

An Honorable Death? Or A Comparative Study of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *Murder is a Matter of Honor* by Rana Husseini with an Emphasis on Gender Inequities

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Abstract

The demise of women in the name of “honor” has been a clear case of gender inequity throughout the history of humankind. Although some women have achieved a type of equality, many women still are prey to societal traditions and expectations leading to slavery, sorrow and death. This paper juxtaposes the nineteenth century American realist writer, Kate Chopin, with the twentieth-twentieth first century writer, Rana Husseini, to demonstrate that societal honor can be a death sentence. |

...One of the prison officials said, ‘this is Sarhan, he killed his sister to cleanse his honour.’ Oddly, Sarhan had a wide smile on his face, apparently welcoming the attention. His sister, Yasmin, had been raped by her brother-in-law. Knowing full well the consequences of such a crime, she had turned herself in to the police, rather than risk the wrath of her family. Sarhan headed to the police station the following day and tried to bail out his sister. His request was refused; the police thought he might kill her because she had lost her virginity. Sarhan went to a friend’s house and stayed there for a couple of days. When he returned home, he found his sister in the living room. Without uttering a word he shot her four times with an unlicensed gun and turned himself in. ‘I killed her because she was no longer a virgin.’ he told me (Rana Husseini). ‘She made a mistake, willingly or not. It is better that one person dies that the whole family of shame and disgrace. It is like a box of apples. If you have one rotten apple would you keep it or get rid of it? I just got rid of it.’¹

Some daughters are bred to be caretakers,
obedient simply for the sake of obedience²

Introduction

Who cares that a woman educates herself? Who cares that a woman chooses to not have children? Why should a woman accept that she is not capable of making decisions that affect her life, her spirituality? These questions and many more are the right of a woman to ask, even if the society she lives in has no answers. Answers must come and will come from the dedicated work of women and their allies in the fight for gender equality. This paper draws on contemporary Muslim literature to highlight the realities of the Victoria era, which we tend to “sugarcoat” through the lens of time.

Between the two sexes of the human species there are physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual elements that are part of the make-up of the different genders, “mankind” has developed a variety of cultures delineating these elements as either masculine or feminine. One

¹ Husseini, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 9-10.

² McElroy, Colleen, *Sleeping with the Moon*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 2007, pg 87.

might suggest that this delineation depends upon the vision of the societies' survival, spiritually, intellectually or physically. Thus, from tribes, to kingdoms, to communities and countries, the "mankind" has pre-determined the roles and positions of the sexes in their society. This was and to a certain extent is the case of women in the Western European world, with the essential beginnings of gender equity changes occurring during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), and continuing up to today³. It is also currently the case in many of the Middle Eastern countries where exposure and voice is being given to making the changes Western European women have instituted and enjoy today. Even though women are @49.7% of the world's population⁴ and live longer than men, gender equality as considered reasonable and logical is far from being the reality. Without the feminists and their allies doing "battle" to change legislation, the Western woman would be in the same position as the Eastern. This type of "battle" is just beginning for many of the women under Sharia Law. It is only in exploring the idea that the "battle" for gender equality between men and women, as depicted in the novel *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin juxtaposed with the same battle depicted in *Murder in the Name of Honor*, by Rana Husseini, reveals the reality that women "bear the brunt" of the societies' restrictions. Nearly one hundred years apart, the women of the West illustrate the outcomes of a continuous struggle for gender equity. This paper will explore the language of Ms. Chopin's novel of 1899 to reveal similar women gender issues to those depicted in Ms. Husseini's non-fiction work. Both authors demonstrate that the concept of "honor" is ultimate goal for societal acceptance, leading both males and females to consider death as the "honorable" method of maintaining their pre-determined roles and positions.

Some daughters grow fat
With worry and call that love⁵

The Role of the Victorian Woman

To begin with, Victorian England was seen as the beacon of civilization for the Western world. Industrialization allowed for prosperity and opportunities to achieve some type of wealth. The upper classes continued to accumulate material possessions, the middle class began to acquire them and the working class attempted to emulate both the middle (bourgeoisie) and upper classes to the best of their ability.

The transformation of Britain into an industrial nation had profound consequences for the ways in which women were to be idealized in Victorian times. New kinds of work and new kinds of urban living prompted a change in the ways in which appropriate male and female roles were perceived. In particular, the notion of separate spheres—woman in the private sphere of the home and hearth, man in the public sphere of business, politics and

³ Evans, Sara M., *Tidal Wave, How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, 2003, pg 1-9.

⁴ <http://www.ined.fr/en/>

⁵ McElroy, Colleen, *Sleeping with the Moon*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 2007, pg 87.

sociability—came to influence the choices and experiences of all women, at home, at work, in the streets.⁶

This “transformation” was also true in the United States as well as in the colonies of the British Empire. Because of the common language and a similar culture, the United States shared the essential elements of Victorianism. Likewise, British Victorians as well as the Americans felt that there were “concerns that the great rush to modernization brought with it the onset of moral decay”⁷ Women were considered the first line of defense against this moral decay. One way that women functioned as this defense was as the ideal woman, typified by accepting the responsibility of the home, motherhood, and a promotion of social standing through the displaying of material goods. The morality of the nation was expressed by:

.... message that motherhood was woman's highest achievement, albeit within marriage, never weakened through the course of the century. Indeed, it was in this period that motherhood was idealized as the zenith of a woman's emotional and spiritual fulfillment. At the same time, however, motherhood was becoming a social responsibility, a duty to the state and thus a full-time job, which could not easily be combined with paid work.⁸

This made it quite difficult for the working class woman whose only means of income was life as a domestic servant or as one who took in sewing as a means of economic survival. Reproductive rights, achieved in the 1970's⁹, were not considered a woman's prerogative, nor was acquiring an education an expectation for females. By supplementing the family's income while preserving the illusion that she was at home taking care of her domestic duties, the working class Victorian woman allowed the man to preserve their jobs and their rate of pay.¹⁰ This illusion of the women being the weaker sex and not being able to compete with men in the working world was a product of the Western civilized thought.

