

The Story of an Hour by Kate Chopin: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Kate Chopin is an American short story writer. She works beyond the imagination for female; therefore, she is considered to be a leading figure of feminism. She produces many short stories, but the story 'The Story of an Hour' is famous for the subjugation of female. It is semi autobiography of the writer that is why she has proposed her personal experience in this story. She fights for women in her era because she believes that there is no limit for women in social context. The researcher elaborates the elements of feminism through the character of Louise in her short story 'The Story of an Hour' from different perspective such as oppression, subjugations, freedom, identity, marriage, suffrage, struggle, and patriarchal system. The researcher applies Textual Analysis method along with the close reading to find out the above elements in the story. The researcher evaluates numerous research articles to provide evidence for the topic under study.

Keywords: Subjugations, oppression, patriarchal society, suffrage, social context.

Introduction

Kate Chopin (1850- 1904) is an American Modern Feminist short story writer. She illustrates female's subjugations through the characterizations of her stories. She produces all time famous short stories such as 'The Storm', 'The Story of an Hour', and 'A Pair of Silk Stockings'. She is considered a voice for female and leading feminist figure. Many writers have differently discussed the approach of feminism but Kate Chopin has her own way to define feminism therefore, she is measured one of the best figures in feminist literature. She doesn't limit freedom in social context for women (Karami & Zohdi, 2015).

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‘The story of an Hour’ begins with the death news of Mr. Mallard. This news is told to Mrs. Mallard in hints and broken sentences because she has a heart problem. After listening to the news, she sobs in the arms of her sister Josephine and goes to her room. She sits on a comfortable arms chair before an open window and focuses whatever is happening outside. She utters the word ‘free’ again and again. When she realizes that this moment is an opportunity for her, therefore, she comes out of her room with self-determination. As she comes down, there is Richard waiting for her for the support, suddenly Mr. Mallard enters in the house. When she sees him, she dies immediately with joy.

Hicks (2019) articulates that ‘The Story of an Hour’ is a semi autobiography of Kate Chopin. She shows whatsoever happens in her life. The story starts with the main character Louise who is young, calm and fair face woman. She hears the sad news regarding the death of her husband and feels freedom at that moment. Her marital life is miserable and she is concealed and controlled by her husband.

Research Question

1. What are the elements that make the story a text of feminism?
2. How does this story different than others in the perspective of feminism?

Literature review

Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural production) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson, 2006, p. 83).

In 19th century, feminism becomes a movement that attracts many European women. Feminists criticize domestic chore, tyranny, and irrational of women; they can be a part of the society. They want that these women should consider themselves as females and freemen. Feminists try to give them a new vision to stand beside men. They are equal and can get more opportunities like men. Feminists suppose that patriarchal system doesn’t give freedom and self-improvement to women. In literature women have been shown as weak, stupid, womanly, and dutiful. Most of the authors have described women as inferior to men (Kusuma, 2015).

Hicks (2009) argues that Kate Chopin is a revolutionary feminist author who fights for the women rights. In Chopin’s era, women are restricted to home and not allowed to partake in public. Women are forced to live under the umbrella of patriarchal attitude. She gives awareness about women’s lives, demands, and affairs. She portrays the oppression of women in patriarchal society in America and she conveys that women are not able to express their own self and desires. According to Karami and Zohdi (2015),

Kate Chopin regenerates the identity of female through her characters' efforts with strict traditional and social structures. She portrays herself as an inspiration for American women in her story 'The Story of an Hour'. She provides motivation for other women to stand against the oppressions of men in patriarchal society. Louise has become an epitome of feminist self-realization as she struggles against the tradition (Foote, 2013, p. 85).

Chopin prefers to use symbolism in her stories to depict oppression of women. When readers read the story, they believe that they are a part of the story and they can relate it to their life (Hicks, 2009, p. 7). In 'The Story of an Hour', when Mrs. Mallard hears the death news of her husband in a train accident, it gives a liberating experience to her and she becomes conscious about her life. She rejoices her new freedom but it doesn't last longer as her husband enters in house and she dies of a heart attack instantly (Hicks, 2009).

Chopin discusses the issue of male domination and female self-determination in "The Story of an Hour" in a powerful way (Foote, 2013). Short stories of Chopin convey the odd experiences of women in a patriarchal society, where they are not only isolated but also marginalized. The story of an Hour' shows the dictatorial nature of patriarchal ideology which suppresses the rights and identity of female. The reaction of Mrs. Mallard on the death of her husband is sufficient to convince the readers about her oppressions (Sabbagh & Saghaei, 2014, p. 297).

Wan (2009) expresses that 'The Story of an Hour' is a notable story about a woman who wants to live for herself. Louise Mallard gets the death news of her husband; she moans a little and then goes to her room where she sits before an open window. While sitting, she gets something strange which she tries to hold it back but couldn't. When she gets the news of her husband's death, she feels the change in her attitude. She finds her freedom and opportunity to go outside which she never does before. It means that after marriage still the confinement continues. She sits before an open window from which she can see the sky with clouds and this represents the situation that she is not entirely free (Álvarez, 2016, p. 82).

