

A CRITIQUE OF VICTORIAN MORALITY REFLECTED BY THE MAIN CHARACTER IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

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Abstract

The Awakening is a novel written by Kate Chopin in 1899. In her novel, Chopin wants to show her critique towards Victorian Morality. Edna Pontellier is the main character who has the role to criticize Victorian Morality. Edna as a controversial character struggles against the rule of society in being mother woman in the Victorian Era. She does not take care of her children and husband. During the time, she flirts to other guy named Robert, and shows her attention to him and rejects doing good behavior in her family. In the end, Edna Pontillier faces many obstacles and her life becomes complicated. The discussion aims to analyze the Victorian morality working on the main character, Edna Pontillier, by using Moral Approach. It is used to analyze the moral of the main character by rejecting the Victorian Morality in the novel. Furthermore, Theory of Ethics by Immanuel Kant is used to analyze whether the main character, Edna Pontillier is categorized having good or bad moral. The deductive method is applied to analyze the general matter in the discussion to obtain the specific conclusion. The library research is used to collect data and information which are relevant to the topic discussion. It concerns with material and information which are taken from many books, dictionaries, and references to support the analysis. The data from internet are also used to complete the data to make the analysis accurate.

Keywords: *Victorian Era, Victorian Morality*

Abstrak

The Awakening adalah sebuah novel yang ditulis oleh Kate Chopin pada tahun 1899. Dalam novelnya, Kate Chopin ingin menunjukkan kritik terhadap Moralitas zaman Victoria. Edna Pontellier adalah karakter utama yang berperan untuk mengkritik Moralitas era Victoria. Edna Pontellier sebagai karakter yang kontroversial, berjuang melawan aturan masyarakat menjadi ibu rumah tangga di Era Victoria. Dia tidak mengurus anak-anak dan suaminya. Selama ini, dia berselingkuh dengan orang lain bernama Robert, dan menunjukkan perhatiannya untuk Robert dan menolak berbuat baik untuk keluarganya. Pada akhirnya, Edna Pontillier menghadapi banyak rintangan dan hidupnya menjadi rumit. Diskusi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis moralitas era Victoria melalui karakter utama, Edna Pontillier, dan tujuan tersebut menggunakan Pendekatan Moral. Pendekatan ini digunakan untuk menganalisis moralitas karakter utama yang menolak Moralitas Victoria dalam novel. Selanjutnya, teori etika oleh Immanuel Kant digunakan untuk menganalisis apakah karakter utama, Edna Pontillier, dikategorikan memiliki moral yang baik atau buruk. Metode deduktif diterapkan untuk menganalisis masalah secara umum untuk mendapatkan kesimpulan yang spesifik. Penelitian perpustakaan digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data dan informasi yang relevan dengan topik diskusi. Hal ini termasuk data dan informasi yang diambil dari berbagai buku, kamus, dan referensi untuk mendukung analisis. Data dari internet yang mendukung untuk melengkapi data agar analisis yang diperoleh akurat.

Kata kunci: *Era Victoria, Moralitas Victoria*

Introduction

The Awakening is a novel written by Kate Chopin which has the setting in New Orleans. This story takes place in the same period as Chopin's life and reflects the attitude of 19th century. Through *The Awakening*, Chopin criticizes the rigid and strict rules in the Victorian Era where men and women have certain defining roles. This novel centers on a woman named Edna Pontellier. Chopin in her novel, *The Awakening*

tells about the main character, Edna, that struggles to deal with the role of a woman in 1890's in America. *The Awakening* reflects that women are not able to truly express themselves in Victorian Era. The novel emphasizes the expectations of women in the Victorian Era with its concerns about morality, proper behavior, and manners. In this research, the issue specifically discusses about the main character, Edna's rebellion against Victorian morality that appears in *The Awakening*. The most conventional image of the perfect

Victorian woman is found in the title of a long poem written by Coventry Patmore: *The Angel in the House*. The pure woman's life was supposed to be entirely centered on the home. She preserved the higher moral values, guarded her husband's conscience, guided her children's training, and helped regenerate society through her daily display of Christianity in action. If she successfully made the home a place of perfect peace, her husband and sons would not want to leave it for an evening's (morally suspect) entertainment elsewhere. (Mitchel 2009:266)

There are many strict rules that has to be adhered especially to women. Women in the Victorian era must obey the morality that controls their life. Consider the idea of mother women, Chopin through his novel creates the main character, Edna, who has the role to criticize Victorian morality. The society marks women as object that take the responsibility at home and as the center of teaching morality to the children. Women in the Victorian Era must obey the rules that control their life such as take care of children, serve husbands, and being mother women. They are not allowed to work outside, earn money and being independence women because the legal authority rested on father. The novel is a form as a critique towards Victorian Morality because Chopin does not agree with the idea of strict rules at that time especially for woman. This novel shows how the main character that reflects the critique towards Victorian morality.