...Since early times women have been uniquely viewed as a creative source of human life. Historically, however, they have been considered not only intellectually inferior to men but also a major source of temptation and evil. In Greek mythology, for example, it was a woman, Pandora, who opened the forbidden box and brought plagues and unhappiness to mankind. Early Roman law described women as children, forever inferior to men... St. Jerome, a 4th-century Latin father of the Christian church, said: "Woman is the gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of the serpent, in a word a perilous object." Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century Christian theologian, said that woman was "created to be man's helpmeet, but her unique role is in conception . . . since for other purposes men would be better assisted by other men."¹¹

⁶ Abrams, Lynn, *“Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian England”*, <http://www.answers.com/topic/victorianism>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Evans, Sara M., *Tidal Wave, How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, 2003, pg 25.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <http://www.wic.org/misc/history.htm>

Therefore, if motherhood was the considered the epitome of a Victorian woman's life, then the "road to motherhood" was equally important. The young lady was groomed for her "career" as a married woman by learning the critical skills of housekeeping, hiring the help, and presenting a united, visible front to the social requirements of the day. Prior to marriage, the young woman of the Victorian era needed to be:

...innocent, virtuous, biddable, dutiful and ignorant of intellectual opinion. Upon marriage, her duty was to ensure that her many children were taught moral values ...and maintain a smooth family atmosphere where a man need not bother himself about domestic matters...so he could get on with making money.¹²

Being innocent was of primary importance to the Victorian viewpoint. As Robert C. Long, M.D. wrote,

Now the stereotype of Victorian woman is gone from the upper middle class. Before marriage a young girl was brought up to be perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant. One false step and the family's reputation was lost.¹³

As a sexual innocent, young women knew little of birth control or of their own bodily functions.

Another facet of the Victorian feminine expectations was that being well-dressed while maintaining a large house furnished with elaborate furniture and decorated with multiple items of bric-a-brac, proved to the community at large that she understood her role as a social representative of her husband. Due to economics and the viewpoint that women could not handle financial transactions, they were dependent upon their fathers, husbands, or brothers for their financial security. Up until the Married Woman's Property Act of 1887 (United States) was passed, women had no rights to own property, and many times inherited property became her husband's upon marriage. Thus, with marriage, women became a chattel of the man, and were she to separate from her husband, her access to her children could be denied and her social position would be forfeited.

As the Victorian Era ended around the turn of the century, the poorest of the working class became the objects of philanthropy; however, these reformers had not really changed the position of women. The desire to better educate women, to provide more employment opportunities with increased wages, to improve the working conditions, was the objective now of the first feminists¹⁴ who had essentially started the "battle" early in the century. Women needed the freedom to make choices in their lives, to vote, to go to college, to make decisions about their body and their futures. These ideas conflicted with the traditional roles as defined by the patriarchal society of the United States. It was during this time period Kate Chopin's Victorian novel, *The Awakening* depicts the choices her protagonist, Edna Pontillier, takes and the ultimate

¹² <http://www.Fashion-era.com/victorians.htm>, Pauline Weston Thomas

¹³ <http://www.innominatesociety.com/Articles/Sexuality%20In%20The%20Victorian%20Era.htm>

¹⁴ Evans, Sara M., *Tidal Wave, How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, 2003, pg 1.

price she pays for wanting to have the same choices available to her that the men accepted as their due.

Some were born for beauty
Some were sturdy, born for work
And breeding daughters like themselves¹⁵

The Role of the Muslim Woman

In Muslim countries where Islam is the official religion, sharia is considered the source of the law. The Muslim woman of the past and the present is guided by the Sharia Law described as “... a religious code for living, in the same way that the Bible offers a moral system for Christians.”¹⁶ It is derived from the Qur’an and the Sunna.

In Sunni Islam the word can be used with at least two different meanings. Its most common usage is denoting the examples, the deeds, sayings and unspoken approval of Muhammad as this has been recorded and systemized.¹⁷

Previously, with the nineteenth century colonial empire building of the European nations, a European-type system of law codes and legislation reflecting the Western European beliefs was instituted. With independence from their colonial overlords, various Islamic countries chose to develop a political structure that included the Sharia Law. It became apparent after 1980, the return to Sharia Law (essentially applicable only to Muslims) became the focused goal of fundamentalist Islamic regimes. The Islamic regimes that are structured with the focus on Sharia law have clearly delineated roles for men and women, similar to those of the Western European countries prior to the 1900’s. For example, within Sharia Law the “Harum” offenses carry severe penalties. Some of these offenses are: pre-marital sexual intercourse, sex by divorced persons, adultery, post-marital sex, false accusation of unlawful intercourse, drinking alcohol, theft and highway robbery. Within the strictest interpretations of the Sharia Law, women are forbidden to drive vehicles, they must be completely covered in public, and are under the governance of male relatives all times.¹⁸ Punishments range from stoning, amputation, exile, or execution if the law is broken. Often times vigilante justice takes place especially when it is perceived that dishonor is brought to one’s family. These laws appear to the Western eyes to limit the freedom of women and to promote the gender inequality of a patriarchal system.

