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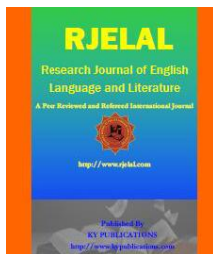
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## KATE CHOPIN'S "THE STORY OF AN HOUR": A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

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### ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* (1894) rehabilitates the female identity through the female character's struggle with strict social and traditional structures. Chopin portrays her feminist view in *The Story of an Hour* and uses her own inspiration for surviving normal life in the mind of the American woman. This paper tries to depict how women confront inappropriate social conventions. In this short story, Chopin explores the conflict between liberation and social conformity that is fundamental in establishing women's identity. Chopin also shows the significant role of women in defining their destiny to fulfill their desires. The richness of this short story relies on how women can attain freedom through developing a sense of identity. A strong desire for bringing about change leads women to create a new life because they have been victimized for the sense of freedom and joy. In order to explore Kate Chopin's treatment of female identity, Virginia Woolf's perspective will be analyzed in respect to her feministic approach. So, disregarding how Chopin demonstrates the idea of words, Woolf shows the false cultural assumptions and characteristics about gender identity of women and develops a female atmosphere in which women portray their status in the real world and their independence from men.

**Keywords:** freedom, patriarchal society, identity, Virginia Woolf.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In relation to the discussion of feminism approach many writers have their own ideas but Kate Chopin is recognized as an important figure in twenty-century American and a major figure in the feminist literature. In fact, this study emphasizes more on the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially the focus is on Mrs. Louise Mallard who is the protagonist in *The Story of an Hour*. It could be said that in this story much attention has been given to the identity crisis of women, thus in this paper all the aspects of identity problems in women will be revealed. Women have struggled very much to make

connection with the outside world, a domain beyond their husband's world. There is an enormous conflict between life, death, and freedom among women where they discover that their feelings are important. This short story offers us to study different problems that clearly are laid among women due to the fact that Mrs. Mallard seeks the best condition of women in society in contrast with her identity. *The Story of an Hour* makes the reader to be aware of the contrasts that exist between freedom and despair; in fact the woman would form their identities through their interactions with their husbands and society.

The importance of this story is shown through the cycle of oppression examined in Chopin's short stories wherein the most of men possess this oppression. Men attempt to increase their own status and power that was formed in patriarchal society. Although patriarchal aspects of society were omitted, male dominance is still current in society. Indeed, there will be "a constant repositioning between dominant and muted, hegemonic and oppositional, central and colonial, so that a woman may be described as no hegemonic or, with equal justice but less drama, as hegemonic if her race and class are dominant" (Duplessis, 1988, p. 482). Chopin persists that women should compete for cycle of injustice now in order to share societal roles more equally.

Since this story follows an unusual tale about female identity, it is an important story because in this way women and other members of society will have the same functions, values, threats and as a result they will receive many forms of oppression. Here is a young woman called Louise Mallard who suffers from heart trouble and is told the news of her husband's death in a railway accident. This danger is visible and notable since all the story twists around Louise Mallard's preservation and everybody arrange security conditions to save her from any extreme grief. She will experience no more than a momentary change in her life and the woman has depression of being unable to focus on freedom and her circumstance is murderer to herself. "The independent life of the mind nonetheless needed someone to care for the body." (Light, 2007, p.61) There is a worried triumph and conflict between her life and death although this subject is difficult for us to agree with the doctor's diagnosis. It is triumph and freedom that kills her joy and also captures her or other individuals. She does not account herself as woman and Louise's status as 'wife' leaves the responsibility for her fate to the man and she quarrels with society's opposition. Louise tries to find identity and an idealized life for herself within the society but sometimes freedom provides a negative condition to the "indescribable oppression" (Chopin, 2000, p.28) since she herself has a feeling of guilt and solitary. Because her solitary in her room does not

have any value in the world of masculine discourse and even may have not existed since a woman lives for others in fact her existence does not depend on the self.

