

Chapter 2

Millet's Theoretical Framework in the Analysis of *The Awakening*

As a pioneer feminist novel, *The Awakening* has been thoroughly studied and discussed by many feminist critics. Those criticisms focus on various gender issues presented in the themes of female struggle for her liberation. However, although so far the feminist theoretical perspectives have been employed to study this novel, there still is a boundary between the criticism and some feminist ideas. Interpreting Edna's death at the final scene, many criticisms with feminist approaches cannot go beyond the feminist convention that woman always triumphs in her struggle against patriarchy. It is because those works, labeled as feminism, refuse to accept that patriarchy is the most powerful institution, as it is hegemony of all societies. Hence, the idea of Edna's failure in her emancipation is always presented with negative solution that her defeat is caused by her taboo-disillusionment, not by the hegemonic power of patriarchy. I detect that there exists a certain taboo in the interpretation of the novel after reading numbers of feminist criticisms of *The Awakening*. The interdiction I wish to speak here is the traditional feminist's denial of Edna's failure or to be more precise, the forced triumph of the heroine. The reason for my contradiction of the traditionalist feminist reading is its underestimation of the power of the patriarchal force that underpins the novel's context.

The Background of Millet's Patriarchy

My thesis will use the main feminist theory of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* to explore the grounds of women's oppression and resistance presented in *The Awakening*. To begin with, it is essential to determine the cause of women's oppression or to be more precise, the context that establishes the male's dominating hierarchy. As one of the leading voices of the second wave feminist movement who fought for gender equality in 1960s America, Kate Millet's concept of the "patriarchy" was first introduced in *Sexual Politics*, offers an insight on women's oppressed context. Soon after published in 1969, *Sexual Politics* became widely

mentioned among feminist studies, and canonized itself as “*the first book of academic feminist literary criticism*” (Clough, 1994, p.473) and “*one of the most influential texts of second-wave feminism*” (Humm, 1994, p.44). In her *Sexual Politics*, Millet introduces the theory of “patriarchy” defined as the fundamental part of gender problems and inequality particularly within society dominated by male power. Millet attempts to assert how the male’s authority, generally termed as patriarchy, comes into existence. Patriarchy, Millet contemplates, is based on the unjust power struggle of “sexual politics”. Accordingly, “[t]he term “politics” shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (Millet, para.4). Millet’s sexual politic, like the relationship between the citizen and the state, not only resembles the imaginary hierarchical relationships between the sexes but also determines their reality. Simply put, the “one group of persons” who is “controlled by another” is the female. Women are trapped in the “power-structure relationships” that place them in the inferior position to men. Placing Millet’s sexual politic into sets of binary oppositions, women will forever be associated with the men’s less desirable qualities. Women will always be at the inferior end of the power structure. In Millet’s perspective, this unbalanced gender hierarchy emerges incongruent with the foundation of society. In other words, the essence of our civilization is patriarchy – a male dominated system designed to enforce women submission. Hence, with Millet’s patriarchal framework, I will illustrate that Edna’s emancipation from male dominance is not simply a case of her solitary struggle against any particular male characters like husband and lover, but the very system that governs her existence. To rebel against patriarchy, as Edna did in the novel, is to start a war with society itself.

Millet's Patriarchy as *The Awakening's* Analysis Framework

In *The Awakening*, most of the female characters have been imprisoned and oppressed by the patriarchal ideology and tradition. The patriarchal society strongly believes in a gender ideology that privileges male dominancy over the suppressed women. Based on Millet’s theory in *Sexual Politics* (1969, chap.2), men establish the process of gender socialization, a kind of psychological process, dividing