According to the publication *Witness Publications*, the viewpoint of the Muslim world towards women is that:

We Muslims have a divine document that truly honours women and treats her with justice; it is a document that rescued her from the gloomy injustice of Pre-Islamic darkness. This document of The Noble Qur’an-honours the woman as a

¹⁵ McElroy, Colleen, *Sleeping with the Moon*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 2007, pg 87.

¹⁶ [http://www. WorldPublicOpinion.org](http://www.WorldPublicOpinion.org)

¹⁷ <http://i-cias.com/e.o//sunna.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8034/>

human being, as a feminine being, as a daughter, wife, mother and, no less, as a full member of her society... One of these questions is: why, if Islam really regards the woman's humanity on an equal basis with that of the man, does it give the man privilege over the female in some dealings such as legal testimony, inheritance, blood money, charge of the family, heading the state and other supporting ministrations? ...The distinction ...is piety and only piety that is the measure of ascendancy, nobility and closeness to Allah...The distinctions, however, are merely conditioned by the different tasks assigned to each of the two sexes by virtue of their natural disposition.¹⁹

The assignment of gender roles is likened to complementary positions, and as such the woman should:

...carry elements that enable her to attract and be attracted by the man. Fundamental to this purpose was Allah's equipment of the female with an instinctive desire and a strong natural passion that leads to their mutual attraction and communion so that life would continue and generations would spring forth.²⁰

It is within in this interpretation of the Qur'an that the Muslim world honors marriage and virginity as the requirement of social status for the feminine members of their society. If, however, the female channels her energy outside the "divinely-sanctioned"²¹ marriage, whether it is visible or invisible, then the protection from seduction and lust has been breached and the basis for the family unit has been destroyed.²² Thus, the women of the Muslim nations who are subject to Sharia Law, are placed in the same untenable position as the Victorian maiden at the turn of the twentieth century.

Some daughters work all day at being good daughters
Some only howl at the moon for nights on end,²³

The Two Authors: Background

First of all, the two authors share the scrutiny of any critical piece of writing. Chopin's novel was originally censored and condemned for its immorality. At a time of intense feminist lobbying for women's rights, Chopin created a heroine who realizes the only freedom and the only right she had was death. Now, almost one hundred years later, Hussein's book has been applauded for its critical content which reveals death by murder or in some cases suicide as the honorable outcome for charges of immorality.

¹⁹ http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/Q_WI/introduction.htm

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ McElroy, Colleen, *Sleeping with the Moon*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 2007, Pg87.

Chopin was married and then widowed leaving her with six children to mother and maintain economically. She was able to provide for her family through her writing.

Like Husseini, Chopin had difficulties after the publication of her novel in 1899. *The Awakening* “...aroused a storm of controversy for its then-unprecedented treatment of female independence and sexuality, and for its unromantic portrayal of marriage.”²⁴ She was socially ostracized as a result of her novel’s publication and died in 1904. It was only until the feminist movement of the 1960’s discovered Chopin’s writings, that *The Awakening* was applauded as a masterpiece of classic American literature. With the ongoing interest and focus on gender equality, *Murder in the Name of Honor* has created much discussion about women’s rights and Sharia Law. Published in 2009, after sixteen years of articles and research, Husseini’s *Murder in the Name of Honor* “...want(s) this book to save lives.”²⁵ Although she started with her journalism efforts to expose the murders in 1993, her thoughtful and energetic approach to the needs of the women who are the visual and physical honor of their families has brought her death threats and negative criticism from her countrymen. Her focus in this book is to reveal the essence of the honour killing which is the...killing is the murder of a person accused of "bringing shame" upon their family”.²⁶ She further points out in her book that “...Victims have been killed for refusing to enter a marriage, committing adultery or being in a relationship that displeased their relatives. In many instances, the crimes are committed by family members against a female relative.”²⁷ Further evidence from current news and internet sources give an estimate that this practice continues despite newly enacted laws and intense media scrutiny. One such website entitled “stophonourkillings”²⁸ indicates in the title that ‘Violence against women, children has risen in 2009’ and continues to report

There has been a drastic increase in incidents women and children during the first half of 2009, according to statistics compiled by Madadgar Helpline, according to which, 2,763 children and 3,593 women fell victim to violence between January and June 2009.²⁹

As Hussieni has documented,” This is what happens to five thousand women who are murdered each year in the name of honour...”³⁰ The woman of her country, Jordan, and of many other countries (including Westernized . . . countries), have allowed women to “bear the brunt” of the honor for a family unit. What is this honor? It is her virginity and the woman’s adherence to the customs and expectations of her culture. “A so-called honour killing occurs when a family feels that their female relative has tarnished their reputation by what they loosely term “immoral behaviour’.”³¹ Husseini reports on a young man named Sarhan.

...he sat with his father, his mother, his uncles and around eight hundred of his tribe...’If I hadn’t killed her, people would look down on me. Once she was

²⁴ Smith, Philip, ed., *The Awakening*, Dover Thrift Editions, Dover Publications, Inc., 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, NY 11501, 1993, notes.

