

Exploring the subgenre ‘novels of female adultery’ in the 19th
century Western literary tradition through a feminist and queer
analysis of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Daphne Du
Maurier’s *Rebecca*

By

Nishat Tasneem Shahara
ID: 17103007

A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

The Department of English and Humanities
Brac University
January 2023

© 2023. Brac University
All rights reserved.

Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Nishat Tasneem Shahara

ID: 17103007

Approval

The thesis titled “Exploring the subgenre ‘novels of female adultery’ in the 19th century Western literary tradition through a feminist and queer analysis of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*” submitted by Nishat Tasneem Shahara ID: 17103007 of Summer, 2022 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts on 23-01-2023.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:
(Member)

Syed Abu Noman
Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities
BRAC University

Departmental Head:
(Chair)

Professor Firdous Azim
Professor and Chairperson, Department of English and
Humanities
BRAC University

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the subversive role of ‘novels of female adultery’ within the context of a 19th century European Literary tradition. Both the primary texts for my research, *The Awakening* and *Rebecca*, revolves around the lives of complex women. These fictional women change the course of their lives and those around them by committing adultery and embracing their ultimate demise.

The obvious interpretation of this trend is that the ‘novels of female adultery’ reinforce gender stereotypes. However, a feminist and queer analysis of these novels reveals that they provide a crucial and timely opportunity to safely deconstruct heteronormative ideas of marriage at a time when happy unions that were so readily portrayed in women's forms of entertainment.

Dedication

To the women in my life, who taught me the importance of tenderness and female companionship – this is for Mairuna, Afsara, Aniqua, Nafisa, Upoma, Bedria, Maisha, Humaira and Afreen.

Acknowledgement

My heartfelt gratitude goes out to my supervisor and instructor, Dr. Sayeed Noman. Thank you for encouraging me to think critically in all your classes. I would also like to express my gratitude to my parents, who always supported me in pursuing my interests.

Finally, I am thankful to my extended community of family and friends – an entire support system of people who took care of me in the past few years. It is a privilege without which this endeavour would have been impossible.

Table of Contents

Declaration	ii
Approval.....	iii
Abstract	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgement	vi
Table of Contents	vii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review	6
2.1 Class and Culture	6
2.2 Women’s Popular Culture.....	7
Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework.....	12
3.1 Feminisms	12
3.2 The Second Sex	13
3.2 Queer Theory and The Lesbian Continuum.....	15
Chapter 4 Textual Analysis	17
4.1 Through a Feminist Lens	17
4.2 Away from Heteronormativity	20
Chapter 5 Conclusion.....	24
Works Cited	25

Chapter 1

Introduction

Literary trends and popular genres are not created in a vacuum. When further contextualised, they can provide an insight into the biases of the contemporary society as literature has an intrinsic ability to reflect people's lives and attitudes. This was also the case for the literature produced in the late 18th and 19th century Europe. It was heavily influenced by philosophical ideologies, political turmoil and revolutionary movements. The French Revolution from 1789 to 1799 saw a rising middle class revolt against the feudal aristocrats. The Industrial Revolution around the same time period created the working class. These led to the formation of new social identities and class distinctions. The general public had access to education for the first time, and public literacy among the masses expanded. There was a boom in the printing press and reading was in vogue regardless of gender identities. The expansion of the press also enabled new trends to emerge in the European literary world. Poems no longer remained the only widespread form of literature – there was a demand for novels, something that could now be mass produced. This is when the gothic novel gained its popularity.

Ultimately a sub-genre of fiction derived from the Romantics, the gothic novels are entertaining forms of fiction. Their plots are often exaggerated, focusing on feelings of love and passion. They are known for their use of superficial, flowery language, and the supernatural elements that coexisted with dramatized storylines. These novels usually used Romantic motifs and combined elements of adventure, mystery and romance. The resolution of the crisis in these books was always the main characters' happy union. Despite some criticism, it was clear that these gothic novels were well received among women. In fact, the gothic novels ultimately paved the way for female authors and established a female

readership for fiction. The English novelist Ann Radcliffe's books, such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* published in 1794, are considered to be canons of the gothic genre. She managed to inspire many prominent literary icons over the course of time.

