Space and Female Subjectivity in Kate Chopin's

The Awakening

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I. Introduction

Published in 1899, The Awakening is a masterpiece by Kate Chopin (1850-1904), an American female novelist who, prior to the publication of the novella, had been accepted by the American literary circle as a prominent “local colorist” of the South. What the novella brought about, however, was a torrent of outrageous attacks on her, casting her out of her literary practice. Her works were since taken out of circulation until their “rediscovery” in the 1960s, thanks to the excavation efforts by a number of American feminist scholars. The Awakening, in particular, was thereafter highly recommended for its celebration of female subjectivity, and Edna Pontellier, its heroine, was honored as a model of the “New Women”. Elaine Showalter, in her essay “Tradition and the Female Talent”, gives credit to Chopin’s literary accomplishment. In Showalter’s words, Chopin has at once inherited and surpassed the literary tradition of two generations of American female writers of the 19th century: the sentimentalists and the local colorists. The Awakening, she claims, is undoubtedly a “revolutionary book” that “marked a significant epoch in the
evolution of an American female literary tradition”, breaking “new thematic and stylistic ground”\(^{[1]}\). She ends her comments with a sigh, bemoaning that we could never possibly know what changes Chopin’s works would have brought to that tradition, were it not half a century before they reached their readers\(^{[2]}\). Nowadays, Chopin’s significance in the American literary history is beyond dispute, and *The Awakening* has become a constituent part of the American canon.

Contemporary feminist scholars read the novella from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. An interesting one is that of mythological analysis. Sandra Gilbert, for instance, posits that Chopin employs the fantasy of the second coming of Aphrodite in the creation of a mythological narrative to dramatize women’s struggle for their erotic freedom\(^{[3]}\). Similar mythological archetypes are identified by Cristina Giorcelli as embodiments of multiple possibilities for female development. Edna is, she suggests, always positioned in a “liminal state”, open to the possibilities of overcoming gender limitations and attaining “a precarious, quasi-divine wholeness”\(^{[4]}\). Psychoanalysis is another productive feminist perspective. Examining the heroine’s sexual-psycho evolution, Deborah L. Madsen contends that Edna, having identified with the symbole of the father, re-experiences the Pre-Oedipal Imaginary as she “awakens.” Unable to resolve the dilemma of her conflicting Symbolic/Imaginary identities, she chooses to return to the Imaginary of the sea\(^{[5]}\). While the above readings are isolated from historical/cultural contexts, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese adopts a more materialistic tone, setting the novelist’s own individualism as articulated in the novella against a background of the concurrent women’s movement. Chopin, argues Fox-Genovese, takes the opposite course to that of the women’s movement by “[viewing] women’s independence as a personal more than a social matter”\(^{[6]}\).

In her review of the early American female literary tradition, Showalter calls attention to the profusion of household spatial images in the works of the female sentimentalists: the kitchen, the garden, birdcages, etc. Such spaces, she observes, are invested with “mythological meanings” in the stories of the local colorists: “the mother’s garden has become a paradisal sanctuary;...the house an emblem of the female body, with the kitchen as its womb.”\(^{[7]}\) The same spatial images appear repeatedly in *The Awakening*, on which, regrettably, no further comment has been given by Showalter.

These spatial images have received some attention by other feminist scholars. Helen Taylor and Janet Beer both discuss the heroine’s image as a female *flâneur*
wandering the urban streets. Stressing the performativity and fictitiousness of the city spaces, Taylor defines Edna’s wandering as a quest for the meaning of femininity\[^8\]. Bill, on the other hand, interprets it as a form of limited expression and materialization of sexual awakening in the city space\[^9\]. While the above focus is on the material public space, Elisabeth Le Blanc’s is on Edna’s cultural space. Employing the concept “metaphorical lesbian” of Lesbian Theory, she examines Edna’s challenge to the heterosexual and patriarchal institution by means of spatial construction, arguing that “Edna’s reevaluation results in a gradual construction of spaces—physical, cultural, psychological—that allows her to establish a (lesbian) identity separate from her social world... She also tries to establish a position, a space within her culture, from which she can question its norms and constitute herself as an active subject\[^10\].

