

Exploring the antithetical trends of feminism in Chopin’s “the story of an hour” and Kafka’s “the metamorphosis”

Dr. Atteq ur Rahman

Assistant Professor of English, Islamia College University, Peshawar

Yamima Edwin

PhD Scholar of English, Islamia College University, Peshawar

Myra Edwin

PhD Scholar of English, Islamia College University, Peshawar

Abstract

This research analyzes the antithetical trends of feminism in Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” and Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” by accentuating the feminist and social trends prevalent in the societies of the two writers. The study adopts the approach of feminist literary criticism to the feminist themes and subtexts in the two mentioned literary pieces. The research shows that the texts in focus manifest female characters striving against repressive patriarchal practices and societal expectations, but in their own unique ways. Chopin’s story traces female freedom and self-awareness while Kafka’s fiction underscores the impossibility of such efforts under patriarchal configuration. This paper also highlights how societal values and cultural norms influenced the rendering of gender roles in literature during the twentieth and nineteenth centuries.

Keywords: Antithetical, Feminism, Patriarchal Norms, Liberation, Self-Discovery

Article History:

Received: 25th May, 2023

Accepted: 19th Jun, 2023

Published: 13th Jul, 2023

1. Introduction

Although the traces of feminism in literature can be seen throughout history, it attained prominence in the literature produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was in the 1960s that feminist literary criticism emerged as a discipline and since then it has been employed in the textual analyses of literary works. Such analyses spotlighted female resistance and their struggle in the male dominated patriarchal societies, laying emphasis on the portrayal of gender roles in such societies as well. Dr. Rubina Saigol and Nida U. Chaudhary (2020) rightly elaborate the development of feminism in the following words: “Each manifestation of shifts in women’s activism and feminist articulation was a product of its time in that it was a response to the global and national events which restructured state and society in significant ways” (p. 5). Women writers, such as Kate Chopin and Virginia Woolf, were indeed sensitive to all such events that influenced women and their rights. They used literature to voice their disapproval of the oppressive patriarchal structures. It is worth mentioning that not merely women writers contributed to the advocacy of feminism in literature, but also several male writers, such as Gustave Flaubert and Franz Kafka amongst others, did not hesitate in expressing the plights and social position of women in their writings.

Kate Chopin published her short story entitled “The Story of an Hour” in 1894 in an attempt to delve into the theme of female subjugation in patriarchal societies. The story centers on a lady named Mrs. Louise Mallard who learns of her husband’s untimely death and consequently experiences a moment of liberation and self-discovery, only to have her aspirations smashed in smithereens when she discovers that her husband has in fact been alive all along. Franz Kafka, on the other hand, in his novella “The Metamorphosis”, published in 1915, focuses on the issues of human alienation and isolation in modern society. Apparently, the story relates to Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one day to the bitter reality of being transformed into an oversized insect. Kafka, although being a male writer, subtly yet effectively underlines the implications of defined gender roles through the persistent presence of Gregor’s sister, Grete. Both stories aptly depict the inevitable dominance of patriarchal structures and the subsequent exhibition of female resistance in their own unique ways. While the

character of Mrs. Mallard—in the absence of her husband—represents female liberation and self-discovery, Grete becomes a symbol of all what is stereotypically expected from a woman in a true patriarchal society.