Mary Wollstonecraft, an eighteenth-century English philosopher, writer, and an advocate for women's education, discusses the issues with the conventions of such Romantic novels in her feminist manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She openly criticizes the quality of such fiction written and targeted towards women because they ultimately reinforced dominant heterosexist ideologies. Wollstonecraft also disagreed with the stylistic choices in these novels, calling them frivolous. She argues that they garnered a female readership because women belonging "In the middle rank of life" had to focus on scheming and planning for marriages "to rise in the world" (Wollstonecraft 37). Romantic novels, including those belonging in the gothic genre, catered to a particular kind of bourgeois or affluent class of women that the Victorian society deemed ideal. By the latter half of the 19th century, European literature steadily moved away from these idealist Romantics.

Soon, the era of realism emerged as a reaction, where the focus was decidedly on the mundane. Unlike its idealistic predecessors, the Romantics, the novels that came from the realist movement did not shy away from revealing the cruelties of the contemporary society. The priorities shifted into representing the realities of lived experiences of ordinary people. This is when English classics such as the likes of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* came into being. It was also no longer inappropriate for stories to explore complex female characters, their wants and desires. In fact, a highly specific trend in realist fiction was the novels of female adultery, which satirized the exaggerations of typical gothic romances. These novels with strikingly similar features had plots that revolved around married women committing adultery and facing dire consequences for their illegitimate actions. Although such themes of adultery in fiction is not a new concept, the popularity of this theme in the late

18th and 19th century, stands out. The books relying heavily on this trope, do not simply use themes of adultery, but has important plot points revolve around a woman's act of adultery and her atonement or demise. Many such novels of female adultery have been produced in Europe during 19th century, and was impactful enough to inspire writers across time and space. Some of the well-known classics include *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *Effi Briest* by Theodor Fontane, and *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. On the other hand, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin are novels belonging in the same category written by American authors instead of European. Examples of books belonging in this category can be found even early into the 20th century, and Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* is an apt example of this.

The novels of female adultery seem to be completely at odds with the Victorian ideals of chastity and modesty. Women were supposed to be domesticated beings in charge of homemaking and child rearing, belonging in the private sphere. Whereas men belonged in the public sphere as wage earners and providers. The lives of both men and women living in this era were strictly gendered, and the ideal Victorian women had limited roles: the pious wife, the caring mother, or the responsible governess. Young women were expected to desire motherhood, tend to their husbands and aspire to be good homemakers. Therefore, on the surface level, novels of female adultery may seem to be a peculiar category to exist at a period such as this. Foucault calls this perspective on Victorian sexuality, the "repressive hypothesis" (10). The repressive hypothesis is the notion that the Victorian society was prudent and held views that were inherently sexually restrictive. Foucault argues that this popular image of the Victorian era is questionable. It is not historically accurate that there was no space for discourses on sexual desires – instead, discourses around sex were more prevalent than ever. Sex was categorised and regulated, pathologized and criminalised. It was only acceptable within the confines of marriage, as for the emerging bourgeoisie class,

reproducing was the only utilitarian outcome of sexual desires. Any other sexual identity and act was deemed unproductive and was othered, only “The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance”, as well as exploitation (Foucault 4). With this evident fixation on sex and sexuality, this particular trend of novels of female adultery seems fitting for the era. These fictional adulterous women represented the “other Victorians” in the society, subjects to be scrutinised and restricted within discourses on sex (Foucault 4).

The books belonging in this sub-genre begin with women already within the constraints of matrimony, usually married to older men they have little in common with. There is almost always a lack of intimacy portrayed in this dynamic. The plot progresses as the women are shown to grow restless and disillusioned with their marital roles and isolated lives. They eventually indulge in illicit acts of affairs in an attempt to move beyond their restricting roles as wives. There can be many modern feminist interpretations of this trope, as the protagonists or the blasphemous women in these books are always complex, fleshed out female characters in search of freedom and autonomy. However, the character arcs for these women in such plots never have a fulfilling ending. They face horrific consequences for going against the societal bonds of marriage, usually in the form of inevitable death or social ostracization. Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening*, Emma Bovary from *Madame Bovary* – all these characters end up taking their own lives. Their ultimate demise seems to be orchestrated by their own inescapable fates. When analysed in this light, these books seem to reinstate the double standards of the ideal Victorian society, despite the writers acknowledging how secluded and restrictive the lives of such women would have been. Even when analysed in a feminist lens, the idea that these women sought out company of yet more men to find self-actualization, puts emphasis on the concept that women’s freedom is contingent on yet another man’s validation and recognition.

My research for this paper will be based on close analyses of the two primary texts that I have selected, as well as on the secondary sources and available literature. I have selected these specific books as primary texts because both of them have major plot points that centre around acts of adulterous women. They are also written within the same literary era. However, despite this, they are diverse in multiple aspects. *The Awakening* is an American novel written by Kate Chopin whose body of work mostly revolves around women's experiences, and overlaps with the genre of realism; and *Rebecca* is written by the English author Daphne Du Maurier in the early 20th century and is stylistically heavily inspired by genre of gothic romance.