human into two sexes: male and female, with regards to three dimensions: status, temperament and role. The process of socialization is crucial in establishing gender division. Metaphorically speaking, patriarchy functions like a conspiracy, in which every man in the society ostensibly agree to maintain a certain superior power relationship over women. Millet states that status is the primary dimension in socialization process as it is men's purpose to proclaim their status as superior, while subduing the female with inferiority. As to the temperament, men claim to be the authority that create '*formation of human personality along the stereotyped lines of sexed category*' (para.9) which are masculinity and femininity, based on the demands and assumptions of men that aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy are in the male while passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue," and ineffectuality are in the female. This categorization is men's excuse in order to find their 'convenient subordinate'. Role, as the last regard, is a complemented result of the previous dimensions. Gender roles set up the division of work, assigning female to domestic labor involving taking care of children whereas male, representing achievement and ambition, can work outside to gain money and social position. Hence, the purpose of men's sexual categorization, to Millet, is to arrogate to themselves two unjust and unmovable hierarchical positions: the superiority of men and the relegation of women. In *The Awakening*, the essence of masculinity is shown through male characters. Léonce, for example, is considered masculine because his repeated actions fall into the concept of masculinity such as his exhibition of superiority and authority in family by controlling and commanding weaker members such as his wife, children and servants. Similar to masculinity, femininity is dominantly presented through Adèle as she represents all femininity's aspects, for example, taking care of her family and being obsessed with her beauty.

Millet's *Sexual Politics*, moreover, states the idea that the hegemonic power of patriarchy exists in all level of sexual relationship's structures. Family is the most important institution of the patriarchy's oppressive mechanism because it is a basic structure of patriarchal society, containing the hierarchy. In a family, husband is positioned as the family's authority that rules and commands other members, while a wife is considered to be submissive toward both husband and children. This is

because wife, having no income and social position, must socially and economically depend on her husband.

Of course, the patriarchal dominancy is not obvious as the state's hegemony, in which the presence of a law enforcer signifies the state's authority. Millet frighteningly proposes that the sexual politic – the female's struggle against the patriarchal regime – is deep rooted in every type of social relationship and structure, as soon as she enters a family:

Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are society, the family and its roles are prototypical. Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads. Even in patriarchal societies where they are granted legal citizenship, women tend to be ruled through the family alone and have little or no formal relation to the state. (para.26)

The quotation above clearly explains the hierarchal gender. Millet states that “patriarchy” is originally rooted in family institutions and extended to the larger structure, which is the society. However, family is the core of this power relationship between the two genders as it is essential in maintaining sexual power. This sexual hierarchy of family epitomizes all social relationships. This is because it is a reflection of larger social relationship that all inevitably concerns political power. Millet insists that the patriarchal power relationship in the family creates the conformity of the members. It is possible to further hypothesize from Millet's statement that the social norm always favors men's role as family provider – the bread winner of the house. Thus, other family members, who are usually wife and children unable to work according to social standards, are forced to accept these imaginary social roles of the capable male and incompetent others. The image of the capable

male then functions as a kind of ideology that leads women to accept the illusion of the weak and the incompetent. This acceptance of male dominancy as the norm then manifests itself at the social level. The entire human civilization exists to glorify the male dominators who assume the roles of a ruler and provider - marginalizing women in the process.

What Millet's *Sexual Politics* achieves is its demystification of the myth of womanhood. By proposing the idea that the society is fabricated to tailor male domination, Millet simultaneously exposes that the idea of wifehood and motherhood, two conventionally pride positions in the society, is not a natural construction but a cultural one that functions through ideological apparatus. She declares that it is patriarchy that creates the ideology that a woman is biologically born to assume the role of mother. It is apparent that Millet's idea of motherhood as patriarchal construction is clearly contrasted to Pizer's naturalist framework reviewed in my previous chapter, which proclaims motherhood as a natural construction. Hence, the male-dominated social sphere marks the dilemma for any female resistance. After all, how can a woman rebel against the system that confirms her existence as one of its members? How can she achieve a sense of victory when she must strive to be equal to the very force that brands her inferiority?