2. Literature Review

Several critics have explored feminist themes in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" by highlighting its portrayal of female identity and the consequences of male dominance. In the article "Kate Chopin's The Story of an Hour: A Feminist Discourse of a Married Woman Reclaiming her Lost Female Identity" (2020), the writers criticize the institution of marriage as a tool for women's oppression in the nineteenth century America. According to the said article, Mrs. Mallard has become a victim of this tool in the shackles of which she loses her identity completely just when she is about to reclaim it. Moreover, critic Lawrence I. Berkove (2000) emphasizes upon the cost which Mrs. Mallard had to pay for her self-assertion and self-discovery in front of her own husband. On the other hand, while discussing Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", several scholars underscore the physical and psychological journey of the male protagonist, Gregor Samsa. This is evident in Carol H. Cantrell's article "The Metamorphosis: Kafka's Study of a Family" (1977-78), which draws parallels between the familial lives of Gregor and Kafka himself. It cannot be denied that some researchers, like Shubham Joshi in articles like "A Gender Study of Franz Kafka and His Work The Metamorphosis" (2021), have reflected upon the crucial role of women, particularly Grete, in the story. However, none of these articles puts the stories of Chopin and Kafka parallel to each other as apt representations of antithetical trends of feminism, particularly in terms of establishing notions of female liberation and stereotyping gender roles simultaneously.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a feminist literary criticism approach to analyze the antithetical trends of feminism in two primary texts: Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis". The study analyzes the portrayal of their respective female characters, like Mrs. Mallard and Grete, and their labors against female repression, oppressive patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Through a close textual analysis and an in-depth study of the said female characters and their circumstances, the paper also takes into consideration the social and feminist trends rampant in the societies the two writers lived in, including the standards and values that dominated the depiction of gender roles in the literature of those periods. Scholarly books and published articles have been consulted as secondary sources to investigate the standpoints of other researchers.

4. Discussion and Textual Analysis

Several antithetical trends of feminism pervade the two primary texts of this research, Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis": the former portraying female liberation and self-discovery in the face of oppressive patriarchal norms whereas the latter depicting women in stereotypical gender roles. Right from the onset of Chopin's short story, it is evident that the protagonist, Mrs. Louise Mallard, is on the path of self-discovery, which gradually overtakes her and illuminates her personality as the story proceeds. Whether intentionally or not, it is obvious from the reaction she exhibits upon learning of her husband's death that she is beginning to defy all stereotypical roles which defined women of her era. Chopin's writes that "[Mrs. Mallard] did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms" (p. 756). This evinces that the character of Mrs. Mallard is in fact a true emblem of female liberation.

Mrs. Mallard's liberation, although short-lived, is authentic and genuinely felt when she keeps whispering, "Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin, 757). Her husband's demise has left her with a "monstrous joy" (p. 757). This proves that the relationship between the two was more toxic and suffocating rather than a healthy one due to which she is able to perceive and truly feel her liberation. While looking out from her

window, the signs of “new spring life”, countless tittering sparrows and “patches of blue sky” are now perceptible to her eyes to which she was blind when her husband was alive (p. 756). Her “vacant stare and the look of terror” have transformed into “keen and bright” eyes with “pulses beat[ing] fast, and the coursing blood warm[ing] and relax[ing] every inch of her body” (p. 757). This depiction of Mrs. Mallard’s liberation and rejuvenation by Chopin is indeed an eloquent testimony to how women of that era felt a newfound sense of independence and self-worth while expressing themselves through literature.

Mrs. Mallard’s momentary freedom indeed represents the limited freedom of women of that age who struggled hard for their liberty under strict patriarchal structures. These oppressive patriarchal structures, whether in the form of depriving women from the right of suffrage, developing male dominance in literary canon, controlling female sexuality, or establishing male-defined roles for women, were undoubtedly inescapable. Chopin by the culmination of her short story, subtly yet effectively, brings forth the unpreventable invasion of man in every realm of a woman’s life by the startling reappearance of Mr. Mallard who had been alive all along. Mrs. Mallard’s hopes of living a life free from her husband’s domination come crushing down with this unexpected revelation. Researcher Lawrence I. Berkove in his article “Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin’s *The Story of an Hour*” (2000) aptly expounds Mrs. Mallard’s untoward circumstances in the following words: “What she wants is, literally, not obtainable in this life. It is a fantasy, a dream” (p. 9). He further clarifies: “*A Story of an Hour* was indeed first published in *Vogue* magazine in 1894 under the more revealing title of *The Dream of an Hour*” (p. 9). Mrs. Mallard’s momentary liberation is indeed a dream which women of that age could only fantasize about.

