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Interrogating marital constrains and servitude: Rereading Kate Chopin's short story titled "The Story of an Hour"

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze women's predicament in a patriarchal society. The paper interrogates marital constrains and servitude as depicted in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an hour" and also delves deep into the complex psychological aspects of the protagonist. The research methodology includes close reading of the text.

Keywords: Abandonment, patriarchy, repression, selfhood, identity

Introduction

From Sappho to myself, consider the fate of women.
How unwomanly to discuss it!

- Carolyn Kizer

Female writers like Kate Chopin sought to explore the sources women's predicament and plight caused by the patriarchal paradigm, the glass coffin in which they have been confined over decades and centuries. Kate Chopin unravels in her short story, "The Story of an Hour," how women suffered from a painful loss of identity and independence in the institution of marriage in the rigorously patriarchal Victorian society. Mallard, the protagonist of the story, was "afflicted with a heart trouble." This is one of the several ways in which women are constructed in an androcentric structure in order to inferiorize them as the debilitated "Second Sex" vis-à-vis men, always highlighted by patriarchy as the superior sex. Women, as depicted by Patmore, is an "Angel of the House", bedecked with "ladylike fragility.....slim, pale, passive beings whose "charms" eerily recalled the snowy porcelain immobility of the dead" (P-25, "The Madwoman in the Attic" by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar)

On the assumption of her being weak-hearted, Mrs. Mallard sister Josephine revealed to her in broken sentences, the news of her husband Brentley's "death" in a rail accident.

Instead of showing "a paralyzed inability to accept its significance" (P-1, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin) --- It would have been the reaction of most of the woman in the similar situation --, Mrs. Mallard burst into a "storm of grief" (P-1, The Story of an Hour- Kate Chopin). Then she left for her room upstairs, all alone.

It was in the world of downstairs that Mrs. Mallard appeared to be circumvented by the morbid conventions which she had to observe almost ritually in the form of weeping "with sudden, wild abandonment" (P-1, The Story of an Hour- Kate Chopin) over her husband's "death" contrastingly, in the upstairs where she had a room of her own, she set up a spiritual communication with the open air outside the "Brently- world". There she saw the tree tops all vibrant with "the new spring life" (P-1, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin), a rain-soaked earthen scent, a peddler's cry, sparrows' twitter, and "patches of blue sky" (P-1, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin) ventilated through the clouds all conveying to her an invigorating message of life with all its refreshing glory.

Mrs. Mallard's serene face was marked with lines that indicated "repression and even a certain strength." (P-2, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin) Indeed, Mrs. Mallard represents

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the women of her time, plagued by repressed anger and anguish caused by male – domination, and always concealingly threatened a volcanic eruption.

The source of the “strength” has always been in the protagonist, in a latent state, and it was after she had received the news of Brently’s “death” that a sort of epiphany radiated her inner self, prompting her into self-discovery and independence. “She said it over and over under her breath: free, free, free!” (P-2, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin)

Each and every aspect of the contour of her body and mind underwent phenomenal changes with the light of freedom having sparked within herself. Her eyes which had earlier expressed a “vacant stare and the look of terror.” (P-2, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin), now became “keen and bright”. (P-2, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin). She may be said to have been transformed into a radical new woman, buoyed up with warmth, excitement and liveliness.

The joy that Mrs. Mallard felt after her husband’s “death” might seem to be monstrous in the common perception: but a sensitive mind, taking the trouble of digging deep into her psyche, would excavate the true source of her joy. Mrs. Mallard grew so delighted not because of her husband’s “death” --- nowhere in the story did she grudge him --- but because of her emancipation from the shackles of the Victorian institution of marriage, so misogynistic as to proclaim that woman’s property and body belonged to her husband, and that her very legal existence was subsumed in her husband’s. This stringently patriarchal machinery practically dispossessed women of their autonomy and basic rights. Recalcitrant women enjoyed no socio- legal approval to rid themselves of this retrogressive marriage institution by means of divorce. Widowhood was the only means of riddance. Therefore, no sooner had Mrs. Mallard heard of Brently’s demise than she felt that in the years to come she would be living for herself, and “there would be no powerful will bending hers” (P-3, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin)

There appeared in Mrs. Mallard’s life a “brief moment of illumination”. (P-3, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin) Now it didn’t it hardly matter to her whether she had ever loved Brently or not because no human consideration was of any consequence to her in that exhilarating moment when she felt herself in “possession of self-assertion” (P-3, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin)

The protagonist had so long been divested of her selfhood and identity. So far, she had remained just Mrs. Mallard, her existence being overshadowed by Brently Mallard. Her sister Josephine’s addressing her as “Louise” symbolizes the fact that as soon as she became unfettered from marital obligations and servility, she was restored to her own identity, her autonomous existence. Only a little earlier, life was so inane and burdensome to her as to make her fear “that life might be long.” (P-3, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin). Now she prayed for a long life since she fancied herself absolutely free in body and soul, capable of enjoying all sorts of coming days at her own sweet way.

Louise Mallard glowed in and out with an unprecedented feeling of joy and glory. A triumphal excitement got lit up in her eyes, “and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory.” (P-3, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin)

Brently’s “death” turned out to be a misinformation. His return alive stood for the “death” of Louise’s ephemeral enjoyment of identity and freedom. Notably, her descending downstairs symbolizes the doom of her dream of an

autonomous life, free from the strait jackets of patriarchy. With Brently’s return, she was again pushed back into the repressive clutch of the marital machinery.

Conclusion

The story concludes with the death of Louise. According to the doctors, her heart disease caused her death ---“of joy that kills.” (P-4, The Story of an Hour – Kate Chopin) There is a terrible irony in the phrase. Brently’s return alive did by no means jubilate Louise so as to cause her death. The fact of the matter is that, Brently’s return having destroyed her dream of an ever- cherished liberation from the subversive marital obligations, Louise got too depressed and devastated to survive any more.

The cage of myself clamps shut.
.....

I have not got the authority.
-Erica Jong

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