Millet's patriarchal dominance encompasses the context of *The Awakening* and constitutes Edna's struggle. The patriarchal ideology, in one way or another, influences every character in the novel. Male characters assume superior position over the female one especially as husband who is a family provider. Their authority in superior social roles, according to Millet's theory, is the main factor of female characters' frustration. The male characters expect their wives to conform to them regardless of women's personal desire. However, in *The Awakening* the relationship between women and patriarchal system remains in a state of constant friction. Instead of submitting to their oppressed status, some female characters, especially Edna, choose to struggle and are able to reach their individual freedom. Millet's theory may inspire female resistance against patriarchy. However, it is a resistance that will always end in the same result- the defeat of women. As a constructor of gender identity and social ideology, the patriarchy gains its power from being able to create the supposedly superior binary opposition that constructs

women's inferior quality. Simultaneously, patriarchy also presents itself as the norm that the female pole must achieve and be identified with. From a female perspective, the resistance under the patriarchal system is but a vain quest for the phallus - a quest completely suppresses and confines women to inferior status right at the moment of their defiance. Thus, Edna will never be able to struggle for her self-ownership, nor to reach for her own identity because she is forced to entirely embrace in the patriarchal area and enact patriarchal ideology.

Criticism of Millet's theory

Although Kate Millet's feminist theory is an applicable framework to analyze the structure of women's oppression under patriarchal system, it does not provide any solution for women to break free from the patriarchal oppression. The problem with Millet's patriarchal framework is its pre-assumption of patriarchal dominance. In other words, Millet's framework presupposes that women are automatically placed into some feminine oppressed roles such as wife and mother simply because the entire social structure is created by men. What Millet fails to explain is how women believed and participated in these roles in the first place. Without this knowledge, it becomes impossible for women to break free from patriarchy as the root and nature of this oppression is never identified.

Nevertheless, I find that Millet's theories of patriarchy and socialization causing women's oppression form an important basis to my proposal of woman's achievement in struggle against patriarchal oppression. This is because they provide the further idea that gender is not merely a social construction but also a kind of practices that require individual participations. In the patriarchal system, the said individuals act out their behavior according to social expectation. For instance, one cannot simply be tagged as a mother without participating in the patriarchal concept. To elaborate this idea, an individual claiming to be a mother will never be socially accepted unless he or she performs the required actions that signify the concept mother. Of course, to be fully accepted by the society or for the said individual to acknowledge his or her identity as a mother the actions that signify this concept, i.e., giving birth, breastfeeding, caring for the children, must be repeated consistently.

Therefore, the framework of Millet is applied to the solution of women's oppression as well.

I would like to propose that Edna's suicide precisely signifies woman's triumph as a liberal individual. The negation of patriarchal oppression is apparent in Edna's change of approach. If we trace Edna's behavior, according to the novel, we will see her attempt in resistance against patriarchal oppression, to give up her female role as wife and mother. It should be reasonable to speculate that Edna's constant failure to resist patriarchal oppression is a result of her being trapped in the repetitive position to support male supremacy. At first glance, Edna may appear to emancipate from her role as a wife/mother as presented through her outward resistance of Léonce's control and her rejection of her children by assuming the role of a lover in her affair with Arobin; however, I believe that these are Edna's acts of merely assuming different roles under patriarchal surveillance. This repetitiveness of role changing is also visible as Edna interacts with other characters, for example, her identification with Mlle. Reisz. It is apparent that Edna gradually changes her role from a submissive wife to a solitary woman who desires for individuality as she continues to reciprocate with Mlle. Reisz's rebellious attitude and artistry.

The repetition of Edna's role changing comes to a termination only at the end of the novel, in which she decided to commit suicide. Her swimming into the sea in the final scene suggests her final realization of the way to elude her imprisonment in the patriarchal roles successfully. Her suicide marks the end of her imprisonment of gender identity and signifies her complete emancipation into a liberal individual. To elucidate women's oppression in male dominated society, my analysis in the next chapter will be based on Millet's patriarchal framework, focusing particularly on how the main three female characters, Edna, Adèle and Reisz are oppressed in the system. The analysis of their inability to form any meaningful resistance should then reinforce the necessity of Millet's patriarchal theory.