It is pertinent to mention that although Mrs. Mallard’s freedom is temporary, the wide range of emotions she feels as a liberated individual evince that she had never been unaware of her individuality; she was just silenced and molded in accordance with the defined gender roles of the patriarchal society. “The lines [on her face] bespoke repression and even a certain strength” (p. 756); this strength emerges in the form of defiance as she does not conform to what is socially expected from a new widow. This strength also comes forth in the form of a “self-assertion which she suddenly recognize[s] as the strongest impulse of her being!” (p. 757) This demonstrates that Mrs. Mallard is indeed a symbolic representation of breaking stereotypical gender roles and embracing female liberation.

Franz Kafka’s “*The Metamorphosis*”, on the other hand, represents such trends of feminism which are antithetical to Chopin’s “*The Story of an Hour*”. In contrast to Chopin’s Mrs. Mallard, Kafka’s female characters highlight the impossibility of female liberation under patriarchal structures. Being often categorized under the genre of absurdist fiction, Kafka, through the story of his male protagonist Gregor Samsa, expresses the detrimental effects of isolation and alienation from the rest of society. Gregor, who wakes up one day to find himself transformed into a giant insect, becomes isolated rather ostracized from society and is no longer able to fulfill his duties as a provider for his family. However, it is not merely Gregor whose predicaments are of primary concern for the reader; the story’s female characters, Gregor’s mother and especially his sister Grete, highlight another crucial aspect of the story - the oppressive patriarchal norms and societal expectations which were prevalent and sternly followed during Kafka’s time.

The story commences with Gregor’s mother calling to wake him up for his job. This attests that the mother is expected to wake up early in the morning despite Gregor being the bread earner of the family. However, it is not just Gregor’s mother but also his sister Grete who further validates the argument that the position of women in Gregor’s household is limited to domestic duties. They are their own versions of Gregor as they, too, struggle to cope with their own feelings of isolation and alienation. The fact that it becomes a duty for Grete to feed and take care of his transformed rather deformed brother proves that Grete, although being a strong young woman with her own aspirations and skills, is confined to menial tasks of cooking and cleaning at home. However, Grete takes full interest in whatever she does. While providing milk to Gregor, she “notice[s] right away with astonishment that the bowl [is] still full, with only a little milk spilled around it. She pick[s] it up immediately...” and brings - “out of the goodness of her heart” and to

Gregor's delight - an "entire selection, all spread out on an old newspaper. There [are] old half-rotten vegetables, bones from the evening meal, covered with a white sauce which had almost solidified, some raisins and almonds, cheese, which Gregor had declared inedible two days earlier..." (Kafka, 30 & 31). Her intelligence while dealing with his animalistic brother exhibits her ingenuity and creativity.

In a patriarchal society, women are easily manipulated to internalize defined gender roles, which have been established by men, in their day to day lives. The character of Grete is a vivid illustration of how a capable, young woman is immersed in societal expectations and cultural norms. Through the memories of Gregor, one realizes that Grete loved music and aspired to play the violin professionally. Unfortunately, this was considered "always only as a beautiful dream, whose realization was unimaginable, and their parents never listened to these innocent expectations with pleasure" (p. 36). Grete's place in the family is pre-defined and any deviance is unfathomable for the family. Critic Elaine Showalter, in her article "Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism" (1984), reiterates the birth of feminism in the following words:

While feminist criticism could not have existed without the galvanizing ideology and power of the women's movement, the women's movement would not have occurred without a generation of women who liked books, graduate students, assistant professors, editors, writers, faculty wives, highly educated products of the academic expansion of the 1960s-whose avid, devoted, socially-reinforced identifications with fictional heroines were coming into conflict with the sexist realities they encountered everyday. (p. 34)

Grete is one such model of women empowerment as she finds a job easily and has become assertive by nature since his brother's transformation. However, the prevailing sexist realities in the shape of her father and the lodgers soon overpower her.