For my thesis, I want to explore this particular trend in 19th century European literary tradition and understand its place in Victorian England. I want to understand what role this sub-genre 'novels of female adultery' play in the 19th century Western literary tradition when analysed through a feminist and queer lens. I will be interpreting the selected books as feminist fiction by using classic feminist ideologies that arose from the feminist movements around the same time period. I want to emphasise the importance of subversive literature such as the novels of female adultery in highlighting the problems within a patriarchal society. To do so, I will be using theories that challenge heteronormativity: queer theory and concepts derived from feminisms.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Class and Culture

Popular culture is best described by John Storey as “culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture” (Storey 5). This residual culture is often easy to decipher, and well received by the majority. These are also the same qualities that render it as inferior in collective consciousness, at least in comparison to the more exclusive and allegedly more authentic, high culture. But it is a fact that because of how accessible popular culture tends to be, it loses exclusivity and reaches the masses, transcending class barriers. Culture and class have always been intertwined with each other in complex ways.

Marx defines class as an economic category – it is our relationship to the mode of production of the society we inhabit. This in turn shapes “the general process of social, political and intellectual life” (Marx et al. *Preface*). Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, further expands on Marx’s concepts of class and capital in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. In the book, he emphasises on the way class is articulated and perpetuated through culture. The ruling bourgeoisie class has an upper hand at setting the dominant, high culture, because of their access to educational institutions and their proximity to centres of power. High culture, or the tendency to appreciate one form of culture over the other, is not based on anything universally intrinsic. Bourdieu states that “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 6), referring to how someone’s preferences in what they consume is determined by their social position and class. Simultaneously, their preferences themselves also determine the social position and class of the consumer. To keep up the class differences, the cultural productions must help maintain and naturalize such class relations.

Raymond Williams, a Welsh socialist, uses his own experiences and adds on to Marx's concepts of culture, class and economics. In his essay called "Culture is Ordinary", He questions the idea of bourgeoisie's definitive dominance in culture production. He argues that the working class, who had just begun gaining access to institutions, create their own cultures:

There is an English bourgeois culture, with its powerful educational, literary and social institutions, in close contact with the actual centres of power. To say that most working people are excluded from these is self-evident... But to go on to say that working people are excluded from English culture is nonsense; they have their own growing institutions, and much of the strictly bourgeois culture they would in any case not want. (Williams 6)

A holistic understanding of this relationship between class and popular culture helped me interpret the significance of this sub-genre and its place in English literature. Women's popular culture, regardless of what class they belong to, have been historically considered to be inferior. Women themselves are othered, and women's cultures overlooked. Williams' case for how culture is ordinary and exists within all social spheres, has been very relevant to me in this regard. The novels of female adultery fall in the category of popular culture and although it reached a wide audience of predominantly white, growing middle class, Williams' rather democratic view of culture affirms the need to analyse this sub-genre with a critical lens.

2.2 Women's Popular Culture

Unfairly stereotyped and trivialized, popular culture that specifically caters to women, is actually proven to have a multifaceted relationship with their real-life experiences. They reveal ideas about women's desires, as well as the ways society perceives and polices these desires. This is why women's sources of entertainment deserve to be analysed with a critical

lens. In her book *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski explores the kind of entertainment that was available to 19th century English women. She identifies the overlapping genres of novels that were circulated and written by women, for women, in a Victorian society: sentimental novels, domestic novels and novel of manners. These books dealt with ideas of morality, purity, virginity and the goodness of the heroine. In contrast, the heroes of these stories were usually ill-mannered men who cared less about morality and indulged in pleasures without many consequences. The reasons why these would have appealed to a Victorian female readership was because these male characters and plots: “...seemed to provide an exciting alternative to the staid domestic “pleasures” which were all good women were supposed to want” (Modleski 9). According to Judith Armstrong, these sentimental love novels were written for an audience of “...largely middle class and feminine: the young ladies were imperfectly educated and therefore daunted or bored by traditional literature; they were also Protestant, and squeamish about the code of adulterous love” (Armstrong 24).

