argue that Edna strives for freedom of women, and she may be considered as an epitome for feminism and feminists. Edna, being in dilemmas, wrestles with ego and id and is indulged in psychological disorders due to fragile ego and id (Tas, 2011).

Edna demeans herself by considering herself cumbersome on the earth because of her indecisiveness and utter anxiety. Karami and Zohdi (2015) discuss that there is much conflict between life, death and freedom among women where they find that there is no importance of their feelings. Edna's feelings are opposed to an old-fashioned woman's feeling. She challenges patriarchal oppression and inequality of status. She wants independence of her caged soul and body. Edna is not a typical Victorian woman who is engulfed with the fire of confinement into the four walls of house. As Hooti and Torkamaneh (2011) remark that in 19th century the typical role of women was to stay at home, beget children, and to attend to their husbands. Edna is exception to these confinements. She regales all desired liberties regardless of feminist ideology. According to Walker (1979), in Chopin's novel, no support for freedom or equal status of women has been emphasised. Moreover, Walker (1979) views Edna's awakening is related to an instinctively sensual process that leads to an absence of structure over her own emotional state and activities. Tas (2011) continues to say that it is challenging to predict that Edna desires for women's liberty so that she may be regarded as a model for feminists.

In the novel, Edna Pontellier is an unconventional woman who develops her inter-personal relationships according to her own free will, vision and scheme. Her personality revolves around her different communications with other men such as Mr. Pontellier, her husband, Robert and Alcee Arobin. Edna's relationships with her husband are not in good terms. However, she has two children and a loving husband. She enjoys all worldly facilities as a woman aspires to have. What makes her discontented is lack of inner peace and recreation (Tas, 2011). Thus, her married bond is at stake. Having two children and prosperous house, she realizes that her marriage life lacks love. Her children are dear to her but she, eventually, takes them as burden. Her husband is loyal to her and provides what a woman wants to have in the house. Despite those provisions, she grows up a rebel and becomes reluctant to carry on good terms with her husband (Chopin, 2008). She is now in anxiety. Bazerman (2001, p. 175) argues that "an anxiety is a frequent accompaniment to life, ...that almost all people show same difficulties in living and cooperating with each other, and many love revere dysfunctions". Edna is so obsessed that she withdraws from doing household work which she used to do willingly, even, she objects to sleep in her husband's bed. She negates to perform duties of a wife and a mother. When her husband goes out of station to do some business, she leaves his house and stays in smaller house. This is, in fact, due to the conflict that emerges in her mind that leads her to loneliness and lays open opportunities of inspiration in her life. Her rebellious bent of mind adds to unique trait of her personality (Bazerman, 2001; Tas, 2011). She bears both good and bad personality traits. Rebellious attitudes to patriarchal norms and the act of undermining her ego reveal her good qualities but being ignorant to her duties being a wife and a mother are bad symptoms of her personality. Therefore, one may say that Chopin's Edna, practically, is a realistic character who shapes personality with her personal instincts, longings and activities.

The first tense inter-personal communication between her and her husband is unavoidable sexual relationships. Edna manipulates that Mr. Pontellier does not draw his attention to the way woman needs to have in her married life. She recognizes that Pontellier is lacking in inter-personal relationships. Edna challenges conventional bonds of marriage between a husband and a wife. Mr. Pontellier's neglecting reaction on recognizing the truth of Edna's forgery becomes mechanism for self-realisation. Conversely, Edna scatters an abnormal self-perception of her factual disposition and begins to fight for her freedom and identity.

Mr. Pontellier considers Edna his personal property that frames his initial image about Edna's personality. He is disappointed whenever he did not receive a slight attention from Edna and becomes an irritant. As in the novel *The Awakening*, he returns late night and finds her wife sound asleep, he calculates:

He thought it very discouraging that 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 (Chopin, 2008. P.9).

On the other hand, Edna views that her husband is an ignorant man. Edna wants her husband's full attention. She requires self-respect and self-esteem that was denied in societal norms. In this way, Edna's inter-personal relationships with her husband are left at stake. These psychological stresses dominate Edna's and her husband's relationships and disturb their characters. Edna struggles to shape her personality by independent identity in terms of decisions, behaviors and actions as narrated in the novel:

Mrs. Pontellier was beginning 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. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman to twenty-eight (Chopin, 2008, P.17).

In the light of Sullivan's theory (see Sullivan, 1953; 1954; 2013), Edna faces two ways of psychological stresses. The first way arises from society in the form of 'id' and the second way arises from her inner side in the form of 'ego' as discussed in the novel:

At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life- that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions (Chopin, 2008, P. 18).

These stresses push Edna into the state of anxiety and fear which later become obstacles in her planning of leading an independent life. This anxiety drags Edna to another stress that she becomes a rebel. She decides not to be submissive to her miscalculations and re-examination of her self-hood. She wants to germinate a new human spirit with well-organized personality irrespective of defined patriarchal society as mentioned in the novel:

A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, - the light which, showing the way, forbids it (Chopin, 2008, p-17).

She became submissive to her impulse and was not following what society expected from an average man as briefed in novel:

she was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility (Chopin, 2008, p. 37).

