THE IMAGES OF WIFE AND MOTHER IN KATE CHOPIN’S NARRATIVES: A FEMINIST READING *

Rizki Theodorus Johan
Maranatha Christian University
Prof. Drg. Suria Sumantri 65
Bandung 40164
Phone: (62 22) 2012186, Fax: (62 22) 2015154

ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of the images of wife and mother in Kate Chopin’s short stories. Chopin is one of the well-known and controversial American women writers. Through her stories and female characters, she deconstructs the traditional idea of an ideal wife and mother. By doing a feminist reading, I try to scrutinize the purpose of Chopin in presenting and deconstructing the images of wife and mother in her works. Feminist writings such as Simone de Beauvoir’s and Mary Anne Ferguson’s will be employed in order to enrich the understanding of Chopin’s narratives.

KEYWORDS:
Feminism, stereotype, binary opposition, deconstruction, women’s position, married women.

INTRODUCTION

As a tool that enables and frees a writer to speak his or her mind, fear, ideas, and feeling, a writing gives the reader a privilege to understand the writer’s notions, belief, and even desire. Often some writings enable the reader to gain a lot of knowledge, which is beyond expectation and comprehension and sometimes the content is unexpectedly beyond the understanding and acceptance of its era. Such writings are often considered unacceptable, scandalous, or even morally incorrect by the society at its time. As a result, these scandalous and immoral writings are

* Rizki Theodorus Johan, Maranatha Christian University, Bandung.
banned from the literary society. On one hand this banning could raise people’s curiosity about the works and increase their popularity, but on the other hand it could be a disastrous end for the works and the author. The latter was what happened to American author Kate Chopin.

Chopin is an American woman writer, who once was considered notorious by her era and forgotten for some time because of her scandalous, unaccepted and unhealthy idea, which she implies in her novel and short stories. She is an example of a writer whose ideas are considered ahead of her time. Her works were condemned to be unsuitable for the society norms and moral, and forgotten for some time until they were resurrected in 1969.

Chopin published two novels namely At Fault (1890) and The Awakening (1899), and almost a hundred short stories which are mostly set in the Cane river country of Louisiana, such as Bayou Folk (1894) and A Night in Acadia (1897). She also wrote poems, essays, plays, and reviews. After the publication of her novel, The Awakening, which was widely condemned, her writing career ended. Her publisher cancelled the publication of her third short story collection. Within a few months, her books were banned by the libraries of St. Louis, and she was refused membership in the St. Louis Fine Arts Club. In 1904, almost five years after her second novel was published, Chopin died.

Most of Chopin’s major characters in her stories are married women. Through a woman’s point of view, Chopin tries to capture the women’s struggles and presents reality to her reader. From her writings, one can learn a lot about marriage as well as women’s position and condition in her time. In her story, Chopin is believed to attempt to deconstruct the ideas of a wife and a mother, which are previously constructed and assigned by the patriarchal world. Her notions and belief can be seen from and represented by her female major characters.

This article is going to analyze the images of wife and mother in Chopin’s works and analyzing these images, would reveal Chopin’s purposes in presenting these images as well as unearthing the differences between Chopin’s representation of wife and mother with the stereotype or the traditional images mostly found in literature. The analysis will be based on her short stories entitled “A Story of An Hour”, “A Respectable Woman”, and “A Pair of Silk Stockings”. In analyzing the images, this article is
going to employ Simone De Beauvoir’s perspectives and ideas about “The married woman” and “The mother” from her book *The Second Sex*, and also Mari Ferguson’s notions from her book *Images of Women in Literature*.

**WOMEN, MARRIAGE AND EMANCIPATION**

Before the analysis of the stories, a discussion is presented on Chopin’s perspectives about man and woman’s binary opposition, which could be read in one of her short stories, “Emancipation: A Life Fable”. Here Chopin presents a fable about a bird in a cage. In the cage, the bird is being taken care of by invisible protecting hands. One day, the cage is opened by accident and the bird finally escapes after a long consideration. The bird flies madly to embrace and enjoy its freedom and it is even careless enough to drink from a noxious pool. Chopin ends her story with one reality that the cage remains empty. Through the fable, Chopin presents an analogy of a woman’s life, which is represented as the bird in a cage, which longs for the horizon of freedom, while the cage represents the patriarchal world which the bird learns to be dependent on.

