

Identity and Agency in Edna and Umrao as Foils or Twins

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The paper probes into the themes of identity and agency in Edna from *The Awakening* and Umrao from *Umrao Jan Ada*, highlighting their similarities and contrasts within late nineteenth-century patriarchal societies. It explores how Edna's privileged but dependent being curtails her autonomy, resulting in only a partial awakening, while on the other hand Umrao's marginalised existence as a courtesan grants her economic independence and greater self-awareness. The paper argues that while both women struggle against societal constraints, their responses differ significantly. Edna succumbs to isolation and self-destruction, whereas Umrao adopts reflection and resilience. It further emphasizes how class, race, and economic power shape their experiences of freedom and oppression. The comparative analysis reveals that both characters challenge conventional gender roles, yet ultimately become foils in their choices and destinies. The study concludes that true agency is also tied to economic independence and self-realization.

Keywords: Agency, Identity, Privileged existence, Transgression, Discrimination.

Out of the huts of history's shame
 I rise
 Up from a past that's rooted in pain
 I rise
 I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
 Welling and swelling I bear in the tide
 Leaving behind the nights of terror and fear
 I rise.

- Maya Angelou

The above lines are forming Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" and they talk about the spirit of feminism. This Paper tries to locate the similarities and contrasts shared by Edna of *The Awakening* and Umrao of *Umrao Jan Ada* and brings them to the surface. It is an analysis of how similar the two heroines are, yet remarkably different. Both the texts belong to the last decade of late 19th century. Both the heroines meet many men during the course of the novel and grapple with patriarchal forces. So the issue and the subject is same. Rusva and Chopin create worlds where the female is the subject of contemplation. Their treatment of the subject is very different perhaps owing to the fact that one text is authored by a male and another by a female. Their own set of

prejudices thought process and conditioning come into the picture.

Chopin brings to life the character of Edna who is an upper-class American woman, drowned in all the possible facilities and living a very privileged life. The privileges she enjoys are of course bestowed upon her by her husband, a male. The stereotypical trope of a male being the provider is deployed here. The text only sediments the narrative that whatever Edna being a woman is entitled to, is due to her husband, a male. It is a relationship where one is a giver and the other is always given.

The equation that Edna and her husband Mr. Pontellier share has inequality at its heart. Their relationship is coloured with disparity. Chopin has robbed them off a true companionship, a partnership. They are man and wife but with zero intimacy. Intimacy can only be established between or among equals. Equality is a prerequisite for a relationship that transcends the border of a gendered relationship.

The problem is that Edna relishes those privileges. It seems, in initial phase of the novel that she enjoys what being an upper-class woman means and fetches for her.

At no point can Edna break away from Mr. Pontellier as it is because of an association with him that Edna can be what she is and what she wants to be. At the most she can be away from her husband but not what a union with an upper-class male fetches her. She thrives on what she 'receives' as Mr. Pontellier's wife. Edna is constituted by her privileges. She is more aware of them rather than for her rights as a woman. In her, the appreciation for what she has is more and she remains happily oblivious of the source of those privileges. She fails to see and understand the source of it. The source is a male and that is exactly how patriarchy functions. Under the garb of providing a desired lifestyle, the male dominated world disperses the women on as many lines as possible, ruling out any scope of unity among women.

Edna like many women of upper-class society becomes slave of her husband's lifestyle because that's how she can lead the life she wishes to. It is a very subtle, an almost invisible surrender to the patriarchy forces. They became vassals of the lifestyle an upper-class man can fetch for them. Edna is a prey to this shrewd working of the male psyche. This is a liberal side of patriarchy where the dominance is not direct. As it is not direct so it cannot be challenged. The subjugation that Edna becomes a party to is more sophisticated therefore more dangerous. She is unable to recognize it as a trap used by patriarchy to enslave the women. Edna's willingness to be a

part of this unequal partnership speaks volumes about the mental and social state of women and also reveals the fact that they are inseparably linked. Edna's being in the first few portions of the story is built on the desire to have a social standing. In the introductory phase of the novel reading into her superfluous upper-class status may make Edna may look like a queen, but she is nothing more than a housewife. This observation flattens Edna's pride that stems from her social status because eventually she is a dependent woman.

Chopin chooses to show that Edna, "like the money as well as most women, and accepted it with no little satisfaction." (P-12)

Edna receives a box from Mr. Pontellier, a box of abundance and that she has no other choice but to accept the fact. On receiving the box of delicacies everyone around Edna announces that no other husband is as good as Mr. Pontellier and Chopin captures Edna's subjectivity very aptly in lines, "Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better." (P-13)

This is how poor, unaware Edna is bought over. Whenever she rethinks over her unhappy marriage she is won over by the material gains and social pressure. Edna fails to register that fact that the affection is absent and all Mr. Pontellier is doing is conforming to his role of provider.