²⁵ <http://arabcomment.com/2009/murder-in-the-name-of-honour-an-interview-with-rana-husseini/>

²⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/honourcrimes/crimesofhonour_1.shtml

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ <http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?q=taxonomy/term/168&page=>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Husseini, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg xi.

³¹ Ibid.,xi.

raped, she was no longer a girl. My only alternative was to kill he. Death is the only way to erase shame.³²

The critical part of the passage is the last line. Without the killing, the family felt ostracized and full of shame. Thus, they felt there was no alternative but to give a death sentence to the daughter they perceived as the one breaking traditions, and restrictions of their community and society. Therefore, with regards to the countries covered in her book, two concepts stand out to the reader. The first is the concept that a woman's hymen is the only worthwhile portion of her anatomy prior to marriage to her immediate society, and the second is that the sole elements of a satisfying life are motherhood and faithfulness. This narrow viewpoint has led Ms. Huisseini to follow the deaths of many women killed because of the perception of honor and the interpretations of the Qu'ran by the people. The consequences of: infidelity, divorce, presumed sexual contact, arranged marriages, specific and "acceptable" clothing choices and womanly prescribed activities, education, legal rights, conception choices political rights are all covered in her book. Oddly enough, these same concepts appear to be almost mirror-like when compared with the societal restrictions of the Victorian era towards women.

Some daughters soften like well tanned hides³³

Analysis: *The Awakening and Murder in the Name of Honour*

The Patriarchal Society

In the beginning of Chopin's novel the voice of the parrot sets the tone of the author with the repetition of "Allez vous-en! Allez Vous-en! Sapristi! That's all right!"³⁴ Translated as "Go away! Go away! For heaven's sake!" In the guise of the parrot is the protagonist's attitude and hence, Chopin's, towards the restrictions society and the law placed upon women. Next, the antagonist is introduced, Mr. Pontieller (Leonce), a man of about forty. With Edna being twenty-eight and her husband twelve years older, this would have been considered an appropriate age difference as the husband would need to be older to "guide" the wife in the correct moral channels. According to Helen Chapin Metz,

..... Families in Saudi Arabia, like families throughout the Middle East, tended to be patriarchal, the father in the family appearing as an authoritarian figure at the top of a hierarchy based on age and sex. Undergirding the patriarchal family were cultural and religious values that permeated the society as a whole, and that found their clearest expression in tribal values and practices. Families shared a sense of corporate identity, and the esteem of the family was measured by the individual's capacity to live up to socially prescribed ideals of honor.³⁵

³² Ibid., pg 12.

³³ McElroy, Colleen, *Sleeping with the Moon*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 2007, Pg 87.

³⁴ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 1.

³⁵ Metz, Helen Chapin, ed. *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992.

This current Middle Eastern viewpoint reflects the male dominated Victorian society where “for the most part, nineteenth century families were large and patriarchal. They encouraged hard work, respectability, social deference and religious conformity.”³⁶ As one can see, the patriarchal system of both the Victorian era and the current structure of the Middle East family focuses on similar systems for authority in maintaining the mores and decision-making processes.

Some hold love in their baskets
of goodies—some tsk-tsk sew up
their mouths until nothing escapes³⁷

Appearance and Clothing

Chopin characterizes Leonce Pontieller as a businessman and as he is reading the newspaper Mr. Pontieller observes some of the inhabitants of Grand Isle, the summer vacation place for he, his wife, and children. Leonce observes first Mrs. Lebrun. She is characterized as a “fresh, pretty woman, clad always in white with elbow sleeves.”³⁸ Chopin makes a point throughout her novel to consistently describe the dress of her female characters demonstrating this as a critical aspect of the Victorian social expectations. Because clothing reflected the economic and social status of their husbands, they also perpetuated both the moral code of pale skin as the most desirable (hence covering up of the body) and the expectation that “The husband should always find the wife fresh, beautiful, sweet as a flower”³⁹ Mrs. Lebrun is presented to the reader as acceptable to Mr. Pontieller based on her physical appearance and of course, the appropriate dress: the wearing of white with elbow sleeves to protect and cover the skin as well as being “fresh” and also “pretty”. Recently BBC News reported a similar situation whereby a woman’s appearance is paramount to her acceptability as a woman and marriage partner.

An Arab country's ambassador to Dubai has had his marriage contract annulled after discovering the bride was cross-eyed and had facial hair. The woman had worn an Islamic veil, known as the niqab, on the few occasions the couple had met.⁴⁰

Is it possible that a woman must be beautiful or marriage will not follow? Does the demand for an attractive woman become a type of dowry and those unfortunate enough to not be born beautiful should accept the disgrace that genetics have given her without complaint? Unfortunately, the Victorian woman, too, was courted if she was attractive then was to be presentable at all times for her husband.

The dressing room of a lady was supposed to be her sanctuary, or a place where nobody except for her ever entered. It was a place where women were meant to

³⁶ Shepherd, Anne, “Overview of the Victorian Era”, <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Victorians/article.html>,

³⁷ McElroy, Colleen, *Sleeping with the Moon*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 2007, Pg 87.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pg 2.

³⁹ “The Lady's Dressing Room” *Etiquette and Advice Manuals*. Cassel & Company, Limited. 1893.
<<http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/ladys-preface.htm>>

⁴⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8508077.stm

admire themselves and make themselves look presentable at all times for their husbands.⁴¹

Chopin juxtaposes Mrs. Lebrun's careful covering up of herself with Edna's brashness in acquiring a sunburn on her beach walk. Edna, in returning from a walk on the beach has not appropriately covered herself and is rebuked by her husband..."You are burnt beyond recognition."⁴² Edna clearly has chosen to expose her face and hands to the sun and is chastised by her socially conscious husband. A morally conscious woman would never expose herself to the sun as ...

