Kate Chopin’s Notion Of Female Independence In The Story Of An Hour

The role of women has changed considerably in the society and it was much different today than it was in the past. ‘Freedom’ or ‘independence’ is the household word for working women in the present world. Though we talk of women’s freedom, it does not mean that they can live independently; it rather means, at some point in their lives, when they undergo hard times they should be ready enough to face it on their own. Women need adequate protection, social and economical development and their own identity. The word ‘woman’ symbolizes strength, sacrifice, courage, commitment, and love. Kate Chopin wrote this short story during 19th Century where the American society held to deep-rooted idea that women were inferior to and should remain dependent upon their husbands and other male figures. Women were involved in the household chores like cooking, cleaning, childrearing, or doing the laundry, etc. Their wages were less than what men earned. They didn’t have any financial independence and their assets or possessions were passed from their fathers to their husbands upon their marriage.

The Story of an Hour was published in the year 1884. It explores the idea of women’s emancipation from the domestic compulsions. This article sheds light on the married folks Mr. and Mrs. Mallards. Kate Chopin’s narratives present the plight and experience of a married woman at the end of the century. The treatment of the women characters in her stories is considered radical and opposing, going against the familiar ideas of feminism at that time. In the words of Simone Signoret, “Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads, which sew people together through the years.” The story is set in the house of the Mallards in the late 19th C – a time when women were confined to the house and were often denied participation in the social life; also it was the time where they fought for equal rights and most importantly the right to vote. Men were expected to live a public life and to socialize with like-minded men in public places like clubs, meetings or bars. On the hand, women were usually expected to live their lives largely homebound. In the free times too very few women had the same opportunities for education.

The domestic space is traditionally identified as the space of women which defines and limits their potential for freedom. Home and family are patriarchal institutions that seek to deny women a voice and trap them into accepting the American dream as having a good husband, children, and a home. The world outside is the sphere of the man and he leaves home to work outside, while the woman stays inside, to manage the domestic sphere. This notion is referred to as the “cult of domesticity” by scholar Alison Kemper, where the woman was the ‘angel in the house.’ The author sets the story in the turn of the century to highlight the changes that were becoming visible – the breaking down of the strict divisions of male and female spaces in society.

The author Kate Chopin too had the same kind of experience with the male-dominated society of that time and had experienced the death of her husband at a young age. The similarity between Kate Chopin and her heroine Ms. Louise Mallards shows how much of this story is imaginary and how much is personal experience. The lives of Louise Mallard and Kate Chopin’s are very similar. Louise’s life had sprung once she realizes that she could live for herself. At this very ‘hour’ she felt true joy and freedom, but her life ended abruptly as her

husband walked through the door.

The story throws light on what is the ‘real meaning’ of marriage; it is nothing but to live a peaceful and purposeful life in spite of the oddities. We see a picture of a young affluent wife who seems to be very pleased with her life. We also know that she was deeply in love with her husband. The news, brought by her sister and her husband’s friend Richards about his death, filled her with a big sorrow as she cried in her sister’s arms with sudden, wild abandonment. This was her first reaction, but, in fact, Louise reacted as most wives would actually do. After her primary emotions she went to another room to be all by herself:

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable roomy armchair.

Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted

her body and seemed to reach into her soul (p. 13)

These sentences illustrate how Louise had always felt about her marriage. The ‘comfortable, roomy armchair’ denotes nothing but her family life. Now we can conclude that in reality Mrs. Mallard wasn’t very happy in her marriage. Her life was like a duty ‘the duty to be married.’ And then, when she realized that her husband was dead, her initial grief turned to the extreme happiness. She felt free,

She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching

to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will – as

powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she

abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips.

She said it over and over under the breath: “free, free, free!” (p. 14)

In addition, Mrs. Mallard’s happiness was caused by the vision of a new future. Louise Mallards was so far living a life of that of a caged bird. Now, she her makes up her mind, she wants to live for herself and to accomplish her every single wishes hitherto she sacrificed for the sake of her family. When she collapsed into the chair, at first, she felt deep grief, then, she experienced the fatigue from everything around her; at last, she realized that she is free. “Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering (p. 13).