Through her short story, Chopin intends to tell how the patriarchal world deliberately creates an idea of emancipation that seems real and achievable. In reality, Chopin argues that it (emancipation) remains empty as the cage; there is little chance for emancipation to exist in the world of patriarchy. The freedom offered by the patriarchal world seems real, like the freedom experienced by the bird; in fact, it is only a fake freedom, which covers the truth. In the patriarchal world, emancipation remains only a life fable.

In her book entitled *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir argues and presents an idea about marriage in a chapter called “The Married Woman”. Beauvoir believes that marriage has always been a different thing for man and for woman: “A man is socially an independent and complete individual; he is regarded first of all as a producer whose existence is justified by work he does for the group,” whereas a woman although she confines herself to the reproductive and domestic role, “has not guaranteed her an equal dignity” (Beauvoir 426).
According to Beauvoir, a marriage is created for a woman, so she will have two important reasons for her existence in the society; the first is to bear children for the society and the second is to give a sexual satisfaction to her husband as well as to take care of his household. These duties are considered a service for her husband, whereas “in return he is supposed to give her presents, or a marriage settlement and to support her” (Beauvoir 427). By marriage, a woman obtains some part in the world as her own, but at once she turns to be her husband’s vassal.

Beauvoir states that man as a husband gets a privilege to work beyond the wall of family. He is able to incarnate transcendence while his wife is restricted in an area called a family interest. She is doomed to produce children and take care of her husband’s household; in other words, a wife is only able to immanence in the sphere of family matters. Marriage shuts her up within the circle of herself. She becomes a “lady of the house” where it becomes her duty to assure the happiness of the family.

As a wife, a woman finds that reality is inside her house and outer space seems to collapse. Her home becomes her “lot, the expression of her social value and her truest self. Because she does nothing, she eagerly seeks self realization in what she has” (Beauvoir 451), although it proves not to help her to escape from her immanence and only gives her a little affirmation of being an individual.

A wife is expected to have superhuman qualities: “the ‘virtuous woman’ of Proverbs, the ‘perfect mother’, the ‘honest woman’, and so on …. This is why many wives let themselves go, they are being themselves, only in the absence of their husbands” (Beauvoir 474). Being a married woman, a woman has unique relations of being a mother and a wife. Both of them are basically universal not individual.

On the contrary, “marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism: the temptation to dominate is the most truly universal … to surrender the child to its mother, the wife to her husband, is to promote tyranny in the world” (Beauvoir 465). These two basic ideas have created an inequality in a marriage life. Husband finds real self-realization in his work and action whereas wife dooms in the repetition and routine household that cannot promise happiness for her.
In term of sexuality in marriage, husband as the reproductive agent is sure of obtaining sexual pleasure, but wife is focused on the reproductive function, which is not associated with erotic pleasure. Beauvoir believes that “while being supposed to lend ethical standing to woman’s erotic life, marriage is actually intended to suppress it” (Beauvoir 436).

Similar to Beauvoir, in the introduction of her book entitled Images of Women in Literature, Mary Anne Ferguson believes that in the world of patriarchy, women are considered passive when it comes to a comparison with men. The power of patriarchy also exists in the literature; it can be seen through the images of women in literature, which are largely created by men: “Female characters have been most often presented as stereotypes, serving as foils, motivators, barriers, rewards, and comforters to males who actively pursue adventure and their own identities. From a male perspective, the central and most desirable characteristic of female characters has been for their passivity” (Ferguson 6). These images have become a stereotype, which defines and establishes women’s character in literature and real life. According to Ferguson, a writer who “deliberately departs from socially approved stereotype by adopting a new role-developing a new life style- may pay a heavy cost in guilt, alienation…”(Ferguson 4).

Ferguson finds that the role of a wife or a mother is often overlapping. Both of them are expected to be happy in putting others first, to stay at home and take care of children. A wife or mother cannot have selfish goals. A mother has a double role as the giver of life and death, of pleasure and pain. It is expected that a mother should have qualities such as firmness, decisiveness, ability to organize time, whereas a wife is expected to be submissive, supportive and to stay in her own sphere.