All women who belong to the white race have always concerned themselves, and will always concern themselves, about the purity, freshness, and brilliancy of their complexion. And in truth a beautiful colour, a white and fine skin, form one of the great attractions of a woman, who cannot be pronounced perfectly beautiful if there is any defect in her complexion.⁴³

Indeed, the covering up of the female body is well known in the Middle East. The chador (A loose, usually black robe worn by Muslim women that covers the body from head to toe⁴⁴) and burqa (a piece of clothing that covers a woman from head to foot. There is an opening for the eyes, but the rest of the body, except the hands, are covered⁴⁵ It is considered the appropriate garment. The covering of a woman's body is an outward symbol of Muslim devoutness. Revealing the face has brought a similar condemnation to the woman not wearing the chador that Chopin's character, Leonce, gives to Edna's lack in covering up herself. In Hussieni's book she describes a well-educated woman holding a Masters Degree in Economics as saying:

...women are the source of seduction for men and if all women are chastised then men would become good on their own. We are a Middle-Eastern society and I am for punishing women more than men because men cannot resist the seduction of girls who are dressed improperly...⁴⁶

She then later reports of a father living with his family in England as asylum seekers from Iraq, who "... was so aggressive that when he saw her (his daughter) outdoors without a headscarf, he screamed at her that she was acting like a bitch, then took her home, spat on her and bear her with his slipper."⁴⁷ Clearly, clothing and appearance whether in the Middle East or as a refugee in England, the adherence to honour is punitive and dictatorial.

⁴¹ Barrera, Mari, *Etiquette of a Victorian* <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/agunn/teaching/enl3251/vf/pres/barrera.htm>

⁴² Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 2.

⁴³ Victorian London - Publications - Etiquette and Advice Manuals - The Lady's Dressing Room, by Baroness Staffe, trans. Lady Colin Campbell, 1893 - Part I, <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/ladys-2.htm>

⁴⁴ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/chador>

⁴⁵ <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-burqa.htm>

⁴⁶ Husseini, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

Some cut their teeth doing
what not to do so well
they can't be called anyone's daughter⁴⁸

Proprietary Attitude

This attitude perpetuates the current Middle Eastern identification of morality with the covering up of one's body. Similarly, Chopin's novel reveals the Victorian belief that a moral woman of the nineteenth century would likewise cover herself. Chopin immediately follows this reference to clothing with Leonce ...looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage."⁴⁹ The author sums up the male Victorian attitude towards women in this phrase. Women were legally personal property⁵⁰. In 1999, Saudi Arabia "... announced its intention to issue, for the first time, identification cards for women.(2) Previously, women were registered on their father or husbands' identification cards.⁵¹ Husseini's example of a young Muslim woman named Salma (whose sister was murdered by her mother and another sister for giving birth to an illegitimate baby boy) follows the results of that murderous action in the following anecdote.

Salma's mother took her out of school after the incident because her family was concerned about her reputation and they wanted her always to be within their sight in case the same thing happened to her. "I am upset that I am no longer going to school. I had dreams of becoming a doctor when I grew up, but now I do not know what my future is."⁵²

Salma's story has both modern and Victorian overtones to it. It is partly a modern story as she might have become a doctor, but is Victorian in the sense that she will never be let out of the home and away from the family unit. With the increase of internet availability, and blogs as forums for information and discussion a Saudi Arabian woman writes of her life:

I am chattel. Slavery is a social-economic system under which certain persons—known as slaves—are deprived of personal freedom and compelled to perform labor or services. The term also refers to the status or condition of those persons who are treated as the property of another person or household. This is referred to as "chattel slavery" I cannot leave my house without my husband's permission. As a Saudi woman, I am not allowed to travel without my husbands documented permission... If I had a less than understanding husband, I may feel compelled to provide marital "services" to him a legally recognized minimum of several times a month, or he could be granted a divorce from me ... I cannot even report the birth of my child and register his/her name... Legally, the house I live in is not mine and I have no rights whatsoever to it. Upon divorce or death, I could be

⁴⁸ McElroy, Colleen, *Sleeping with the Moon*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 2007, Pg 87.

⁴⁹ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 2.

⁵⁰ <http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/guide19/part10.html>

⁵¹ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/arabs/arabwomen.html>, (2) Al-Quds Ai-Arabi (London), December 4, 1999.

⁵² Husseini, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 49.

homeless if his relatives or children wanted to claim their portions (much larger than mine) as their rightful inheritance.

As property of the husband or father, the women of Hussieni's book are denied the rights given to the men of the society. As with the Victorians, the marriages are arranged, with virginity assured, and the women then remain within the household absorbed into the family. This societal system follows the family wherever they settle. In seeking asylum from Saddam Hussein the family of Banaz Mahmood went to England; however, she was not protected by the British authorities. In attempting to escape from an arranged marriage with a cousin in Iraq she ran away and was returned to the family unit by her brother.