The making up after the contemplation on her loveless marriage is quick. It is so because she is 'bound' to be grateful to her husband. It is because of him she feels belongingness with the upper-class social world. She is not willing to let go of that part of her identity. As soon as she receives the

money from her husband, she jumps with joy and utters, "It will buy a handsome wedding present for Sister Janet." (P-12) She forgets her sadness and tears of the previous night and submits her complaints because she is a social butterfly. To keep up with the upper-class society she has to keep accepting the money and with the acceptance of money comes the acceptance of male authority. It is a bargain that makes the woman stoop very low.

The question that Edna's behaviour gives birth to is at what price can she hold a different opinion of Mr. Pontellier? Doesn't disagreeing mean going against the crowd and the set norms? Does that not border on being a revolt? How can she revolt against her source of comfort and a socially acceptable lifestyle that many yearn for? Despite being married she is quite lonely and experiences solitude. She never feels one with anyone in the novel. Showalter has read Edna's loneliness under the lens of class and gender she finds Edna uninformed and naïve.

She allows the patriarchal cage and sets of restrictions to be imposed upon herself because she seeks a very comfortable life and is sheltered by the chambers of race and class. She belongs to a class and race (White) that provide her an elite status, and she doesn't want to be deprived of that status. It forms an inseparable part of her identity but the question is what kind of an identity it is. Is it not a crippled identity? Edna is nothing but an offshoot of her husband.

Chopin's portrayal of Edna compels the readers to think that is everything that Edna is not an extension or a result of her ties with Mr. Pontellier. If she wants to disown Mr.

Pontellier her fortunes world frizzles out because it is not or independent life she leads.

Both Edna like Umrao meet a series of men one after the other and try to negotiate their way with them. The chapter 6 of Chopin's *The Awakening* sums up Edna's evolution into a more aware woman. The novel is a story of the awakening of a woman from the slumbers of a very privileged life by result of accepting patriarchy.

In chapter 6, Edna begins reflecting on the position she occupies in the universe. It counted as a person, as an individual. She is extremely well provided but she feels non-existent and feels a lack. She doesn't feel the lack of any material gains but the lack of personhood. The mercies showered upon her by her husband, a patriarchal force. In years that have gone by, she had not felt human. She had been looked at as a type and as an add on to Mr. Pontellier.

As the story progresses, Chopin makes it clear that Edna's marriage is a matter of chance. The sanctity of the union is snatched away. It is seen as something that just happened and this expression takes away the power society places in any marriage. In lines like, "He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing." (P-35) Chopin express the truth of Edna's marriage. When Adele says that her husband should stay at home more, Edna responds by saying that what should she do if he stayed home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other. These little revelations speak a lot about their marriage. It is a stale marriage with very little or negligible communication left.

Edna is represented as a naïve, young girl who falls prey to her passion. Mr. Pontellier just happened to be at the night place the right time but that in no way makes him the right person. The mental process of Edna is captured by Chopin very beautifully in the text. These lays bare the naked truth of their marriage. Happiness is an illusion in most of the marriages and the more one likes to form an alliance with it, the farther it slips away. Though the statement borders on being a general statement. It hints at the hidden meaning that Edna or a female looks for love & meaning in a relationship. She seeks symmetry in tastes and orientation, but it is far from being true.

The genuine question that arises here is that what makes Edna stay in a marriage that she herself sees as a mistake. The answer lies in the fact that if she cuts ties with her husband, the lifestyle will have to give up. This would make her an ordinary woman which she does not want to be. The elated femininity that she enjoys, she doesn't want to discard.

Edna defies the conventional image of a woman with respect to maternal instincts too. She leaves the kids with the nurse, but this is also possible because of her husband. He with all his wealth can afford help for Edna. It is also bought for her by her husband.

Her choice to be an upper-class lady imitates an economic dependence on her husband thereby throwing her agency to the winds. Whatever constitutes her as a lady is bought by the wealth of Mr. Pontellier. When Edna asks Mademoiselle to come to her party that she plans to throw before leaving her husband, Chopin gives a glimpse of Edna's

shallow ladyship and makes Edna say that she will give a grand dinner before she leaves the old house. She doesn't stop here and goes on to say, "I will give you everything you like to eat and drink." (P-153)

When she decides to walk out of the marriage she throws a party. It is all on her husband's expenses. She seeks shelter in an attic, a space for herself it is in the house of her husband. So, these little acts may seem rebellious and transgressive but are not.