#### A. Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a significant figure for presenting feminist criticism in her work *A Room of One's Own* (1929). In this text, Virginia Woolf declares identity of females in which the woman would be allowed to establish opportunities for her own identity and challenge with false political, social, and literary structures about her gender identity. She warns against woman should express herself freely with "a feverish triumph in her eyes like a goddess of Victory" (Chopin, 1998, p.538) and also she should ignore the pressure of opposing movements. *A Room of One's Own* encourages women to free themselves from repressions and limitations on them by society. In contrast, Woolf excludes many women in concept of freedom because the concept of freedom becomes problematic and then creates tragic end in real life. Angelyn Mitchell clearly points out: "Patriarchy's social conditioning creates codes of social behavior to ensure the suppression of feminine desires" (Mitchell, 1993, p.60). Woolf insists that all women and men are politically, socially, and economically equal and she encourages women to take control of restricted position that determine by the existence of men. Men seize the opportunities available in which to control the political, economic, social structures and conditions and they have also treat women as inferior. Virginia Woolf emphasizes the notion of destiny and encourages women to jump over the barriers of oppression, reject their melancholy, and get equality or balance of social norms for themselves within the society.

#### II. Kate Chopin's Feministic Outlook in *The Story of an Hour*

Kate Chopin believes that women cannot easily go on their freedom and selfhood without any resistance in the patriarchal society. Chopin depicts the destructive power of men and this fear creates a sense of worthlessness that was applied to the females of that century. From the beginning of the story, Louise wants to face for self-admiration and freedom but forces of patriarchal suppress the

feminine selfhood in the social and moral custom. She cannot succeed because as a woman she will be suppressed. Although, Louise is scared for freedom, selfhood, and independent in a democracy of men but she is eager to get free and reaches the peak of her ideal dream. In particular, Louise overcomes her limitations and attempts to continue her desires and she tries to capture her profound joy about her new sense of life's beauty. Her attitude about marriage reveals that she equates it with loss of her freedom and constantly whispers the word "escaped" or "free" on her lips. She thinks "I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race" (Woolf, 1977, p.43-44). Kate Chopin is unlike many of the feminist writers of her time who do not limit freedom in social conditions of women and she proves an understanding of personal freedom in her stories. Chopin believes that women would live for themselves and no powerful person would bend them in which women like men must define themselves and articulate their freedoms, values, and aspirations in society.

Louise's marriage in the early twentieth century is a form of patriarchy that the woman is subjugate to the patriarch's power although she cannot improve her fulfillment and happiness as a wife in the society. "Men are the 'opposing faction'; men are hated and feared, because they have the power to bar her way to what she wants to do" (Woolf, 1977, p.65). The patriarch's power will succumb her in which it is not easy to say that one thing will suit for a woman that the woman must be allowed the opportunity to consider what will make her happy. But, her husband's friend, Richards, was infirm in treating her while Mrs. Mallard's death becomes so irreconcilable because Mr. Richard has an obvious weakness that elevates his chivalric against comfort from a woman. "What is so unfortunate is that wise men never think the same thing about women, Here is Pope: Most women have no character at all" (Woolf, 1977, p.34). Mr. Richard tries to reinforce the last word of the fact that finally man wants to control the circumstances of Louise's life and her death even masculine will reincarnate at Louise's life through

her husband's return but the doctor learns the reason of her death. Like so many wives in the modern society, Louise would be able to create a special world for herself only after her husband death. Louise as a widow would live for herself even the absence of children in the story not only find the total freedom but also her marriage was futile because any offspring would not be imputing to Louise. Then, she encounters with the failure of her feminine discourse so she cannot feel the love of beautiful young wife or mother. The treatment of the woman character in the Chopin's story was against notions of femininity and domesticity of the century because the woman does not look at many of her desires on love and sexual desire. Chopin describes different aspects of love while how a woman deals with the act of sex so for Chopin the sexual act was completely false and absurd.