The famous English sentimental novelist, Samuel Richardson himself, stated that his intentions with his work were: “to promote the cause of religion and virtue” (Armstrong 24). Such novels, along with these morals that they tried to promote, were directly criticized by Wollstonecraft. As an educator herself, Wollstonecraft was a stern critic of the existing educational system and contemporary trends that affected women. She openly criticized the types of fiction written and targeted towards them – particularly, novels. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she writes:

I...deny the existence of sexual virtues... For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same; yet the fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, demanding the sacrifice of truth and sincerity,

virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience. (32)

Both Wollstonecraft and Bourdieu criticize the educational system's role in perpetuating the ideologies and cultures of those in power. For Wollstonecraft it was the patriarchy and reinforcement of gender roles. For Bourdieu, it was the naturalization of class hierarchies.

Armstrong attempts to record such varying attitudes of poets, writers, novelists and reformists of the nineteenth century towards women, marriage and adultery in her book *The Novel of Adultery*. She traces back the historical as well as geographical origins of these themes, and identifies two contradicting attitudes that prevailed during the nineteenth century. First, an undisputed acknowledgement of the “link between a stable hierarchical state and a stable hierarchical family system” (15). This was often supported by conservative authors. An industrial society required the exploitation of the people's labour capacity, and stable family units that depended on a monogamous, conjugal relationship, reproduced this labour capacity. Foucault points out the same observation during his analyses of the repressive hypothesis: “All this garrulous attention which has us in a stew over sexuality, is it not motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labour capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative?” (36). Armstrong's second observation was that the younger generation of authors were influenced by the revolutions of the era and did not accept such conservative views. They questioned preconceived assumptions and had “different ideas about the role of woman and of the family” (15). The novels of female adultery explore the very same ideas.

It is important to note that when the gendered roles are reversed in these sentimental and domestic novels - if the heroines decide to ignore morality and give in to their desires - they face serious repercussions. The trope is handled very differently based on the difference

in genders: “Another typical, but far more sombre plot, dealt with the woman who gave in to the libertine, and at the end of the novel died a penitent and often excruciating death” (Modleski 8). The only redemption for these women could be choosing marriage before passion. This double standard is never really explicitly criticized in these books either. Instead, many of these female characters were portrayed as passive, wilful participants of their own demise, as having “...some measure of conscious choice in their ‘fall’...” (Modleski 8). We see these motifs continue to be replicated later, in the novels of adultery. It can also be argued that these plots are not simple replications of a gendered social structure, but also a cathartic space for the female readers to collectively vent over their shared grievances. Such themes provide the “means by which women can localize their diffuse and general sense of powerlessness”, deduces Modleski (9). She concludes that there is some merit in studying these closely, as these depictions of fear and paranoia in popular female fantasies must have meant something more than solely entertainment. These narratives would have addressed some of the realities of the lives its readers lived: “...they speak to very real problems and tensions in women’s lives” (5). Modleski refers to, and compares the role of these novels in women’s lives, with Marx’s stance on religion as an opiate for the masses: “...at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering” (Marx et al. *Introduction*).

In this literature review, I have tried to place the sub-genre of novels of female adultery within the literary traditions of 19th century literature that was available for Victorian women. I have highlighted and summarized concepts that were relevant to my topic. Act of adultery as a plot point has been explored in the past, and its historical origins extensively traced. The individual novels of this genre have also been critically analysed by feminists over the past few decades. However, such subversive trends in women’s literature – both for portraying female protagonists as well as for being popular among women – needs to be re-

examined to further explore and appreciate their roles in challenging deeply embedded heteronormative narratives.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

The research methodology for this thesis is qualitative. The sources I have used are both primary and secondary, because along with the primary texts, I refer to other relevant secondary sources in the form of journals and books. The textual analysis of the chosen books: *The Awakening* and *Rebecca*, are based on the theoretical framework presented in this chapter.

3.1 Feminisms

Feminism is essentially an ideology that emerged as a reaction to the inequalities and subordination that is historically encountered by women in all spheres of life. It is both a philosophy and a political movement, as well as a multifaceted approach in establishing equal rights for all genders in their political, personal and social lives. The first sustained feminist revolution was the suffragette's movement demanding for equal voting rights for women. This occurred during the late 19th and early 20th century, and is popularly known as the first wave of feminism. The second wave of feminism was around the 1970s, and focused on reproductive rights, and equal social and employment opportunities. These movements originated and gained traction in the West, and was led predominantly by middle-class, white women. This is also when the first foundational books on feminist thinking were written, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. A new cultural shift emerged as well, and according to John Storey, "It is feminism that has placed gender on the academic agenda" (152). The third wave of feminism of the 2000s is critical of the past feminist ideas for their lack of intersectionality and their binary understandings of femininity.