Edna's breaking away from her husband is a restricted awakening. It is a myopic selfhood because she is unable to shed idea her privileges. Neither does that allow moving away from her husband nor allows sisterhood with under privileged women in the novel.

The novel is a product of early phase of feminism and hence could not have been too cognitive of all the concerns of all kinds of women, so it deals with one woman like Edna and her Awakening.

Edna becomes an easy target for questions that seek the nature of her awakening as it comes at the cost of other women. As the novel comes to an end, Edna's character evolves. She becomes a newer, fuller being understands who she is. By the end of the novel if she doesn't know what she wants she seems to know with certainly what she does not want. She is very inconsiderate to the other women present in the novel. The representation of the women of colour in the text borders on demeaning them. She is too preoccupied with herself and her ladyship and that ladyship comes from the fact that she is a white upper class American lady. Her

ladyship is the actual barrier that doesn't allow her any sort of female companionship and results not only in a class but also a racial divide. Elaine notices this side to Edna's character and opines that Edna barely notices the silent quadroon nurse who takes care of her children, the little black girl who works the treadles of Madam Lebrun's sewing machine, the laundress who keeps her in frilly white or the maid who picks up her broken glass. She never makes connection between her lot and theirs. The absence of a real, heartfelt connect among the women characters is the disturbing issue. Does it indicate that for Chopin the Black presence is avoidable and doesn't hold any vital meaning? Joyce Dyer by asking, "Are Chopin's black characters really just minor actors whose function is to facilitate Edna's awakening?" (2002, P-142) brings the element of racial discrimination to the centre.

When Robert, one of the many men she meets during the novel tells her that he can't be with her as Mr. Pontellier, her husband still owns her as his wedded wife, she utters "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself values choose." (P- 206)

Here an encounter with an awakened Edna takes place. She understands that she is not object or a shame who to be with the one she loves, has to be made free. She at this moment thinks herself as an independent individual who would like to follow her heart and for that she doesn't need any one's permission.

Edna's encounters with the two other men Robert and Arobin indicate towards her sexual awakening. Showalter also holds the

view that the novel is quite sexual, is occupied with the body.

To sum up Edna's characterization critically it can be said that she is an elite white woman who thrives on economic support provided by her husband and is able to attain sexual awakening which is only a sort of partial awakening.

This analysis of Edna invites a critical examination of a heroine (Umrao) portrayed by Rusva. Umrao is different from Edna on so many levels and not just one. She appears to be innately different from Edna. Unlike Edna Umrao is a woman who is on the margins of the society. She is not respectable in the eye of the society as she is a courtesan. Edna is an elite woman while Umrao is for the sheer display in the public domain. The public and private is marred and inseparable in Umrao's care.

Umrao, though a product of late 19th century Indian Muslim milieu is way ahead of her times. She by virtue of being a courtesan is an equivalent of modern working women, meaning she has her control over money. This sets her apart from Edna. She is more in control of economic matters than Edna.

Financial independence to feminists is very close to the true emancipation from the clutches of patriarchy. Edna can't afford a separation from her husband because her fortune would see a downfall, but Umrao is not dependent on a single male for her money. She provides a service to her clients and charges them appropriately.

She is a famous courtesan of a famous Kotha. The Elitist of the men, including the Nawabs visit her. Here in Umrao's case, owing

to the nature of her profession, the male are slaves of woman. The equation is not a replica of *The Awakening* but an inversion of it. In words of Mekhla Gupta, “The domain of the courtesan is described as an oasis of refinement, pleasure and contentment that the wealthy are gravitated to.” (2014, P-124) Edna attains sexual liberty and Umrao by the virtue of her profession already has.

The world that Rusva has created is different than Edna's world because there the female seeks validation from men and here the men long for one glance of Umrao. It enhances their image in the eyes of other men if they could boast of their intimacy with Umrao.

The basic but very prominent difference between the two heroines is constituted by the financial powers. One has it and one does not. The courtesan earns by making her body available to the men. They are given such a training, an education that refines them and make them appear exotic, at least quite different than the otherwise household trapped women. Mekhla Sen Gupta speaking of courtesans, registers, “They had an opportunity to train in the literary and the performing arts (but in a commercial way), and to be independent and free thinking.” (2014, P-125)

Edna is on the periphery of the social composition in Chopin's world while Umrao is the center. She is the one who commands men and men dance to her whims and fancies. The male surrender must be read critically. Do they surrender because of the emotional quotient or due to the bodily charm of the courtesan Umrao. Is it the feelings of the

woman that occupy space or is it the sheer physicality.