According to Karami and Zohdi (2015, p. 434), Kate Chopin reveals skilled portrayal of the woman who can fight for a sound claim for liberty of selfhood. Edna, therefore, tries to shed off the definitions of patriarchy. This slogan is a sign of transformation. Thus, Edna becomes a strong revolutionary against the conditions which European women used to live in. this idea is illustrated in the novel:

She should only realize that she herself-her present self-was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect (Chopin, 2008, p. 45).

Edna loses her relations with her husband because she thinks that her life has become troublesome and impossible with Mr. Pontellier. Under this stress, Edna changes her mind when she is introduced to Mr. Pontellier's friend, Robert, a businessman. Robert, contrary to Mr. Pontellier, is more careful and concentrating. Edna, under a dire need, starts considering Robert the best substitute of Mr. Pontellier. Now, another turn comes in Edna's personality. She assumes and verifies with different meetings with Robert that he is a person embedded with specific qualities she is looking for. From this perspective, Sullivan (1953, p. 110-111) highlights the upright and depraved disposition in the light of his 'psychodynamic theory' of the development of the self, 'the self-dynamism'. This dynamism is named 'the self-system', is a fundamental mechanism of the personality of the individual, security which needs to be guarded from anxiety. Edna develops such discouraged relationships with Robert to diminish her latent anxiety. She tours with him and reserves feelings for him. Such societal degraded practice of a married woman grows Edna as a sustained personality.

According to Sullivan (1953, p. 63), the self-system is 'conjunction dynamism' and suppresses personality adjustment. Human activities and experiences are contradictory with self-system that exploits human security and enhances to flourish security actions to put down inter-personal tensions. In this connection, Edna promotes her own dynamism to secure only herself and tries to maintain her personality through illegal inter-personal relationships that could be vulnerable for a havoc end. Dilemma brought her to take disruptive decision under severe anxiety and indecisiveness. Sullivan (1953, p. 98) argues that anxiety is 'disruptive force in interpersonal relations.' In order to encounter such anxiety, dynamism is a characteristic conduct which gets birth from either physical necessity or strains and tensions. Edna's affair with Robert frees her from values, taboos and sense of family. Edna defies her ego and overcomes id. She is now obstinate to flourish relations with Robert. According to Tas (2011), Edna Pontellier plainly disparages search of women's rights. She rather strives to attain amoral cravings. She is eager to sacrifice all her matrimonial, familial and societal bonds for the sake of her instinctive feelings. Edna feels different person and gets Robert to be the best partner she would be proud of sacrificing husband and children. Tas (2011) argues that while having relationships with Robert, Edna also neglects her children and quits duties being a wife and woman of the community. Another change in her personality takes place when Robert draws himself back from her and departs on his way. Edna gets annoyed having broken relationships with Robert. Robert, on knowing that Edna is a married woman, suspends relationships and moves to Mexico. Edna becomes frustrated due to Robert's separation. She, now, is controlled by her disturbed psychological stress and feels another person on the face of earth. Her belief is shaken by the separation as pointed out in the novel.

She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vendor, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic (Chopin, 2008, p. 58).

Edna's internal tension, now, is high. Robert's suspicious attitude adds to the chaotic fury so far inter-relationships between her and Robert is concerned. Edna's mind is shaped with the wavering anxiety which is caused by her own actions and disruptive attitude towards others. This attitude makes her awkward to herself as well as to other characters surrounding her. Her inability to harmonize broken relations makes her personality controversial. After having separated from Robert, she develops relationships with Alcee Arobin, a layman. She involves with him not emotionally but sexually. Tas (2011) views that depressed by Robert's absence, she keeps a sexual affair with another person, who is said to be philanderer. Despite the fact she has illegitimate relationships with a philanderer, she does not give up thinking about Robert. She is now in severe attack of anxiety as it is mentioned in the novel:

As Edna walked along the street she was thinking of Robert. She was still under the spell of her infatuation. She had tried to forget him, realizing the inutility of remembering. But the thought of him was like an obsession, ever pressing itself upon her (Chopin, 2008, p. 59).

Edna discovers that she is another person who does not have social inter-personal chain of relationships because she fails to flourish for long. She presses herself to the state of estrangement and alienation. In fact one cannot rely on any one longer. Edna wants to be infused in the relationships that she does have. As mentioned in the novel:

if ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union (Chopin, 2008, p. 61).

Therefore, one may show agreement with saying of Tas (2011) who argues regarding Edna that generally it is a married woman's struggle to fulfill her sexual freedom.

Conclusion

Edna's personality is strong-willed, self-determined but problematic and indecisive. Her character changes amidst other characters whose involvement and interactions lead Edna to dilemmas. From the perspectives of Sullivan's theory on inter-personal relationships, Edna develops her identity irrespective of societal norms and taboos. She denies performing duties of a wife and mother and decides to give importance only to herself. She takes decisions relevant to her desires contrary to an average woman in the world. Her personality is entrapped with insecurity and anxiety and unease produced by her inordinate feelings and ignorance of other characters. Her personality transforms from pragmatic mechanism to dogmatic mechanism. Edna realises that she is not the part of the social and inter-personal network of relations. Edna's personality is full of strong determination for free will and personal desires. She rejects her prime duties being wife and mother and enlightens herself with rebellious actions and behaviors which remain open while interacting with other characters. She fails to maintain balance in her personality. In the fit of anxiety and tension triggered by her personal activities and movements and attitude to other people, she transforms into a deep schizophrenic personality.

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