Chopin argues that marriage is a plague which women should stay away from (Matarneh & Zeidanin, 2017). Chopin's work often analyzes as an evaluation of 19th century regarding gender roles and marriages (Rajakumar & Rajeswar, 2016). Lawrence L. Berkove's essay 'Fatal Self-Assertion' criticizes that 'The Story of an Hour' is against feminist reading. If the readers change the perspective of this story towards masculinity then they can't find any argument about feminist reading. He elaborates that there is in-depth level of irony in the story. The character Louise Mallard describes about the hands of her husband as tender and kind as well as she

loves her husband sometimes, make the readers suspicious regarding her emotional and mental sanity (Sabbagh & Saghaei, 2014).

The story is a noteworthy regarding an intimidated wife who selfishly lives for herself. When she is informed about the death news, she cries once and then thinks about her freedom (Wan, 2009). She realizes that she can be happy without her husband. She senses her freedom for the first time as she sits on the comfortable chair. She feels that she is reborn but it becomes short-lived as Brently comes home. She dies at the moment but this death is a shock and disappointment (Tolentino, 2008, p. 13).

Research Methodology

The researcher uses Textual Analysis for this research to find the elements of feminism in the short story 'The Story of an Hour'. This method helps in analysis to express accurately, systematically and precisely. The researcher investigates the content of the story along with critically focuses on numerous research articles to provide support about the discussed topic. The researcher applies the theory with the help of close reading to observe the elements of feminism in the story.

Textual Analysis

Other research scholars have discussed this story from either a single perspective or from the issues related to patriarchal and oppression as discussed in the literature review section. The researcher analyzes the content of this story for all possible elements of feminism. The researcher examines the story for the following feminist context: oppression, freedom, marriage, identity, Struggle, suffer, and patriarchal ideology.

Oppression

“There would be no powerful will bending hers...men and women believe...right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature”.

The story shows the unhappy relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Mallard as they are living together but they are not a happy couple. When she is updated about the death of her husband, she sees it as a release of oppression. She says that she would cry on her husband funeral but after the funeral she doesn't mention crying because she is thinking about her freedom and happiness. 'The Story of an Hour' provides many sorts of oppressions. Louise is suffering from her marital and medical condition. She locks herself in the room and her sister warns her not to harm herself. The text reveals that Louise knows about her own oppression and she understands that she is free to live her life. It means that she considers her own fate in

terms of oppression and shifts her thoughts towards social activities. Louise's reaction to the death of her husband is adequate to convince the reader that she is subjected to an inequitable treatment.

Louise thinks that her husband is hindrance between her and social life. Both are living together but she doesn't want to live the way she is living. She is stuck between her husband and her social life, and she feels this as oppression. Her desire is to get away from this oppression and she finds it in the death of her husband.

Patriarchal system

“Josephine...in broken sentences; veiled hints... Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her...doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills”.

Chopin shares two different kinds of women in the story; Louise and Josephine. Josephine follows the patriarchal system of the society, on the other side Louise stands against this system. Louise tries to escape from it but she cannot and patriarchal force controls her life. ‘The Story of an Hour’ offers domineering scenario of patriarchal ideology which suppresses female identity and rights. Louise is introduced as Mrs. Mallard and ‘she’ in the story. Only when she becomes Louise when she utters the word ‘free’ and later in the story, Louise is referred as ‘wife’.

The entire story mirrors the point that her social implications are controlled by her husband and he is the only thing standing in the way of her living life. Mr. Mallard's death provides this opportunity and now she can live her own life. She enters in her room in melancholy but comes out as self-determined person. But this determination doesn't last longer when Mr. Mallard enters alive and she feels her dreams are shattered. She suffers from heart trouble and it is identified by male dominant medical profession. She is subject of and to the masculine discourse of the story, and this discourse pronounces her death.

According to Karami and Zohdi (2015), Chopin points out that men should not have any authority to define women's freedom, values and social life. Louise tries to control herself before the patriarchal power. When she comes out of her room with a new determination, she encounters Richard, who is standing near the door to support her. The story again shows that the women are weak and they need masculine power to control the situation.

Louise believes that she is living under the spot of patriarchal system. She can't do anything without her husband and he is the only one who directs her life. She is not able to enjoy social life due to the oppression of her husband. She doesn't even celebrate her happiness while having this belief.

Louise goes against the patriarchal ideology after the death of her husband but when she starts her life with determination, she encounters Richard which identifies that women can't live without this system.

Identity Issues and Freedom

“There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair....sank...exhaustion that haunted her body...reach into her soul...countless sparrows...twittering...a little whispered word...lips...said...over and over..."free, free, free!"..."Free! Body and soul free!"...whispering”.