However, it is important to remember that these waves of feminisms are merely a hypothesis created to make sense of a dynamic, ever-evolving movement. History is rarely as

linear as this hypothesis suggests. There are many overlaps within these eras, and feminism today still incorporates some of the core ideologies of economic equality and reproductive rights. The modern-day feminists are more inclusive and intersectional, and also concern themselves with the re-evaluation of gender identities and sexualities.

3.2 The Second Sex

The aforementioned Simone de Beauvoir is both a participant and an instigator of the revolutionary second wave radical feminism, with the publication of her book *The Second Sex* in 1949. She digs deeper than first wave feminists to analyse the ways in which underlying cultural practices, ideologies, beliefs, and pervasive social structures contribute in the subordination of woman. The book is an ambitious attempt at a feminist analysis of the entirety of mankind's history, and it is the first of its kind. Her radical concepts of the creation of myths, the otherization of women, and the idea of "immanence" (193), are what is relevant for this thesis. Her book is divided into two distinct parts, "Facts and Myths" (22) and "Lived Experience" (326).

In the first volume called "Facts and Myths", Beauvoir's main argument is that it is historically evident that women have been treated as the other, the subordinate and the secondary in contemporary world. She explores the evidences present in biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism that reveals the essential differences between men and women. These were popular in academia and as discourses during that time. She refutes these essentialist theories with the point that they only recount history or emphasizes on biological differences, but do not justify the dominance of men and subordination of women. She proposes that the "theory of eternal feminine" (23) has been perpetuated all throughout human history with the help of "myths" to justify this discrimination.

These myths portray women not as humans, but as mystical creatures and traps them within unattainable, limiting roles and responsibilities. When discussing these myths,

Beauvoir uses Greek mythology and myths from Christianity to explain how the narrative of woman as the object is perpetuated. She examines how myths are essentially created by man, who sees himself as the self: “Once the subject attempts to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is nonetheless necessary for him...” (193). Women take up this necessary role of “the absolute Other” (105), the “inessential” (26). She is the embodiment of untameable nature for man. After all, if man is the subject, everything else is the object. A woman is simply the embodiment that can be possessed without any threats. Myths ultimately exist to naturalize women’s inferior positions in societies, a parallel to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production naturalizing class differences.

Beauvoir further illustrates how not only are women doomed to being the object under patriarchy, they are also kept in this perpetual state of “immanence” (37). By immanence, she refers to the private spheres that were considered the realms of women, where their duties were limited to home-making and child-rearing. Unlike men, they were not allowed to pursue “transcendence” (37) – being productive, creative and contributing to the greater things of human lives. Beauvoir believed that every human being has an existential right to both immanence and transcendence, but women have been unfairly indoctrinated to believe that immanence is their ideal state of being, and any promise of transcendence essentially depends on men. These themes are reflected in the novels of female adultery. In these novels, the female characters are shown to have trouble relating to their prescribed roles. They cannot connect with their busy husbands who lead fulfilling lives beyond the restraints of marriage or parenthood, while they are stuck repeating their duties as doting mothers and devoted wives. They refuse to suffocate silently, and pursue affairs with other men as a way out of immanence, assuming these men will be their chances at achieving transcendence – only to find themselves disillusioned and discontent.

3.2 Queer Theory and The Lesbian Continuum

During the myriad of discourses trying to regulate sex and sexuality in the 19th century, homosexuality as a category was established: “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault, 101). This, along with any other perversions were categorised and pathologized in the West ever since. Heterosexuality and marital bonds were legitimised, naturalised even, and everything else considered an abnormality. The main goal of queer theory is to question the social stereotype or ‘naturalness’ of this heteronormativity, and the binary nature of gender. Applying queer theory in literary criticism would open up radical interpretations of works of literature. If feminist analysis allows us to consider literature through the lens of the othered, queer theory does the same.

Bonnie Zimmerman, in her comprehensive study called *What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism*, analyses all the different ways – feminists and lesbians alike – have attempted to approach a lesbian criticism of works of literature. She emphasizes on the need to establish a lesbian literary tradition, a canon, that is not unlike the feminists’ literary tradition. She argues that:

Because feminism concerns itself with the removal of limitations and impediments in the way of female imagination, and lesbian criticism helps to expand our notions of what is possible for women, then all women would grow by adopting for themselves a lesbian vision. (471)

Zimmerman urges for re-readings of traditional literature through the lens of lesbian theory, just as feminists have done with their critical analyses of literature through a feminist lens. She believed in “Perhaps lesbian feminist criticism is a political or thematic perspective, a kind of imagination that can see beyond the barriers of heterosexuality, role stereotypes,

patterns of language and culture that may be repressive to female sexuality and expression” (qtd. In Zimmerman 470).