Kate Chopin describes herself as a victim of her own self-assertion in the modern society and presents us the picture of a woman who develops her selfhood by the false news of her husband's death. After hearing the doleful news of her husband's death, Louise promotes herself into an emotional world where she prefers to free herself from the responsibility for her life. Simone de Beauvoir has emphasized that she does not need to justify her existence as a wife and mother and that she can largely leave the responsibility for her fate to the man. (Beauvoir, 1961, p.13). So Mrs. Mallard feels to depend on her own efforts and it more important for her to create her own role than to be wife or mother. On the other hand, the setting of Louise's room with an open window is a sign of new life which is filled with energy, life, and ability since it is the season of spring:

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. (Kate Chopin, 1993, p.40)

All the natural things above are the symbols of rebirth and a season of life that gives the reader a

feeling of hope about Mrs. Mallard's new life. This sense of hope is quickly replaced by a feeling of shock as Mrs. Mallard suddenly dies. The open window in *The Story of an Hour* leads the female to a new inspiration and enlightenment since Chopin shows that Louise is "drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window" (Chopin, 1998, p.537). This reference suggests that she imagines a new birth of unstable condition and who is governed by her passions and her spirit rather than by any contemplation about life such as wife and marriage. So, all natural things form a new world where Louise attains a freedom or potential new life, then Chopin depicts that open window which has an useful and important role in bringing Louise to a new life and also recovers her with new spirits but She tries to abandon any repression in her life and experiences an inspiration leading to enlightenment. Kate Chopin shows different set of options and she chooses these options while they take away her from normal life so the woman can control extra happy and continues the rest of her life as well.

#### A. Defining the "self" in *The Story of an Hour*

Louise insists to rebel with the strongest role to seek a clear sense of self and enables herself to deal with outer space not by adapting to male roles, but with her freedom, and with her idea and new free life. "She is drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window" (Chopin, 1998, p.537) in which Chopin uses everything as a symbol of Louise's spiritual leading to independence and beautiful images. Even, there is a serious conflict in Louise's mind that follows the laws of environment in her life or suppresses patriarchal environment and finds only opportunities of inspiration in her life. Louise's mental conflict is shown with the symbol of the "patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled above the other in the west facing her window." (Kate Chopin, 1993, p.41) Here the "clouds that had met and piled above the other" shows a serious conflict in Louise's mind, so she tries to control herself against the power or laws of patriarchal. It is obvious that Chopin wants women to become aware of their status and of the fact that they control their own ideas and images and also the young woman

attempts to remove hers own selfish desires that is inherently wrong.

Chopin relates all the sentences to each other in the story in which all of them describe the nature and music except the sentence "In the street below a peddler was crying his wares" (Kate Chopin, 1993,p.40).This sentence is not about nature and music, and then Chopin inserts a contrast sentence in the passage. Although all of the sentences about nature and music lead Louise to inspiration and clear-sightedness but the sentence about the peddler in the passage indicates something else. It provides the contrast between reality in Louise's inward world and reality in Louise's outward world. Louise leads a "dual life that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" since her social role conflicts with her true identity (Chopin, 1969, p.18). In the outward world, "peddler" cannot be a woman, in other words, a man can cry for his wares and also can easily sell them because any human connection with the outside world for men is easier than women. Virginia Woolf provides an aspect connected to topic: "to the world of reality and notonly to the world of men" (Woolf, 1977, p.124). In this way,Woolf suggests that Chopin believes that the outward world may not abandon a woman from the storm of grief and also may not provide an ideal world and self-admiration for a woman. So, a woman must be able to realize her essence and make a conscious choice for her own destiny. It becomes more and more obvious; she tries to find herself in the female role that does not have trouble in the role of submissive woman.Then, she should reject the false norms of social construct and establish ideal identity for herself.

In this story, some of quotations prevent the force of patriarchal: "she was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength"(Chopin, 1998, p.537).First, the word "line" is the symbol of pressure or stress that a young woman may has wrinkles in her face before she reaches to the normal old age so Louise as a woman attempts to abandon herself from the pressure or stress of a man. Second, the word "repression" points that "Louise is still automatically struggling to suppress the repression of certain

strength," even though the suppression on Louise is by both men and women and it could be from the patriarchal principles. We reach this point that Josephine, Louise's sister cannot perceive Louise's true feeling because Josephine obeys the patriarchal blindness society, then she fails to see Louise's deep mind. After all, the powerful suppression over the female like Louise gives self-admiration in her abandoned herself. But a woman like Louise without any rebelling voice adapts selfhood to the patriarchal society which lacks her identity or joy as she dies. Chopin was concerned with this subject that women were confined to the patriarchal society and they could not treat against men because women are bound to home and that they are trapped by their controlling husbands in marriage, not love.