Bekhal's (Banaz's sister) only brother, Bahman had attempted to kill her (Banaz) under direct orders from his father to cleanse their family's honour..She (Bekhal) remained in hiding until a few months later she learned that Banaz had agreed to an arranged marriage set up by her father...On June 11 2007, Mahmood was found guilty ordering the death of his twenty-year-old daughter...boasted in prison how after torturing and raping Banaz for two hours he finally stamped on her neck to 'get her soul out'.⁵³

The question is was the murder worth life in prison? The answer is apparently yes as the last part of the passage was a boast made from the prison. Bekhal herself feels,

' Her(Banaz) only crime was to want to have some say in her life. Where is the shame in that? My life will always be at risk. There are people in my community who want to see me dead, and they will not rest until I am. I will never be safe.'...Behkal now wears a veil for a different reason: 'so no one can recognize me'.⁵⁴

Sadly, the Victorian woman who refused marriage had few choices also. Although not murdered by her family, she too would have faced being disowned and turned out of the house to survive on her own without skills or money. Furthermore, if she had been raped, she would have lost the one element considered precious by the society and prostitution would be her future. It constituted a slow death or an ignominious lifestyle and early death from sexually transmitted diseases. Another current example of the proprietary attitude Husseinini tell of was of the report that a young man killed his sister "because she had left the house to look for a job in a commercial area."⁵⁵ A deputy from Amman Fourth District spoke publicly saying..."a woman can jeopardize her honour by going out late at night to take part in related social activities. If his daughter stayed out late at night he would shoot her himself..."⁵⁶ Ideally, the females would never leave the house. Unlike Husseinini's examples, the Victorians did not kill the individual who dishonored the family, however, they did disown and reject them for actions that did

⁵³ Husseinini, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 164-165

⁵⁴ Ibid., pg 166.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pg 144.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pg 74

dishonor the family. Even so, women had similar restrictions and were required to only be involved in the accepted activities. Chopin writes of Leonce rebuking Edna for not being home to greet the “callers” as she exercised her new found freedom by being “out”.

“Why my dear, I should think you’d understand by this time that people don’t do such things; we’ve got to observe *les convenances* if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession.”⁵⁷

As a result of Edna’s afternoon of rebellion, Leonce leaves the house in anger and goes to his club. The club of the Victorian male is similar to many clubs we enjoy now, health clubs for example. Unfortunately on January 20, 2010, the Saudi women’s gym was shut down:

while gyms for men in the gender-segregated conservative Islamic society are permitted, women’s health clubs are forbidden...anyone who violates regulations governing the running of health facilities would be punished severely. [said]_Jeddah health official Muhammed Abdul Jawad.⁵⁸

In the world of many of the women in Hussein’s book the idea of having the freedom to go to even a social activity results in death.

They found that around sixty-six per cent of so-called honour crimes were motivated by anger over a women’s desire for more freedom... Begard ... was burned to death by her husband. He had done so because she had gone to his brother’s wedding party without his permission.⁵⁹

Without permission in a male-dominated society, women have few choices outside of the home for interaction. In her novel, Chopin mirrors this attitude with Leonce’s condemnation and in fact, Leonce’s rebuke does infuriate Edna as Chopin characterizes her emotional and physical reaction to Edna’s dereliction of the expected duty.

But the voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness and the sky above and the stars. They jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope...taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet.⁶⁰

Chopin’s intentions show Edna as imprisoned in a loveless marriage. The desolate and discouraging tone is reflected in the diction of “devoid even of hope”. Although not an arranged marriage, Chopin has Edna marrying Leonce as “purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate.”⁶¹ Arranged marriages were economically respected and in Edna’s social class, she would have been expected

⁵⁷ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 50.

⁵⁸ <http://www.ggoogle.com/hostedhews/afp/article/ALeqM5jA-ReASUrtehiVwFEjds1A6FPiog>

⁵⁹ Hussein, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 122.

⁶⁰ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 52.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pg 18.

to marry a man acceptable to her father and the families' social class. As a result, Edna feels no love for Leonce and does the expected by providing him with children.

Motherhood

The Victorian viewpoint regarding motherhood was assumed and "child-bearing grew into something more than a service a wife owed her husband...giving birth also provided a way for women to rise about their previous label of woman and achieve a respected status of motherhood."⁶² Although Chopin provides the reader with the idealized women in the character of Madam Ratignolle, her protagonist, Edna, feels otherwise. Chopin gives a satirical edge to her diction in the phrase," "They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels."⁶³ Chopin presents the popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman, the "the Angel in the House"; she was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure.⁶⁴ While motherhood was considered a woman's highest achievement⁶⁵, Chopin 's character does not see herself as other mothers. " He [Leonce] reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?"⁶⁶ This sums up the Victorian perspective, this Victorian viewpoint where motherhood is considered a holy act and solely the responsibility of women is shared by this interpretation of the Qu'ran.

History does not recall a religion or a system which honours the woman as a mother and which raises her as Islam does. Islam repeatedly commends the woman, and this comes directly after the command to worship and believe in the Oneness of Allah. Allah has made honouring one's mother a virtue, and He puts forth the mother's right over that of the father for what she endures in pregnancy, delivery, nursing and raising her children: "And we have enjoined on man (to be dutiful and good) to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness and hardship upon weakness and hardship, and his weaning is in two years-give thanks to Me and your parents,-unto Me is the final destination. [Surah 31:14] and "And We have enjoined on man to be dutiful and kind to his parents. His mother bears him with hardship and she brings him forth with hardship, and the bearing of him, and the weaning of `jim is thirty (30) months. [Surah 46:15]⁶⁷

Husseini writes that there are many reasons for honour killing. Here is a case where a woman failed to produce a child.