These observations are enlightening in their attention to the gender-space relationship. What is more or less overlooked in their interpretation is the local power structure of Edna’s private spaces. This paper examines from a feminist perspective Edna’s interaction with her private spaces in her process of subject consciousness awakening and subjectivity construction.

II. Space and Gender

Events in literary works unfold themselves in space, and produce their meanings through the transition of space. “Every story,” says Michael de Certeau, “is a travel story—a spatial practice.”\[^11\] The function of space is not only limited to the provision of location for events. Indeed, space is implicated with socio-cultural relations, especially gender-power relations in which the characters find themselves. In the works of male authors female characters are always passively located in confining family spaces, while in those of female writers the basic images frequently turn out to be those of “encampment-escape”\[^12\], with their female characters tormented under the material deprivation and psychological domination by the patriarchal order, from which they try (in vain) to escape.

From the feminist perspective, then, space is not only the product of gender relations, but also the very condition of their production and reproduction, and is the power that plays the central role in the relationship between gender and space\[^13\]. In other words, patriarchy works as the structural factor in shaping gender-space relationship. It is precisely for this reason that gender-space relationship becomes a focal theme in the theorization of many feminist scholars. Virginia Woolf, for
instance, calls attention to the necessity of a private space and economic independence for women’s accomplishment in her seminal work *A Room of One’s Own*. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, observes that the patriarchal culture defines women as “the Other”, thereby depriving them of their subjectivity and creativity. Consequently women exist in “the basic tension between immanence and transcendence”.

Iris Marion Young, a contemporary feminist philosopher, develops de Beauvoir’s observation in “Throw Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Female Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality”, exploring the relationship between femininity and space in the patriarchal society. Citing Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the body as “the original subject which constitutes space”, she attributes three features to the female space: 1) that feminine existence lives in such space as enclosed; 2) that the female space has a dual structure constituted by the “space of the here” and the “space of the yonder”; and 3) that women experience themselves as “positioned in space”. Women, claims Young, are domesticated as “good wives”, living in enclosed spaces—bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms, and attics. Beyond these enclosed “spaces of the here” and out of their access, are “spaces of the yonder”, the free spaces of the male. Objectified by the patriarchal order, then, the female bodies are “positioned in space”, their mobility confined, so that the bodies, supposedly active in constituting space, can only live themselves passively in a constituted space.

The above feminist theorizations can be illuminating when applied to the examination of gender-space relationship in *The Awakening*. The spatial settings in the novel are, first of all, implicative of power relations. The geography of Grand Isle, for example, is presented as a metaphor of the enclosed space of female existence. As a barrier island distant from the mainland on the surface, Grand Isle is geologically part of the continental shelf. Likewise, the community on the island, though seemingly a female Utopia beyond the patriarchal order, is indeed within its hidden control. The women on the island are ideologically bound by the Creole tradition. These good wives, living their own lives as “positioned in space”, are ready to speak what they believe to be “the law and the gospel” of patriarchy. The layout of the Lebrun resort provides another metaphor of the patriarchal control. Madame Lebrun’s room is “situated at the top of the house....Two broad dormer windows looked out toward the Gulf, and so far across it as a man’s eye might reach” (30). The cottages, the beach, and the coastal waters are all under the
surveillance of the dormer windows, as were the case of the Benthamian panopticon. The matriarch dwelling in such a dominant space, who admires the “more intelligent and higher” patriarchal order (31), propagates patriarchal laws as she issues her commands in a high tone.

Along with the transition of space and thematic focus, the novel can be divided into three sections. The location of the first section, comprising the first 16 chapters, is Grand Isle and the nearby Cheniere Caminada; and that of the second section, chapter 17 to 38, is the city of New Orleans. Edna’s process of subject consciousness awakening unfolds itself in the first section, her construction of subjectivity in the second. The third section contains only the final chapter, in which Edna ends her own life in the sea. Edna’s private spaces include the Pontellier cottage at Grand Isle, the Pontellier house at New Orleans, as well as the “pigeon house”. The cottage and the Pontellier house are family spaces, and the drawing-room within the house and the “pigeon house” could be defined as her personal spaces. Edna’s subjectivity project follows the “encampment-escape” pattern, coinciding with a spatial transition from the familial to the personal, from immanence to transcendence, from “the here” to “the yonder”.