Grete's father, who is "accustomed to read the afternoon newspaper in a loud voice to [Gregor's] mother and sometimes also to [Gregor's] sister..." (p.28), is indeed emblematic of patriarchy in the story. Before Gregor's transformation, Grete was often perceived as "a somewhat useless young woman" (p. 40). Even later in the presence of the lodgers at their home, she is used as a source of amusement when the lodgers urge Grete's father to let her play the violin in front of them. Grete "often ask[s] his father whether he want[s] to have a beer and gladly offer[s] to fetch it herself" (p. 34). This manifests that even Grete herself is unaware of the patriarchal norms rooted firmly in society and therefore blindly follows what her parents demand from her. While commenting upon Kafka's depiction of a male-dominated society, Nina P. Straus (1989) quotes that "...Kafka records the damage that patriarchal capitalist-oriented society inscribes in the psyches of men, but Kafka also records the damage that is done to women" (p. 658). She further elaborates that "Kafka's transformation of the male role into the female, of Gregor into Grete, mitigates the differences between them and the disrespect accorded to women in a culture concerned with men's upward mobility" (p. 658). At the conclusion of the novella, the graphic portraiture of Grete's "blossomed" and "voluptuous" appearance (p. 77), and her parent's contemplation on the prospect of marrying her off confirm that she will never attain liberation but will undeniably remain a victim of the damage inflicted by the patriarchal society.

Thus, Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" reflect the social and feminist trends of their respective societies. Chopin's short story was published during the time when women were beginning to demand greater self-independence and freedom from patriarchal norms. The female protagonist Mrs. Mallard, whose gradual realization of female liberation and self-discovery, reflects this trend and highlights the significance of female empowerment. Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", on the other hand, was published during a time when societal structures were becoming increasingly rigid and oppressive. Through Grete's eyes, the impossibility of female liberation echoes this prevailing trend of strict societal norms for women and displays the limitations that women faced in patriarchal societies.

5. Findings and Implications

Kate Chopin and Franz Kafka, through their respective works, delineate such societies in which the societal norms and cultural values define rather stereotype, and perpetuate gender roles of their respective times. The two stories focus on the complex relationship between societal expectations, cultural norms, and gender roles in literature during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" challenges traditional gender roles by portraying a female character who desires independence and self-discovery. Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", however, reinforces traditional gender roles by depicting female characters who are expected to fulfill their domestic duties and care for the male protagonist, thus accentuating the impossibility of female liberation under patriarchal structures. Hence, the two stories, subtly yet successfully, trace the antithetical trends of feminism by taking into account the social and feminist trends of the societies the two writers lived in.

References

1. Berkove, L. I. (2000, Winter). Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour". *American Literary Realism*, 32(2), 152-158. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27746974>.
2. Cantrell, C. H. (1977-78, Winter). "The Metamorphosis": Kafka's Study of a Family. *Fiction Studies*, 23(4), 578-586. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26282050>.
3. Chopin, K. (2000). *The Story of an Hour*. *The Library of America*, 756-58. (Original work published 1894)
4. Jassam, A. H. & Hatif, H. (2020, Sept.). Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour": A Feminist Discourse of a Married Woman Reclaiming Her Lost Female Identity. *Social Sciences International Research Journal, IMRF Journals*, 6(1), 1-5. ISSN 2395-0544.
5. Joshi, S. (2021, May). A Gender Study of Franz Kafka and His Work "The Metamorphosis". *Contemporary Literature Review India*, 8(2). ISSN 2394-6075.
6. Kafka, F. (1991, Jan.). *The Metamorphosis* (Ian Johnston, Trans.). (Original work published 1915)
7. Saigol, Dr. R. & Chaudhary, N. U. (2020). *Contradictions and Ambiguities of Feminism in Pakistan: Exploring the Fourth Wave*. Islamabad: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Pakistan Office.
8. Showalter, E. (1984, Spring-Autumn). Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 3(1/2) *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, 29-43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/463823>.
9. Straus, N. P. (1989, Spring). Transforming Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis". *Signs*, 14(3), 651-667. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174406>.