Adrienne Rich on the other hand discusses in her definitive text on queer theory titled *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, that the term lesbianism is too much of a stigmatized term. Instead, she suggests “Lesbian existence” and “Lesbian continuum” (Rich 648). The meaning of these terms includes a range of “woman-identified experiences” (Rich 648) rather than simply stating a woman’s sexual orientation. It includes female friendships and a rejection of the binary heteronormative society. The extended definition of lesbian experiences to counter heteronormativity is what is applicable to my chosen texts that belong in the sub-genre of novels of female adultery.

Chapter 4

Textual Analysis

4.1 Through a Feminist Lens

The Awakening by Kate Chopin is a story about Edna Pontellier's struggles to free herself from the gender roles imposed on her by the society. Her circumstances reflected the lives of real-life women during the 19th century. Although an American novel, the themes and questions raised by the book falls in line with the larger Western literary trend of the sub-genre, novels of female adultery. The readers and critics did not accept the morally ambiguous, increasingly independent and conceited heroin, Edna Pontellier, when the book was first published in 1899. Critics called her "A Creole Bovary..." (Cather 697) because of similarities with plot, themes and motifs with *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, despite vastly differing in narration style and voice. Such criticism simplified and dismissed the complexities of such adulterous female characters by describing them as "...victims of the over-idealization of love" (Cather 698), even if this characterization is only apt for Madame Bovary and not so much for Edna.

What these criticisms failed to understand is that Edna is a fictitious representation of very real women, who were expected to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of their families. They were trapped in what Beauvoir would call immanence, and were not allowed to achieve transcendence (37). The yearnings discussed in *The Awakening* were both for freedom and bodily autonomy, for transcendence – something that is easily available to men. Edna was looking for emotional freedom from social expectations of motherhood, as well as sexual liberation from the constraints of a loveless marriage. But this was what brought upon her ultimate demise. According to Beauvoir, women's sexuality, as well as their reproductive capabilities, have been historically mythicized. The only way to codify this mythical

woman's sexuality, and for men to make peace with their discomfort with the idea of maternity, woman's sexuality had to be domesticated. Beauvoir believed that this was done through marriage and family making. But the mystification of motherhood continues throughout a woman's life: "The cult of germination has always been associated with the cult of the dead" (Beauvoir 200). Mothers are both bringers of life and reminders of the vulnerability of man, the absoluteness of death. They signified death. This symbolization gets projected onto women at all stages of their adult lives, further contributing to the mystification of women themselves. In this process, wives and mothers are reduced to their roles and biological functions and robbed off of their identities. This is the what Edna wanted an escape from.

Daphne de Maurier's *Rebecca* on the other hand, subverted the typical structure of novels of female adultery. The titular character and adulteress, Rebecca, refused to play the subservient role of a wife and mother from the very beginning. We only get to know her story later on, and that too from the warped perspectives of mostly Maxim de Winter and Mrs Danvers. From their stories it can be pieced together that Rebecca proactively makes a deal with Maxim before their marriage in an attempt to live a fulfilling life on her own terms. Her disillusionment with matrimony and a life of imminence did not come later on, she was disillusioned to begin with. This is because her life before the marriage was unlike any typical Victorian women's. According to Mrs Danvers' stories, "She had all the courage and spirit of a boy, had my Mrs de Winter" (Maurier 272), and it seemed that she had the freedom to live like it to: "She did what she liked, she lived as she liked" (Maurier 273). She was already living a life of transcendence, and had no intention to sacrifice it. Instead, she negotiated the terms of the marriage like a contract: she gets to live her life the way she has always had, but in secrecy. In return, Maxim gets the perfect image of a functioning family, an efficient housekeeper and a gets to be a popular socialite: "I'll look after your Manderley

for you, make it the most famous show-place...people will visit us, and envy us... they'll say we are the luckiest, happiest, handsomest couple in all England" (Maurier 305). She did keep up her end of the bargain; Manderley was so popular that the estate had postcards created with its image on it. However, her secrets were thinly veiled and she cared very little for social etiquette and morals. Maxim soon began losing patience for her antics. He never quite respected her anyway, and his confessions of violent feelings towards her was revealed at the climax of the story's plot: "She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through" (304).