III. Space and Awakening

Edna’s subject consciousness awakening is a gradual, contradictory process, involving two major conflicts between the couple. The awakening process is given explicit narrative in three places in the novella. First in chapter 6, “Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being”, when her subject consciousness is still ambivalent between “two contradictory impulses” (19). Second in chapter 11, where the awakening unfolds itself: “Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually from a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream.” (46) Edna’s awakening reaches its consummation in chapter 13, where the whole process of her falling into sleep and waking up is given a very detailed description. Waking up from a long sleep, her perceptions are fresh all over: “Her eyes were bright and wide awake and her face glowed” (55). The awakening episode signifies the maturing of the subject consciousness of the heroine, who is now “seeing with different eyes and making acquaintance of new conditions in herself” (59).

The first major conflict between the Pontelliers takes place in chapter 3, before her awakening. Coming back late at night, Mr. Pontellier reproaches his wife for
failing her maternal responsibility. Afterwards, Edna leaves the bedroom for a wicker chair on the porch and continues to cry. “She could not have told why she was crying....An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish.”

At this point, Edna is still unable to understand the constraints of her gender role so her “oppression” is therefore “indescribable”. Passive to her marital space (the bedroom), unconscious of its confining and oppressing effect on her, she is “positioned in space” as an inert object. Her departure from the bedroom serves as an expedient to release her anxiety, after which she is to return for her sleep and to make up with her husband the next morning as if nothing has happened.

The second conflict takes place in chapter 11, several weeks after the commencement of her awakening process. Back at the cottage after an accomplished Saturday evening, she stays in the hammock in front of the door till midnight, showing no compromise to her husband’s desire: “[She] settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that her will has blazed up, stubborn and resistant.”

Fastened on a pole at the porch and a tree trunk in front of it, the hammock is beyond the shelter of the cottage architecture. If the bedroom is an enclosed space, the porch a liminal one, then the hammock is a free space upon which Edna is able to withstand the persuasion and coercion of her desiring husband. In contrast to the prior conflict, Edna’s choice of space indicates her newly acquired agency and determination. Her refusal to enter the bedroom suggests her resistance to the marital institution; her occupation of the hammock suggests her insistence on an independent subject position; and her rejection to the wine passed over by her husband from the inside suggests her rejection to the seduction of the enclosed space. Edna’s resistance to the patriarchal order through spatial practice, in a word, has achieved its initial triumph.

Of the two conflicts, the former includes the husband’s reprimand and the wife’s subjugation. Edna remains a passive object in a “constituted” family space. The latter, taking place in the course of her awakening process, involves the wife’s resistance and the couple’s confrontation. It is just after the confrontation that “Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream” (46). With her subject consciousness awakened, she perceives the possibility of autonomy. Here, the development of her subject consciousness is represented in her growing sensitiveness to space. To her, space unfolds itself in a polarization of “enclosure-freedom”. The bedroom as a marital space is explicitly enclosed and
constraining. Resistance to patriarchy requires leaving the enclosed bedroom, crossing over the liminal porch and occupying the free space in the open. A comparison of her diverse relations to space in the two conflicts illustrates the growth of her subjectivity.

IV. Space and Subjectivity Construction

The second section begins with a description of space: "The Pontelliers possessed a charming house..." (73) Back in New Orleans, Edna begins her subjectivity project through a succession of spatial practices, i.e., she attempts to "constitute herself as an active subject"[19] in space: to occupy, define, control and transcend space. In Young's terms, Edna's subjectivity project is carried out in the form of the transformation of the immanent "space of the here" and the transcendence toward the free "space of the yonder".