THE IMAGES OF WIFE AND MOTHER IN KATE CHOPIN’S WORKS

A. “A Story of An Hour”:

In this short story, the central character is Mrs. Mallard. She is portrayed as a young wife whose husband was reported to be a victim of a train accident. This sad news was brought by one of the family’s friends, Richards, who was truly aware of her heart
problem. The news was broken very carefully and gently to her, in order not to shock her. As the reader has probably expected, Mrs. Mallard, who was a good, loyal and loving wife, got very sad in hearing the heartbreaking news: “She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister’s arms” (Chopin 213). Here Mrs. Mallard is portrayed as an ordinary and loving stereotyped-kind of wife.

Later on in the story, she locked herself in her room, and allowed no one to meet her. It is said that in her solitude and exhaustion, Mrs. Mallard was just only able to sit and aimlessly watch a scenery of an open square in front of her house. Here, clearly Chopin tries to direct her readers’ emotion to understand her character’s feeling and condition. Her sadness and confusion of losing someone she loved and depended on seems a normal reaction of someone in a state of grieving. Shortly, the reader soon learns that something unexpected happened in the story:

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it fearfully. What was it? …. Creeping out the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, scents, the color that filled the air…was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will …. When she abandoned herself, a little word escaped …. She said it over and over under her breath: “free, free, free!” …. They stayed keen and bright …. She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her (Chopin 214).

Here, Chopin presents a different image of a wife. She deconstructs her readers’ notion of a perfect and loving wife. The way Mrs. Mallard reacted seems not a common reaction of a wife who had just lost her beloved husband; on the contrary, she seemed relieved. Although it is said in the passage that she tried to react otherwise, it seems that she succumbed to the power of her desire and welcomed it. Here Chopin presents Mrs. Mallard’s awakening moment at the time when she regains her freedom as a woman.
Later in the text, Chopin describes Mrs. Mallard’s notion in terms of her marriage and future life: “She saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome. There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending her in that blind persistence …” (Chopin 214). Here through Mrs. Mallard’s notion, Chopin shocks the reader by giving them a reality that Mrs. Mallard is welcoming her husband’s death with uncommon feeling of relief and ecstasy “ ‘Free! Body and soul free!’, she kept whispering …. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long” (Chopin 215). Chopin deliberately puzzles the reader by giving an unusual idea of how a husband’s death brought freedom to the wife, and how the wife saw the marriage as a prison for her.

A woman is said to be forced by marriage to think universal and kill her individuality because “she takes [her husband’s] name; she belongs to his tradition, his class, his circle; she joins his family, she becomes his ‘half’, … she loses some of the rights legally belonging to the unmarried woman” (Beauvoir 429), and “for her it is not a question of this husband but of a husband in general, of children in general. Her relations are not based on her individual feeling but on universal; and thus for her, unlike man, individualized desire renders her ethic impure …. Woman is not concerned to establish individual relations with a chosen mate but to carry on the feminine functions in their generality” (Beauvoir 435).

As a devoted wife, a woman is expected to think only about her husband and her children and not to think about herself as an individual. Here, through Mrs. Mallard’s one-hour freedom, Chopin presents a different image of a wife, whereas in an hour Mrs. Mallard had come to a realization of her existence as an individual and forgot about her universality as a wife. After a long time, she gained back her spirit and freedom, and became alive. It appears that her marriage had oppressed her, and the death of her husband was only a gateway to regain her freedom as an individual. This idea really deconstructs the patriarchal idea and stereotype of a wife. Here, Chopin argues and emphasizes that a wife is a free individual.
whose focus is not only on her family (her husband, children and her husband’s household) but also on herself.

Chopin’s idea is in accordance with that of Ferguson, who is against the idea that “a wife is expected to be submissive, supportive and stay in her own sphere” (Ferguson 6). Here Chopin deconstructs the idea of a wife’s submissiveness. In the story, Mrs. Mallard is not portrayed as a submissive wife who succumbed to her husband’s death but as a wife who sees the death as a great opportunity to have a better life. Her husband’s death was not the end of the world for her and she was not losing herself. On the contrary, she regained her whole self because now she was not only “a half” of her husband.

The greatness of Chopin’s ideas is presented at the end of the story: Mrs. Mallard died while her husband turned out to be alive. Mrs. Mallard’s death is being misinterpreted as “a joy that kills”, because she was overjoyed to see that her husband was still alive. Here Chopin gives us an important message of how the society could wrongly interpret things; how the society wrongly perceives woman’s position as an individual, a wife and a mother, and how the society has wrongly constructed the idea of a marriage for a woman.