This particular characterization of Rebecca was not new in English novels. Novels with sensual, ideal Romantic heroines with monstrous, uncontrollable female characters as foils for them, was a trend that was becoming common. Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* is the most apt example for this. This is an example of the Madonna-whore dichotomy being replicated in literary forms. In *Rebecca*, Rebecca was the uncontrollable force, and our nameless protagonist was the idealistic heroine. The nameless heroine worshipped Maxim and contrary to Rebecca, was eager to fulfil the roles of a wife and homemaker. However, her morality was just as questionable Rebecca's, considering how she was not weary at the confessions of Maxim's murder. She was instead elated at their relationship finally reaching equal footing, which was only possible with Maxim's confession. Throughout the entire book however, up until the confession, she tries and fails to achieve this and is overcome with fear and overwhelmed by the mysteries of Manderley. Modleski, in her exploration of women's popular culture, uses psychoanalysis to examine the paranoias of the female protagonists that is romanticized for the sake of mystery and plot progression in Gothic novels and Harlequin Romance novels. Modleski hypothesizes that these novels "provide an outlet for women's fears about fathers and husbands, fears which are much more pronounced than the sentimental heroine's" (Modleski 10). Both these genres "...deal with women's fears of and confusion about masculine behaviour in a world in which

men learn to devalue women” (Modleski 52). As *Rebecca* is more prominently inspired by the Gothic genre, Modleski’s hypotheses are more readily applicable to the book’s unnamed female protagonist and her fears. This heroine yearns for real companionship with her newly married husband, but throughout the book finds herself being treated like a pet: “The smile was my reward. Like a pat on the head to Jasper. Good dog then, lie down, don’t worry me anymore. I was Jasper again” (Maurier 132). The age difference between her and Maxim and her inexperience further contributes to the power-dynamic between them, to the point that to be treated like a wife and a real companion, she needed them to completely abandon their past lives and lead a life more akin to fugitives.

All the important female characters in both *Rebecca* and *The Awakening*, are aliens in their own societies. It is not only the adulteresses that can’t seem to fit in to the roles set for them by the patriarchal society; Edna cannot be content with her domestic life and yearns for something she cannot even put into words. In *Rebecca*, our nameless protagonist constantly falls short in her role as Manderley’s mistress and feels like she is treated more like a pet than a wife by her older husband. She longs to be like Rebecca, which is ironic considering Rebecca is nothing like the ideal Victorian housewife either and faces dire consequences for it. Such examination of married lives and the exploration of the psyches of complex female protagonists through literature was made possible by the structure and themes that are explored by this subversive sub-genre.

4.2 Away from Heteronormativity

Edna’s true feelings ostracized her and could have made her ‘othering’ occur in two-folds. First and foremost, as a woman she was already the object, but as a woman who could not relate to her close-knit Creole community of “mother-women” (Chopin 14), she could have been doubly ostracized. This did not occur because she found a confidante in Madame Ratignolle. She candidly shares her seemingly unconventional and borderline blasphemous

thoughts regarding her husband Mr. Pontellier and her children. She confesses that she possesses no passionate feelings for her husband, “no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth coloured her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (Chopin 34) and that her fondness for her own children is “uneven, impulsive” (Chopin 34). Madame Ratignolle seems to understand Edna’s state of mind, even if she does not agree with it.

In fact, the only true understanding Edna Pontellier, from *The Awakening*, receives, comes from Mrs. Ratignolle. When she opened up about her life one day at the beach, she did it with her, and felt free: “She had put her head down on Madame Ratignolle's shoulder. She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candour. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (Chopin 35). Their relationship was soon side-lined in Edna’s story. However, it is interesting how she felt most at ease, was most understood and loved by two people in her life: Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. On the contrary, when it comes to her husband, there was an obvious communication and linguistic gap between them, and a lack understanding of her needs. When she tried talking to Mr. Pontellier about her rediscovering her sense of self, or “rights of women” (Chopin 132), he could not comprehend her. He failed to understand Edna’s change in ideologies. This lack of passion and refusal to understand Edna’s state of mind drives Edna further away from him.