As mentioned, the narrator of the story tells the reader:

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending her in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination. (Kate Chopin, 1993, p.41)

According to these sentences, Louise is tired of her life because she wasn't free, when one is not free and is forced to suffer either spiritually or physically. "Her wits were turned with solitude and freedom" (Woolf, 1977, p.68). She has lived for others in the past and at the every moment she will not live for everyone in her future life and Louise hopes to continue her own life and to enjoy her own freedom. Kate Chopin suggests any woman can have ideal feminine selfhood and freedom in society but any woman cannot have any feminine self-admiration or concept of freedom. Chopin shows that Louise trips to the ideal world of feminine freedom but at the end the powerful patriarchal forces control her life. It seems that Brently Mallard controls Louise's identity and this is the time Louise loses her freedom and self-identity. Then, the fate of

Louise's freedom is destroyed and at the end of the story the death of Louise shows that an idealistic feminist searches a wrong track for freedom and independent. It is impossible for a woman to search for her freedom in the age of powerful patriarchal, so Louise cannot achieve the integrity of the true spiritual and selfhood.

### III. Conclusion

Kate Chopin gives hopefulness to the women that find feminine independence and freedom in a new way to come. However, Chopin was not a romantic but she displays her ability with connotation of imaginations in the mind of female characters. On the other hand, absolutely freedom is not ideally perfect because it belongs to divinity but it may be seen as fantasy or dream in Louise's unhealthy mind, therefore, she loses control of her mind and also does not think clearly as raises unrealistic ideas that it was a delusion and failure.

The end of *The Story an Hour* points Louise's sudden death while Louise may gain freedom as a result of Brently's death but freedom is limited to isolation so that Louise's freedom is based on her relation to the dead husband more than the conditions of her future freedom. She discovers freedom of self and will control her life that there is not any place for her in the patriarchal society. Her increased freedom results in a loss of relation to the patriarchal society around so Kate Chopin represents that the sharp description of a woman will make a strong claim for freedom of selfhood in which she tries to break the definitions of patriarchy in her own mind. However, Louise attempts to struggle for selfhood against the society's law but Louise's death is an occasion that she would take ability to control her feeling and decision in the world of patriarchal blindness or suppression. Physically, the woman's heart becomes weak and in other words, she cannot create any system of her own and other social systems will not accept her, so she will not have any life to lead when the woman's self fully gains the freedom. According to her, however the woman is respectable and sensible so it is very important that there is the picture of politeness and perfect gentlewoman within women and the woman would return more mature towards man in all respectability. The woman should lead a

respectable life for her husband while she must control her love, passion, and respect for her spouse because it is possible that those feelings will eternally stay between the man and the woman.

Although Kate Chopin's short story can be viewed as the best example of feminist themes, Chopin was able to promote an unusual or irregular ideology of female character in a large context. This short story is also a sign of the effects of oppression and suppression under a system of powerful patriarchy over the woman's existence in which it denies rules, norms, and perspectives of woman to self-development and oppresses moral conduct of woman toward the world of marriage. Chopin shows the conflict between women roles in house as wives and personal aspiration and that the women would not expect to complete their roles as wives but would expect to protect their wives as the expression of personal aspiration. In fact, many of women have lost part of human being and their existence that they have to perform as a wife and a mother and also they should be firm in their reasons, actions, and reactions over themselves. Chopin reveals a character such as Mrs. Mallard that is the center of action in the story and offers to the women that the role of independence is very important, so women must be allowed to have the opportunity to improve their thoughts, feelings, emotions and senses and liberate themselves from constraints of society and marriage. On the other hand, Chopin offers that Mrs. Mallard's short freedom does not support her dream through the ideals of new woman because woman cannot think of freedom and other personal possession for herself as long as she is committed to the sanctity of marriage.

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