What is a courtesan without her body? Does Umrao have anything other than the control over her money? The answer to this is a sound education (Taleem). Umrao is an undisputed empress of rhetoric, poetry, dance and music. Her charm is not just about her exterior but also her rich interiority. She has an unsurpassable command over language and she outwits Mirza Rusva many a time as the story unfolds.

Umrao, though being a courtesan is by default on the margins of the society but considering the then prevalent culture, she was a store house of fame. She comes out to be far more independent than Edna. At no point in novel, to an excessive level, she is identified by a male beside her.

She is a colossal figure in the novel that stands for an educated, independent, though ill-fated woman.

Periphery becomes a subjective term. Within the Kotha she is this towering personality with all the paraphernalia that comes only with being a famous courtesan and outside the Kotha she is a woman who is powerless. The world outside the Kotha looks down upon her and her willingness to be in the market. It is presumed that a woman like her is 'available' to everyone and anyone but within the Kotha she is available only to men with the right resources. Mekhla interrogates the real nature of feminism advocated by Rusva and says, “Were they the first feminists, was this female empowerment or was it the exploitation of men?” (2014, P-125) The equation and the language deployed to

describe Umrao's trajectory of life is transactional though.

Umrao tells that "All courtesans, as a rule, keep a man for themselves." (P-49) The word 'keep' is very suggestive of both, the inversion of man woman equation in the novel and the subversion of the idea that only men could keep women as add on or a prop.

Does Kotha become the nucleus of power ascribed to women in the novel? It is a crucial space because within it the woman is the super ordinate and the man is subordinate. It gives birth to a subtle decentralization of the power that patriarchy showers upon a man.

Umrao, for a change is a voice of dissent. She can't be in 'Purdah'. The usual predicament of 19th century muslim woman would be to a part of 'Zanana' and in a veil. Umrao is miles away from practicing Purdah system. She is out there in public exhibiting her charm unapologetically.

The episode where she visits – Akbar Ali's house, where all kinds of abuses are hurled at her and she is called names, gives an insight into human behavior. The men visit Kotha due to their own needs and the women curse Umrao.

The brothel cannot survive without the male visitors and yet the woman is the one who receives the derogatory remarks. This is an irony that defines the narrative of the novel.

Umrao is still a much more nuanced character than Edna because she has got many layers to her character. She is a learned prostitute and her interaction with men in the novel allow us to closely interrogate ways in while a woman like Umrao can relate herself to them.

Umrao is not only learned in rhetoric, grammar and Persian but she also reads through the men. Men according to her are fools. She says, "men are quick to fall under a women's spell while women are much more cautious." (P- 193)

She dissects the male libido within the boundaries of the Kotha. Kotha serves as a site of Umrao's evolution just like the sea is for Edna in 'The Awakening'. Had she been a part of the orthodox muslim 'Zanana' like the other contemporary muslim girls, she couldn't have become the person she is. Just towards the fag end of the narrative, she admits, "whether I live or die, I couldn't let myself to be suffocated by observing purdah." (P-199) Kotha provides her a definite edge over not only men but other women and it teaches her and allows her articulation.

Kotha makes her a worldly wise woman. Edna an upper class elite white woman longs to have a voice of her own and her Awakening comes very late and the other hand, Umrao, is quite articulate. She not only writes and recites poetry but also engages herself in conversation with men. When she seeks refuge in a mosque her conversation with the caretaker reveals a lot about how vocal she is.

Rusva very subtly also shows a valuable side to Umrao. Her emotional vulnerability is very poignantly captured by Rusva in scenes where Umrao oscillates between her reality of being a courtesan, too available a woman and her need to be loved. She admits that women crave for love. She is characterized by this internal debate that has she made the right choice?

Umrao may appear to be swayed away by the yearning to be loved but at no point in the novel she lets go of her rationality. She understands the real, bare character of men and gives a million-dollar advice to fellow prostitutes “Never entertain the false hope that any man will ever love you with a true heart.” (P-200) She is a character who uses her thinking capacity, unlike Edna and analyses. Edna who could not fathom the reality of Robert’s intentions falls prey to the superficial pretence of love and suffers, is a foil to Umrao. Umrao is not a passive sufferer when the mutiny takes place and the Kotha loses its power. Umrao’s destiny takes turn. She gives up on Khanam’s Kotha and in Faizabad and Kanpur becomes an independent entertainer in her later years. That is when a contemplative Umrao surfaces in the novel. She analyses herself in equations with various men.