**B. “A Respectable Woman”:**

The central character of the short story is Mrs. Baroda. The story tells about how Mrs. Baroda struggled to overcome and understand her own desire. In the story, Mrs. Baroda is portrayed as a good and loving wife and a respectable woman in her society. Her husband often invited relatives and friends to spend time in their house. It had become her duty as a good wife and “lady of the house” to entertain her husband’s guests. A problem commenced when her husband told her that his best friend, Gouvernail, whom she always heard about, was going to spend his two weeks’ holiday in their house. What made her uneasy was that she just entertained some guests during winter and she really needed a rest.

During Gouvernail’s stay, Mrs. Baroda learned that Gouvernail was a delightful and loveable fellow, and moreover he was not too demanding as other guests, but it also puzzled her the most. Throughout the story, the reader could see about how Mrs. Baroda
developed a strange desire towards Gouvernail. She tried to overcome her immoral desire because she was a good wife and moreover she was a respectable woman. At the end of the story, Mrs. Baroda succeeded in understanding her desire and overcoming her guilt.

In this story, Chopin is cleverly exposing a dilemmatic condition and position of Mrs. Baroda as a wife and a woman. After years of marriage, she was attracted to another man who was her husband’s best friend. This is not merely a sudden reaction that happens without a trigger. It can be seen that her feeling towards Gouvernail was a reaction to her own marriage. In the story, her family seemed normal and happy; she had a good and wealthy husband. Expectedly, nothing would go wrong with it.

In Beauvoir’s opinion, the marriage is a typical definition of a happy marriage, which is constructed for woman. A woman wants to have a good husband and her primary job is to maintain the happiness of her household. However, if the story is scrutinized, it will be apparent that Mrs. Baroda was stressed out because of her possessive husband and her daily and typical routine activities as a wife. The story demonstrates that Mr. Baroda was reacting as a typical married man who perceived all things, including his wife, as his possession. It seems that marriage allowed him to possess his wife’s life, which can be seen in the way he treated her at the beginning of the story. Without asking for his wife’s approval, Mr. Baroda invited his friend to stay at their house. This shows how Mr. Baroda had acted as the powerful leader in his family, controlled the decision and ignored his wife’s feeling. This accords with Beauvoir’s ideas that “marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism: the temptation to dominate is the most truly universal … to surrender the child to its mother, the wife to her husband, is to promote tyranny in the world” (Beauvoir 465). Here, Chopin presents the existence of communication problem in a marriage relationship. The couple lived different lives, and the wife had a life in which she was “expected to be submissive, supportive and stay in her own sphere” (Ferguson 6).

The story describes that Mr Baroda and his friend Gouvernail possessed different traits: “His manner was courteous toward her as the most exacting woman could require …. It pleased him also to get
on familiar terms with the big dogs that came about him, rubbing
temselves sociably against his legs. He did not care to fish, and
displayed no eagerness to go out and kill grosbeks when Gaston
proposed doing so” (Chopin 195). These differences puzzled Mrs.
Baroda but also opened her minds. She grew to like him better than
her husband. Her feeling had become the source of her agony. On
one side she knew that she was a married and respectable woman,
who had to kill her desire; on the other side, she began to realize her
longing to be understood as an individual especially as a woman
which she did not get from her marriage and her position as a wife.
This story shows that “a woman obtains some part in the world as
her own, but she turns to be his vassal” (Beauvoir 427).

At the end of the story, the reader gets surprised by Mrs. Baroda’s
statement: “I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I
shall be very nice to him” (Chopin 197). It can be concluded from
her statement that in the end, she followed her desire to love
Gouvernail and ignored her duty as a wife. Here, Chopin tries to
deconstruct the idea of a supportive and loyal wife, which is a typical
image of a wife in the literature. From the story the reader could find
that her husband expected her to be a supportive and loyal wife, who
obeyed his orders. The irony is that by obeying her husband’s orders,
she was also “being allowed” to grow her wrong desire and commit
adultery.

Through the image of Mrs. Baroda, Chopin has shown how women
are often enslaved by their marriage, especially by their duty as a
wife and they are only considered a vassal and possession to
complete her husband’s world of tyranny. Mrs. Baroda is an image
which symbolizes the women who are trapped in a cage called
“marriage”.