⁶² Reneau Lacey, <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/femhist/motherhood.shtml>

⁶³ Ibid., pg 4.

⁶⁴ http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/thackeray/angel.html

⁶⁵ Abrams, Lynn, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_07.shtml

⁶⁶ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 5.

⁶⁷ http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/Q_WI/introduction.htm

A twenty-seven-year-old Sikh woman fled her marital home because she feared that her in-laws were planning to kill her for failing to produce a child. She had passed fertility tests but still had fertility treatment forced upon her. She suspected that her husband was infertile and it was this that sealed her fate.⁶⁸

As Leonce presents Victorian viewpoint, Chopin's character, Edna, presents a "modern" perspective: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself."⁶⁹ Chopin allows her protagonist the freedom to consider herself over her children; not a popular viewpoint during the Victorian era. Edna's awakening is all about understanding "instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions."⁷⁰ As the novel continues Chopin reveals her own personal needs through Edna's awakening, "She could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self."⁷¹ The "other self" clearly is the one society demanded of Edna, who can be symbolic of what many of the Victorian women felt. The author presents the frustration, depression and hopelessness women felt prior to the change in the laws. Women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Fuller, Gloria Steinmen, NOW, and the ERA movements created the political environment and fought for the needed changes.

Doctors

As *The Awakening's* plot moves forward, Leonce becomes confused with his wife's unhappiness and behaviour. He asks his friend and family physician, Doctor Mandelet to "talk to you about Edna. I don't know what ails her."⁷² Leonce goes on to say "She lets the housekeeping go to the dickens."⁷³ Still the doctor doesn't understand what the problem is, although not keeping up with the housekeeping was fairly serious. Finally, Leonce reveals the real problem "She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women..."⁷⁴ Understanding Leonce's complaint, the doctor questions Leonce "Has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings?"⁷⁵ In this exchange, Chopin illustrates the male attitude of frustration with a woman who does not accept her place in society, of a woman who does not do the required activities. The negative tone of the doctor in referring to the "new" women manifests by Doctor Mandelet advising Leonce to have patience and the mood would pass. Somewhat like a child's passing fancy for a toy or a fun activity, time would create boredom and Leonce will have his dutiful wife once again. As Leonce is being patient, Edna's father comes for a visit. His character is also patriarchal and he has little sympathy for the situation. "Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only

⁶⁸ Husseini, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 168.

⁶⁹ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 52.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pg 13.

⁷¹ Ibid., pg 40

⁷² Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 65.

⁷³ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 65.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pg. 65.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 66.

way to manage a wife. Take my word for it.”⁷⁶ This statement epitomizes the male attitude of the Victorian era. Men were to be in control, in charge of their woman as a parent to a child. Chopin’s next revealing sentence follows: “The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave.”⁷⁷ The Colonel’s abusive character establishes the current viewpoint of Edna’s society and that the only escape from such a relationship is death. Authority, punishment, coercion were the province of the Victorian male. The laws supported his control over women and any decisions he chose to make regarding her life. Hussein also demonstrates the authority of the doctor in determining the fate of females. Unlike Doctor Mandelet who cautions patience, the doctors of the woman in her book are there to examine the women for evidence of virginity. Although:

Dr. Mumen Hadidi, who performed virginity tests on hundreds of women throughout his medical career, told me (Hussein) ...that it is always a tough moment for him, professionally when a girl is brought to his centre by police where she is “pressured to do the test because there was no clear cut consent for the examination...On many occasions we examine a woman and find her hymen to be intact and we write a report stating just that...families are not convinced...murdered a few days later.”⁷⁸

The question arises from this passage as to why is the women required to be a virgin, and the men allowed pre-marital sex? Perhaps it is for an inheritance as Hussein suggests “It had nothing to do with “honour”. Nadia and Kifaya were ...killed for their inheritance. Those poor women were totally innocent. Everyone here know this is the truth.”.⁷⁹ Or perhaps it is as Sarhan says after he killed his sister...”but traditions and society inflict things on us that we really do not want to do. If society would not have shunned us after her rape, we would not have killed her and instead locked her inside the house until she dies or someone married her.”⁸⁰ One notices that the blame for the murder is passed onto the society at large, and that the woman would have still been a prisoner for the rest of her life. As Hussein writes “Jordanian society blames women for everything: for being raped, ...harassed on the streets, for philandering husbands, for husbands who divorce them, for bearing a child of the wrong gender—the list is endless.”⁸¹ The reader can sense Hussein’s frustration with the lack of accountability the men have for their actions. It appears that many seemingly innocent actions can become a death sentence. The question remains: is there any justice in male gender maintaining control over the female gender?

⁷⁶ Ibid., pg. 71.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pg. 71.

⁷⁸ Hussein, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 85.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pg 21.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pg 15.

⁸¹ Ibid., pg 5.