Edna begins this process by abandoning her Tuesday reception day, with a simple but disturbing excuse: "I was out, that was all." (74) After an unpleasant dinner with her husband, she goes to her room, takes off her wedding ring and strives to crush it with her heel. She then smashes a vase upon the tiles of the hearth. These are both highly symbolic conducts. What she attempts is a rebellion against her marriage and her gender role as "the angel of the hearth".[20]

Once taking a rebellious stance, Edna becomes an alien in that space. "The street, the children...the flowers...were all part and parcel of an alienated world which had suddenly become antagonistic." (78) "A room of one's own", then, seems to be imperative for her subjectivity construction. In the subsequent narrative, Edna breaks through the constraints of gender role and devotes her efforts to explore new spaces. These turn out to include: the drawing-room, the "pigeon house", Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, the streets, Catiche's garden, etc. Among them the drawing-room and the "pigeon house" are of crucial importance for her subjectivity project.

A bright atelier in the top of the house, Edna's drawing-room is a space that allows her a certain extent of freedom. "She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked." (83) She even "had the whole household enrolled in the service of art" (84). In this particular space, the painter-model relationship takes a carnivalesque turn form that of the daily life. This is exemplified in the sketch episode with Edna's father as the model. The father/daughter, active/passive dichotomy is reversed. The daughter works with ease with her pencil, while the aged colonel sits "rigid and
unflinching, as he had faced the cannon’s mouth in days gone by” (99-100). The atelier allows Edna to experience the pleasure of untrammeled expression and discretion and possess a full-frown subject consciousness. As a result, she is transformed from a “listless woman” into “a being who...seemed palpitant with forces of life” (102).

To this point, Edna could have regarded herself fortunate to her time. As suggested by Woolf, with “a room of one's own” and sufficient financial support, an aspirant woman artist can be expected to accomplish something in her career.[21] Unfortunately, Edna’s aspiration is not with the creation of art. To her, art is but one of the ways through which she expresses her subjectivity; it is by no means the whole of her subjectivity project. Moreover, the drawing-room is just one of the corners in a house safeguarded by the numerous “household gods” allegiant to Mr. Pontellier (73). “Within the precincts of her home she felt like one who has entered and lingered within the portals of some forbidden temple in which a thousand muffled voices bade her begone.” (122)

The drawing-room is, therefore, just a part of the enclosed marital space, insufficient to accommodate Edna’s subjectivity project. Subjectivity construction requires that the body recuperate its status as the original subject to constitute space. In other words, the individual, as the subject of space, should be granted the power to occupy, define, control and transcend space. What Edna needs seems to be a “space of one’s own” in the true sense of the words.

The “pigeon house” is the new “space of one’s own”. It is a cozy little house rented with her own money, supplied with things of “her own resources” (122). It enables her to escape the confinement of marriage, and to look at the world and experience life as an independent subject.

The “pigeon house” pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected liked a warm glow....Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. (136)

It is a space that allows her to enjoy the freedom of action and thought, a space in which she dates Arobin and unlatches her hitherto imprisoned sexuality, and a space which she eventually invites Robert to share. More significantly, she plays the dominant role here in all her interactions with males. Arobin gets invited and
dismissed precisely as it pleases her. Robert gives his confession of love under her guidance. The “pigeon house” appears, in a word, to be the “space of the yonder” where Edna could eventually be a true subject.

The “pigeon house”, however, fails that promise. It is just a tiny constituent unit of the larger social space, vulnerable to the invasion of the patriarchal order in its various forms: the husband’s commercial tactics to redefine it, the children’s expectation and Madame Ratignolle’s exhortation, not to mention Arobin’s persistent presence. More significantly, as is the case of Grand Isle, the most powerful instrument of the patriarchal surveillance lies in its ideological penetration. Just inside the “pigeon house”, despite his bold confession of love, Robert is tightly bound by patriarchal gender notions. He cannot accept her autonomous identity, nor imagine a sexual relationship without marriage, not to mention collaborate with her to challenge the patriarchal order. Robert’s departure permanently deprives Edna of the possibility of getting an affirmation to her subject identity, and thereby undermines the meaning of the “pigeon house” as a subjective space.