In *Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening' as Part of the Nineteenth-Century American Literary Tradition*, Maria Mikolchak argues that our perception and our language is so warped by a strict heteronormative narrative, that we do not have a term for women like Edna:

Chopin's defining Edna as not the wife-woman and not the mother-woman makes it clear that the only way the woman can be defined if she does not suit the roles imposed by the society is by saying what she is. Not only the adulterous heroines find

themselves in a linguistic void, but whoever tries to describe a woman deviant from the norms is also entrapped into talking about something that has no name. Indeed, if women are socially constructed as mothers and wives, then what does it make a woman who is not a wife and not a mother? Linguistically such a woman does not exist. (6)

This inherent heteronormativity in our society and in the language we use, allow a power dynamic to foster between men and women – and in this book, between Edna and Robert. The only reason Edna is enamoured with Robert, is because there is a sense of relatability between them that is absent with her and Mr. Pontellier's relationship. However, her infatuation with him allowed him to shift her perspective into a romantic yearning instead of self-discovery. Robert's words and charming metaphors often took over and replaced Edna's true thoughts. For instance, the readers know that her process of awakening evoked with her own experiences and during a confession to Mrs. Ratignolle. Yet, she gives Robert all the credit when they finally confessed to each other: "It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream" (Chopin 222). Edna's self-discovery is almost stunted by the heteronormative and romantic narrative of Robert.

In an interview, Daphne du Maurier's son shared his mother's opinions on her own best-selling novel, *Rebecca*: "She did get so irritated with people calling it a romantic novel... Because she always said it was a study in jealousy" (House). Indeed, in the book, Mrs Danvers' jealousy and obsession with her mistress Rebecca is hardly a secret. She was Danny for Rebecca, the life-long companion and caretaker since her childhood. Danvers' obsessive nature was borderline absurd in some cases. If anyone came in the way of Rebecca's whims, Danvers would console her with "...no one will put upon you. You were born into this world to take what you could out of it..." (Maurier 272). When she describes Rebecca's childhood, she is almost proud at her charms and portrays her as a grown up: "She was lovely then...

lovely as a picture; men turning to stare at her when she passed, and she not twelve years old” (Maurier 272). She confesses her devotion for Rebecca throughout the entirety of the book. In her perspective, Rebecca’s affection for her was constant as well, and she would say things such as: “You made me better than anyone Danny... I won’t have anyone but you” (Maurier 189). It is true that Rebecca never had a steady partner; not even in her husband, Maxim. She manipulated people to get her own way, and did what she wanted for her own entertainment. Danvers herself states this while chastising Favell, “She was not in love with you, or with Mr de Winter. She was not in love with anyone. She despised all men. She was above all that” (Maurier 382). Danvers was the only other person in Rebecca’s life who was a constant, who truly cared for her, and kept her alive even in her death.

Adrienne Rich’s concept of Lesbian Existence proposed in *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, considers how women in heteronormative societies can choose to lead a hetero-life even if they have queer tendencies, because they have been only been taught heteronormativity as the norm. Most of the time they do not even have the language to express themselves and understand their own desires. It seems that both Edna Pontellier and Rebecca belong to the women who are a part of Rich’s Lesbian Existence.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir deduces that the reason why myths about femininity have been so pervasive is because “women have not created the virile myth that would reflect their projects; they have neither religion nor poetry that belongs to them alone: they still dream through men’s dreams. They worship the gods made by males” (Beauvoir 196). This sub-genre in novels of female adultery however, has the subversive qualities that is able to provide some form of counter to this. Although it is true that these are all created under the influences of patriarchy and inevitably has issues that has raised concerns in modern feminist interpretations of them, these novels provided writers with a unique opportunity for their time. An opportunity to safely deconstruct ideas about marriage and happy unions so readily portrayed in other forms of entertainment for women. An opportunity to question heteronormative ideas, and to explore what it is like living and performing as a woman in a patriarchal culture.

Works Cited

- Armstrong, Judith. *The Novel of Adultery*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1976.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 2015.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Cather, Willa, and William Martin Curtin. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cathers Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. Vol. 2, University of Nebraska Press, 2004.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Bedford Books, 1993.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Translated by Eleanor Marx-Aveling, Fingerprint Classics, 2016.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley, vol. 1, Penguin Books, 1998.
- House, Christian. "Daphne Du Maurier Always Said Her Novel Rebecca Was a Study in Jealousy." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 17 Aug. 2013.
- Marx, Karl, et al. "Preface." *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977.
- Marx, Karl, et al. "Introduction." *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.
- Maurier, Du Daphne. *Rebecca*. Virago Press, 2015.
- Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*. second ed., Routledge, 2008.
- Radcliff, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Everyman's Library, 1959.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631–660. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3173834.

Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. 8th ed., Routledge, 2018.

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. Translated by Aylmer Maude, Vintage, 2012.

Williams, Raymond, and Jim McGuigan. "Culture Is Ordinary." *Raymond Williams on Culture and Society: Essential Writings*, Sage, London, 2014, pp. 1–18.

Wollstonecraft, Mary, and Zoe Williams. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Vintage Books, 2015.

Zimmerman, Bonnie. "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1981, pp. 451–75. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177760>.