Lovers

As Edna's story continues she takes two lovers: a young man (Robert Lebrun) and an older man (Alcee Arobin). Her 'true' love is Robert, but he leaves her and she waits for his return dallying with Alcee. It was common during the Victorian times for a man to take a mistress:

...they still expected their wives or mistresses to be faithful whatever their own misdemeanors. If a woman took a lover it was not made public. If it did become public knowledge she would be cut by society. But men could amble along to one of their gentleman's clubs and always find a warm welcome.⁸²

Edna does remain discreet with her extra-marital relationships, but realizes early in her marriage that "She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that not race of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution."⁸³ Here, Chopin illustrates the marriage of convenience. There is little passion or love, only the duty and requirements that is needed to be a "couple". On the other hand, Hussein tells of women who did have extra-marital affairs that ended in murder. "Stoning for adultery remains a common practice in Iran"⁸⁴. Other nations such as Lebanon where the amendment to Article 562 reads as:

'Whomsoever surprises his spouse of one of his ascendants or descendants or his sister in a crime of observed adultery or in a situation of unlawful intercourse and kills or injures one of them without deliberation what benefit from the excuse of mitigation'... Of course, this amendment did not relieve women from the burden of being the sole carriers of honour. It is a 'blind acceptance of the assumptions that any sexual relationship outside marriage is a shame and sullies the woman's honour, that her honour is the property of her husband or male relative only, that the woman bears immediate and full responsibility for sullying her honour, whether it happened in her positive or negative will and subsequently deserves the maximum physical penalty'.⁸⁵

This modern belief that women have a right to their own person, and the discovery that this has been denied to them by their society is what has many women in the Middle East dedicated to changing the laws as the feminists did in the West. While Hussein's book discusses the multiple ways and laws that organizations, both national and international, have been working to change the system of punishment, the perceptions of honour and the tribal perspectives on gender equality, it appears that there is a very long way to go before this occurs.

⁸²Weston Thomas, Pauline, "A Woman's Place in C19th Victorian History", http://www.fashion-era.com/a_womans_place.htm#Mistresses%20For%20Men

⁸³ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 19.

⁸⁴ Hussein, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 131.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pg 139.

An Honourable Death?

Chopin ends her novel with Edna's choosing to die by drowning.

The waters of the gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun...A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water...She walked out...The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke...She went on and on...She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of blue-grass meadow that she had traversed as a child...Exhaustion was pressing upon and over-powering her...the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone...There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.⁸⁶

This suicide is emblematic of the sense Chopin imbues her character with that only a suicide would be considered an honorable death. Certainly a "living death" as she had experienced as a woman in her society was no longer an option. Explaining herself, and creating a new free and liberated life was not an option either socially or financially. Chopin lets the reader know that Edna has no choices despite the freedom she was allowed in having a lover, moving out of her husband's home, indulging in art, and having friends who supported her need for personal expression, for a life of her own. Without gender equality, Edna would forever be the property of her husband, subject to his wishes, to continuous childbearing, to financial destitution should she leave or divorce him. Without the work of the feminists, the modern woman of the West would be in the same position as the women of the Middle East. They would be judged by the historical tradition of a woman being the weaker sex and a second-class citizen as a result. Maternity, long considered the major role for women and as a consequence, this belief that "the joys of motherhood" to the abandonment of it fulfilling in and of itself, along with the attendant roles as a caretaker and domestic "goddess", determined how women could express themselves. Today in the West, birth control and, in some areas, legalized abortion has given women greater control over the number of children they will bear. These Western rights are not recognized by Sharia Law and the women of Hussein's book live in fear of death and when killed often times lie "in unmarked graves"⁸⁷, similar to suicides (i.e., Edna). Men of the book feel that... " 'honor' derives from the struggle to retain the chastity of the women in his family... Husbands-to-be consider virginity evidence of exclusive possession, proof that the 'merchandise' is brand new."⁸⁸ With this attitude, women need to fight for a change in this perception and laws need amending so that honour killings are punished appropriately as murder, the "battle" for gender equality continues. Hussein's book highlights many of laws that permit this attitude towards the murder of women. In retrospect, Chopin paid the price of a Victorian author in writing about the

⁸⁶ Chopin, Kate, *The Awakening*, Dover Publication, Inc, 31 East 2nd Street, Mineola, N.Y. 11501, 1933, pg 116.

⁸⁷ Hussein, Rana, *Murder in the Name of Honor*, Oneworld Publications, 185 Banbury Road Oxford, OX2 7AR, England, pg 61

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pg 84.

Victorian attitude and the wrongs committed against her Christian culture and society. Currently, Husseini writes about the attitudes in her country and worldwide and the price women pay as part of the Islamic culture and the tribal society. She ends her book with:

Today, many crimes of honour are fed by the clash of old and new. As the old world has migrated to the west, countless conflicts have arisen between adolescent children and their parents...Part of this conflict comes from the ongoing worldwide transition in women's status and roles, with women becoming a vital and fast-growing part of the labour force. This change in the status and roll of women has been very rapid and the related empowerment it brings clashes with long-established conservative attitudes.⁸⁹

Husseini has clearly stated the case for her peers and countrywomen, for the women under Sharia Law and those worldwide who are seeking equality from a traditional society. The questions are: "How far does the Muslim world need to progress to give women equal rights to those given men?" "How far has the Western world come from the inequities of the Victorian era and how much further does we need to go to continue the balance needed for true "honorable" relationships?" In our Western literature there persists the fairy tale. The attitude that fairy tales come true with the white knight riding to the princesses rescue and taking care of his lady-love forever, sheltering her from dragons or decision making, freedom of choice, and self-expression is one the post-Victorian women is rejecting and is codified in Colleen McElroy final stanza of "Fairy Tales" giving voice to the many daughters described in her poem woven throughout this paper:

The princess who says: fuck
The pea and throws the damn
Mattress out the window⁹⁰

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