C. “A Pair of Silk Stockings”:

The story focuses on Mrs. Sommers. She is portrayed as a good and
dedicated mother. One day, she unexpectedly found herself to
possess fifteen dollars and she planned to go to a store to spend the
money on her children’s needs. While she was in the store, by a
force that she could not resist and explain, she changed her plans.
Instead the of buying things for her children, she indulged herself
with things she bought. She bought a pair of silk stockings, a pair of gloves, and two high-priced magazines, treated herself with a decent lunch in a famous restaurant, and watched a drama performance in a theater. It seems that Mrs. Sommers suffered from “one-day madness” because she could not explain her action.

Some readers might have grown wrong impressions about Mrs. Sommers’ action, which gives the impression that she was a selfish and not a good mother. The common questions that readers come up with, after they have read the story, is why a mother could ignore her children’s needs, when she was “expected to be happy in putting others first”, and required to leave her “selfish goals” (Ferguson 6).

Chopin deliberately shows two different opposing images of Mrs. Sommers. At the beginning of the story, she is portrayed as a dedicated and well-planned mother: “The question of investment was one that occupied her greatly … she did not want to act hastily, to do anything she might afterwards regret …. [She had] revolving plans in her mind that she seemed to see her way clearly toward a proper and judicious use of the money” (Chopin 262). The quotation clearly shows that Mrs. Sommers always considered her children as her priority, especially when it dealt with money. Another evidence that shows her good traits as a mother was when she forgot to eat her luncheon: “Between getting the children fed and the place righted, and preparing herself for the shopping about, she had actually forgotten to eat …” (Chopin 163). Her life and time were dedicated to her children, which showed her image as a good mother.

Later on in the story, she was shown to fail to be a good mother. Her transformation is written in the story:

She was not going through any mental process or reasoning with herself, nor was she striving to explain to her satisfaction the motive of her action. She was not thinking at all. She seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her responsibility. (Chopin 264)
Mrs. Sommers’ action gives the impression that she was a victim of a traditional role of a mother. She forgot who and what she was as an individual, because she was victimized by the idea of a good mother who always put her family first. She even did not have a chance to take care of herself: “Her foot and ankle looked very pretty. She could not realize that they belonged to her and were a part of herself …. [H]er stockings and boots and well fitting gloves had … given her a feeling of assurance” (Chopin 265).

The story ends with Mrs. Sommers’ journey to go home. She took a cable car to go home, but she hoped that the cable never stopped and went with her forever. This ending shows how stressful Mrs. Sommers was in her life as a mother and how her family had imprisoned her. This situation is clearly explained by Beauvoir when she says that a wife “takes by becoming a prey, … finds freedom by giving it up; by renouncing the world she aims to conquer a world …. [S]he has her husband, representing human society, and she has her child, who gives her the entire future in portable form. The home becomes the center of the world and even its only reality” (Beauvoir 450). Here it is obvious that Mrs. Sommers’ journey home seems to be the end of her dream and freedom. She would be back to her own world of reality as a wife and a mother, and had to give up her freedom.

Chopin gives realization of what a mother is through the image of Mrs. Sommers; Chopin just wants to imply that a mother is only a human being who also has desires. According to Beauvoir, a mother is defined as a traditional biological role which a woman should accept as a sign of her existence in the world and society. Unfortunately, this role has trapped women into the image of a good mother, who believes that a mother’s priority focuses only on her family (husband, children, and household). Often a woman’s desire and individuality are oppressed by her role as a mother and by a high standard of a good mother, which is set by the society. A woman as a mother often forgets about herself as an individual and turns to be immanence in the family interest.
CONCLUSION

Chopin has deliberately shown new images of a mother and a wife in her witty writings. She has deconstructed the stereotype images of wife and mother. These new images do not only live in an imaginary world but also in the real world as a representation of women whose voices are silenced by the rules, norms, and perspectives of the society. Her short stories have captured the anxiety of married women toward their marriages. The three major characters in her three stories are the representation of many women who have been oppressed by the world of marriage. In reality, many women have lost their existence because of the role that they have to perform as a wife and a mother. In Beauvoir’s opinion, many of them have lost their individuality as a human being.

Many people condemned Chopin’s works as unhealthy and immoral, and banned her works and also her existence in the literary circle. The treatment which she received can be seen as a representation of how powerful patriarchy is over the women’s existence. Chopin’s works voice the anxiety of married women and also give reasons for women’s existence, actions and reactions.

REFERENCES