The two heroines are at times different at times similar. Her encounters with the three men lead her to sexual awakening and Umrao’s encounter with men from different walks of life reads to the art of reflection in her.

After the quarrel scene at Akbar’s Ali’s House, Umrao reflects on three types of women. She ponders upon the three categories and tries to understand the nomenclature. She tries to examine the virtuous, the depraved and the vulgar women. An encounter with the household melts the strict categorization among the three.

She belongs to the public domain and Akbar Ali’s wives belong to a private domain. She feels that the domestic household has more chaos and fuller ruling out the space for her. Then she truly fails to feel oneness with

the other women who are a part of the Zanana and feels as an outsider. The feeling of being an outsider to the domestic space is common to both Edna and Umrao.

Umrao has a wider range of experience, is educated and thoughtful so in the end she gives into a reflective withdrawal from the world.

Edna lacks the exposure to the public domain and as a result attain partial and paralyzed awakening which results in her complete withdrawal by way of suicide. The emotional incomprehensibility of men that Edna receives makes her choose suicide as the last resort. Kwangsoon says, “Edna’s drowning is her voluntary choice stemming from the clear understanding of herself as an autonomous subject.” (2011, P-71) The sexual awakening that she attains leaves her in an alien emotional state which does not let her relate to anybody. On her suicide, Chametzky comments, “it is a lonely and isolated autonomy that exacts a terrible price.” (1972, P-72) Unable to imagine herself in a world occupied by insensitive males she decides to end her life. Her final act is a defiance against the patriarchy. Unlike the rational Umrao, Edna is taken over by the wave of emotions and she chooses herself over herself with a male.

The two novels though published in the same year have a similar subject: a woman character to be examined but their representation and treatment are very different. There are many contours that are either in symmetry or are asymmetrical between the two. Both have a quest for selfhood but their ways of attaining it are

different. They make different choices ending to different ends.

Edna is placed in a wedlock and Umrao's profession is so stigmatized that for her, marriage is unthinkable. For Edna marriage is a confinement and for Umrao it is a wish unfulfilled. The hypocrisy of the society and the tragedy of their lives lie in the fact that for one a marriage is seen as the only way to exist and for the other marriage is inconceivable.

The narrative techniques are also different. Chopin chooses to present Edna through her lens so her story unfolds as a third person, distanced narrative while Rusva allows a peep into Umrao's world through Umrao's lens resulting into first person, subjective narrative.

While Edna is dependent on her husband for her social privileges and materialistic gains, Umrao is not. She rather dictates financial encounters with men. She can negotiate on matters of money. The language of both the text at times gets transactional. It borders on being a language of bargain and possession.

It would not be erroneous to say that being late nineteenth century's heroines, both Edna and Umrao appear twins sometimes and as they are two different individuals, they differ in how they lead their lives and end up becoming foils of each other. Edna appears as a slave of her corporeal desires and Umrao longs for a true love, but both come across as a challenge to the conventional values attached to women. Edna, after all the three failed relationships and disabled awakening gets projected as a plain and an uninformed

character. Umrao on the other hand with all the worldly wisdom and experience stands out as a twisted but more appreciable character. If Edna is built of impulses and passion, then sagacity and wisdom are Umrao's basic elements. Both are pitted against the communitarian ideals, and both seek liberation. The two iconic heroines of two very famous novels oscillate between constraints and illusionary freedom. The old selves of Edna and Umrao die, and their new acquired selves carve their own path. Umrao's new self seeks renunciation and quite withdrawal and Edna's new self seeks complete freedom through death. In their attempt to discard the social roles that demand domestic conformity they become transgressive women and betray their old selves. This transgression makes Edna end her life, but the reflective side of Umrao saves her and results in her termination with the profession. Both grapple with issues of identity, sexuality and a very well-constructed entrapment. The major difference that seals their destinies is that Edna chooses a very claustrophobic path of self-absorption and Umrao immerses herself in deep conversations. The connect and companionship that is absent in Chopin's text causes Edna's doom, but it is very much present in Umrao Jan Ada and comes to the heroine's rescue.

Both the heroines are a product of their social milieu and are very realist and believable in elements they are made of.

After the above critical analysis, it can be fairly concluded that many layers of similarities and contrast run between the two. At times they appear twins in their struggles,

loneliness and at times they are opposites in the choices they make.

The lines in the epigraph of the chapter stand for the indomitable spirit of woman. They ensure that even after years of suppression it is possible to break the shackles and come out victorious.

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