Indeed, the “pigeon house” is never spaced beyond the patriarchal order. “Just two steps away” from the Pontellier house (77), it is just another house “around the block” (122). It is analogous to the hammock in front of the Grand Isle cottage, viable only for the purpose of temporary resistance. This expedient space—as hinted in Mr. Pontellier’s words: “You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you” (41)—is never beyond the patriarchal surveillance, and is therefore predestined to be re-incorporated into the patriarchal order sooner or later.

In this sense, the spatial image of the “pigeon house” could be viewed as a suggestion of the limitation of the “a-room-of-one’s-own” proposal by early feminism. A space like this is subject to the institutional constraints of the patriarchal order and the invasion of its ideology. Moreover, it limits the possibility of female development, blinding them from the broader social space and the stronger female collectives, and entrapping them into the snare of individualism. Individualism alone, as it is by now clear, cannot provide a positive outlet for women’s liberation, but will only exhaust the energy and lives of the feminist precursors. With this in mind, we can see that Edna’s transcendence of the enclosed space is only on a limited scale, and that her subjectivity construction remains an unfinished project. In disillusionment and weariness, she finally walks into the sea, a timeless, boundless, imaginary female space, which is also the realm of death.
V. Conclusion

From a feminist perspective, Edna’s spaces are gendered spaces under patriarchal surveillance. The ways social practices and gender relations are organized in her spaces are ineluctably prescribed by the patriarchal order. Edna’s spatial practice, as her subject consciousness awakens, evolves from passive acceptance to active construction. She attempts to be an independent subject by means of exploration and construction of personal space. Her subjectivity project ends up in failure owing to the penetration of patriarchal order into her personal space and the limitation of female individualism. As the above study illustrates, the feminist theoretical perspective of gender space offers a vantage-point for the close observation of female identity development and of the limitation of female individualism within the patriarchal order.

Notes:
[1] Elaine Showalter, “Tradition and Female Talent”, New Essays on The Awakening, ed. Wendy Martin (New York: Cambridge UP, 1988) 34.
[2] Ibid., 54.
[3] Sandra Gilbert, “Introduction: The Second Coming of Aphrodite”, Kate Chopin, The Awakening and Selected Stories (New York: Penguin, 2003) 20-21.
[4] Cristina Giorcelli, “Edna’s Wisdom: A Traditional and Numinous Merging”, New Essays, 122.
[5] Deborah L. Madsen, Feminist Theory and Literary Practice (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2006) 108.
[6] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “The Awakening in the Context of Experience, Culture and Values of Southern Women”, A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, eds. Janet Beer and Elizabeth Nolan, (London: Routledge, 2004) 51.
[7] Elaine Showalter, “Tradition and Female Talent”, New Essays, 39.
[8] Helen Taylor, “Walking Through New Orleans: Kate Chopin and the Female Flâneur”, A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, 62.
[9] Janet Beer, “Walking the Streets: Women out Alone in Kate Chopin’s New Orleans”, A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, 78.
[10] Elisabeth Le Blanc, “The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in The Awakening”, A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, 69.
[11] Michael de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1988) 115.
[12] Kerstin W. Shands, Embracing Space: Spatial Discourse in Feminist Discourse, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) 71.
[13] Jane Rendell, “Introduction: Gender, Space”, Gender, Space, Architecture: An
Interdisciplinary Introduction, eds. Jane Rendell, et al (London: Routledge, 2003) 102.

[14] Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, and Three Guineas, (New York: Oxford UP, 1998).

[15] Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatially”, Human Studies, 3 (1980):141.

[16] Ibid., 149-150.

[17] Ibid., 151.

[18] All quotations from the novella are from Kate Chopin, The Awakening (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2007).

[19] Elisabeth Le Blanc, “The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in The Awakening”, A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, 69.

[20] The space in front of the hearth is the centre of traditional Western family lives. The term “angel of the hearth” refers to the traditional ideal female image in Western culture.

[21] Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, and Three Guineas, 137.

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