Chopin discusses the conflict between social accord and liberation. These two are essential for the identity of women. She puts a lot of efforts to define that women can get identity through freedom. A change in women's life can create joy and happiness. Chopin believes that Women can't get freedom without resistance in this patriarchal society. She illustrates the destructive power of patriarchal system where women are worthless. Louise has to face self-admiration and freedom but these patriarchal forces suppress her selfhood, moral and social custom (Karami & Zohdi, 2015).

Mrs. Mallard realizes that after the death, she gets a room/ place where she develops and discovers herself. She can explore the world alone without the help of anyone. She realizes the fact that she can live her life independently. She has pleased everyone except herself now she has a new path to go. She has lived for others in past and at this moment she hopes to continue her own life and enjoy her freedom. For the first time, she notices things outside her window it seems that she is reborn. But at the end of the story, Mrs. Mallard seems to realize it's impossible for her to keep both her spirit and body free in the traditional society (Wan, 2009).

Louise lives with her husband who manages her social values. She wants her own identity in a society when she gets the death news of her husband, for the first time she senses freedom and believes in herself. She struggles for freedom spiritually and physically and she doesn't want to live the way she lived before. When Mr. Mallard comes alive, she realizes that her identity is no more here due to which she dies instantly.

Marriage

“no one to live...coming years...live for herself...no powerful will bending...men and women...right...a private will upon a fellow-creature”.

Kusuma (2015) argues that according to Chopin, all marriages are intrinsically oppressive, even the purest one. Matarneh and Zeidanin (2017) discuss Chopin's point of view about marriage that it is a plague,

from which women should avoid. 'The Story of an Hour' is all about to discover the complexities of marital life. The story also liberates women from the restraint of marriage (Tolentino, 2008). Story's setting transforms but the thing which cannot change that is her marriage. This marriage is an illusion for her and works as a real cage (Álvarez, 2016).

Women are trapped in home by their husbands not for love but for marriage. Marriage is an oppressive element to suppress women's freedom and desires (Matarneh & Zeidanin, 2017). Wan (2009) elegantly elaborates that 'The Story of an Hour' is an instance of unsatisfactory marriage. Louise attitude towards marriage is very strange because she believes that with marriage women lost their freedom. Therefore, Louise calls the word 'free' again and again in the story. Her marriage in early 20th century is a form of patriarchy because she is not happy with her marriage. When Louise enters in her room and sits on chair, which gives her comfort for the first time. She is satisfied with her surroundings and she gets this sense after the death of her husband. It means that she is not happy from her husband and somehow she wants to get separated from him.

Suffer and Struggle

"Josephine...kneeling...closed door...Louise...open the door...open the door...make yourself ill. What are you doing...For heaven's sake".

Major characters from the stories of Chopin are married women. She tries to capture the struggle of women and shows them to the readers (Kusuma, 2015). Louise is tired of her life because she doesn't have freedom. Therefore, she suffers from physically and spiritually. She reaches at the stage where she doesn't bother to talk to anyone. She locks herself and begins to think about her life. The wrinkles on her face show her suffering and struggling to live with and please her husband under the pressure of patriarchal society without social freedom. She is young but she has wrinkles on her face which tell the struggle and suffering of her unhappy life.

Lack of male characters

"Her husband's friend Richards was there...It was Brently Mallard who entered...He stood amazed...Richards' quick motion...But Richards was too late".

Chopin stories have lack of male characters and she gets this nature from her life experience. She lives at home with her mother, grandmother and great grandmother, all of them widows (Tolentino, 2008). 'The Story of an Hour' revolves around only one lady mainly. The story is all about Mrs.

Mallard and a few sentences regarding her sister Josephine. The male characters are there just for few sentences as well. She ignores male characters which also deal with the feminist perspective. Louise is a selfish young woman who only thinks about herself. She wants freedom from her husband socially, physically and spiritually. After the death of her husband, she gets freedom and self-determination, she is happy because there is no one to restrict her to go outside in public. She is so mean about the death of her husband, she celebrates it with the word 'free' which she uses it five times. She doesn't want to please other and she lives for herself now only. She celebrates the death as a release of oppression. She thinks that marriage is lack of freedom. She has a heart problem, she bears the hard and bad news of death easily but when she finds her husband's survival, she doesn't handle it and dies on the spot. She dies due to her newfound happiness, joy, freedom and self-determination have lost.

Conclusion

Kate Chopin discusses the elements of feminism in her short story 'The Story of an Hour' from different perspective such as oppression, freedom, identity, marriage, suffrage, struggle, and patriarchal system. She has mentions all these elements through the character of Louise. The story does have the components of feminism which have been put together by the character Louise. The story demonstrates the oppression of women along with their need of freedom which is controlled by male-dominant society. The main character Louise struggles and suffers in patriarchal system to get her identity which is possible to go against this ideology therefore, she becomes the epitome for other women.

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