Subsequently, after accepting this new feeling, Louise began to feel comfortable with the idea of living by herself, and “her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body” (p. 13). Louise realizes that she is filled with high spirit and her joy knew no bound. Of course, she had not forgotten about her deceased husband. She remembered how loving he was to her and how she would miss him, but she also thought about the years of liberation and the air of freedom that she would undoubtedly enjoy. This was a confusing time for Louise. She knew that she was going to enjoy her new life, but yet she had mixed feelings toward Brently, her husband,

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

hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they

have 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 brief moment of illumination (p. 13)

Filled with the feeling of happiness and vision of the free life, Mrs. Mallard came out of the room. But exactly at this moment, when everything was so excellent, the disaster struck. Brently Mallard, who was supposed to be dead, entered the house. He re-entered Louise's world and put an end to her new life. Mrs. Mallard understood that all her dreams, all visions and plans were ruined. At that moment, the reality flashed in her mind. She realized that he returned, and everything would go on in bad old way. The same "gray cloud" covered her and the particles of her broken dreams.

Unfortunately, Louise couldn't tolerate the returning of her husband, and she collapsed with a heart attack. As doctors said afterwards, it was the joy that killed her. Unlike his wife, Brently felt sad by her untimely death, although he did not know that she had died because of his staying alive. 'Freedom' – What a magical word! Any of us puts its own sense into this small combination of letters. Sometimes we realize that we can do everything and give everything in order to be free from someone or something that dominates us and influences our life. In fact, the question of freedom appears to be the most burning problem in family relationships. The cause of these difficulties lies in a husband's attitude towards his wife: he dominates her, shapes her lifestyle, make her live for him instead of living for herself. Unfortunately, the wife accepts his behaviour because she loves him and doesn't want to lose him. At the same time, the feeling of obedience in order to prevent divorce lives in her only at the beginning of their marriage. As the years pass by, she becomes used to the subordinate mode of life that her husband has thrown on her. And after some time she finds out that she hates her lifestyle because she has devoted all her life to her husband, and the only thing she wants is freedom.

This surprising story brings out Mrs. Mallard's liking for her own freedom, yet there is a struggle between her life and death. She has her own thoughts on love, marriage and freedom. But some hundred years ago these things have never been permissive to women. Women cannot have second opinion on established ideas and institution. The story tells us that Mrs. Mallard could have lived if she had been a conservative woman. In real life, Mrs. Mallard, social space for living is very small and no one can share their thoughts with her freely. Therefore, she closes the door avoiding those who troubled her thoughts even if they are her close relatives.

Looking into Mrs. Mallard's psychological state, we could find that the emotional change must be described as the development of an increasingly resistant barrier between the real external world and that world which is most authentic in her experience—the inner world of her fantasies. Though in her deep heart there is an ardent longing for liberation and for female self-assertion, and beneath her reserve lies a strain of romanticism and rebelliousness, she has no chance to release from what she evidently felt as repression or frustration, thereby freeing forces that had lain dormant in her. These causes trouble her heart she sighs with relief when she learns about the death of her husband.

Her moment of vision, when she understands herself and regains control of her life, is followed immediately by the arrival of her husband, Brently Mallard “who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He never meets with an accident and never knows that an accident happened. The doctor describes her death as a “joy that kills”. The fact that her husband has returned to deprived her of the freedom kills her. However, her death liberates her from her husband.

This short story reminds me of the book written by Donald Rogers titled “Teach your wife to be a Widow.” Though this book is no longer in print, the copies are available online. The book urges husbands to devote time explaining things like life insurance, investments, real estate policies and taxes to their clueless wives.

In the end of the story, Mrs. Mallard understands the impossibilities of keeping her spirit and body independent of traditional male-dominated society. After the death, Mrs. Mallards gets permanent spiritual freedom dissolving into the universe. Her plight is tragic but she invites fate to be the master of her destiny. Doctors claim that Mrs. Mallard died of joy; the joy never comes from the news that her husband is still alive but from the death which enables her to acquire and indestructible freedom. Her deconstructed conflicts never exist at last.

Chopin’s writing career began once her husband died. She wrote a few collections of short stories, but when she began expressing her feminist views, the critics walked through the door and her life as a writer was over. All through her life, Kate Chopin must have been constantly shifting to adjust to the loss of her family members such as her father (in 1855), great-grandmother, brother, grandmother, her husband (in 1883), and her mother, and to her changing place in her personal community. Focussing on escapist literature, she tries to forget the world and her grief. At times, she bounces back into life after gaining strength. Mrs. Mallard seem to be looking for self-comprehension despite last death. At first, the idea of ‘freedom’ sounds like a horrible thing to Mrs. Mallard who is suppressed in many ways. The cardiac trouble she develops can be the result of inner conflicts. Louise is killed by the shock caused by unprecedented return of her husband but the physician’s report that represents the mindset of the patriarchal society claims that she died of ‘joy that kills’. Mrs.Mallard’s death unfolds the inability of an impounded woman whose attempt to realize her selfhood and attain liberation within a marriage are still an impossible dream for ever.