The discussion of the research focuses on critique of Victorian morality conducted by the main character, Edna. The topic above leads to find the morality in Victorian Era reflected in the novel. Secondly, the analysis leads to find how rebellion appears in the novel towards Victorian Morality. The last, the analysis leads to find the ideology of the author. The moral perspective used as the basis of theoretical review in this research is taken from Theory of Ethics by Immanuel Kant's.

To know how the woman's rebellion in Kate Chopin *The Awakening* is, first, I formulate some points such as the morality in Victorian Era reflected in the novel. The second is Edna's rebellion appears in the novel related to Victorian morality. The last is to find the ideology brought by the author in the novel *The Awakening*

This research has 3 goals. The first goal is to provide a description about morality that is legitimized in Victorian Era reflected in the novel, especially for women. The second is to describe how Edna's rebellion reflected in the novel is. The last is to find the ideology brought by the author in novel related to Victorian Era. In addition, I do hope that this research will contribute for the other students who are interested in analyzing about Victorian Morality. Furthermore, this research can give valuable contribution to the readers and help in conducting research about moral studies.

Research Methodology

The role of research methodology to formulate a good research is important. In this research I use documentary reseach. Documentary is applied in this research as the technique of data collection. Blaxter states: Documentary analysis proceeds by abstracting from each document those elements which we consider to be important or relevant, and by grouping together these findings, or setting them alongside others which we believe to be related. What you see or read in documents will be a product of your viewpoint, discipline or focus (2006:208). Documentary analysis is used to give classification about important or relevant information which are found from some references to be the material which support the topic of this research. I use the novel of Kate Chopin *The Awakening* as the source of primary data. The primary data are in the form of dialogues and narrations that represent critique towards Victorian Morality. This primary data are supported by the secondary data which are taken from some information in the references, such as taken from the books, papers, journals, and articles.

This research uses deductive method as the way to describe the problems. It is a general thinking process which is related to the data and set out from the general to the particular pattern. It starts with the general idea about the morality in Victorian Era which appears in society goes to the specific discussion about the rebellion and morality of the main character in the novel. This way of reasoning will produce a specific conclusion about the topic.

Result

The data which have been collected and analyzed to find the result of Victorian morality during Victorian Era where the society is underpinned by rigid moral and ideal forms of behavior. Morality in Victorian Era is highly influenced by the increase of industrialization as the impact of industrial revolution. Industrial revolution is time of development that many things are good and sufficient for human being. It is not only giving positive aspects such as technology, invention, industrialization, but also gives negative effect such as materialism, capitalism, life style, moral values etc. As the impact of industrial revolution related to morality that is legitimized at that time ,during Victorian Era everyone has to obey the morality as the rule in the daily life.

Discussion

Victorian Morality is a set of principles that control people during Victorian Era. Victorian Era is an era during the reign of Queen Victoria over the United Kingdom, from 1837 until 1901. Victorian morality is well known with its rigid moral and strict to the rule. Many people, for example, believe that Victorian society was safe, family-centered, and stable because women could not work outside the home, although every census taken during the period records hundreds of thousands of female laborers in fields, factories, shops, and schools as well as more than a million

domestic servants—often girls of fourteen or fifteen—whose long and unregulated workdays created the comfortable leisured world we see in *Merchant and Ivory* films. Yet it is also true that there were women who had no household duties and desperately wished for some purpose in life but found that social expectations and family pressure absolutely prohibited their presence in the workplace. (Nelson, 2007:ix)

Victorian Era is often idealized as a model of parental authority, loving relationships, inner harmony, and straight to the society expectation. It supports the idea of rigid moral in Victorian morality. In the late nineteenth century, also known as the Victorian Era, women has no place to work outside instead of staying at home with household duties. There is a little possibility to get freedom and they are essentially the property of their husbands. Their main duties and privileges as women and wives were to take care of their children and please their husbands. In the Victorian Era, women are marginalized and oppressed by the society because physically women are weaker than men. Women just have roles in private and domestic area, such as being mother woman at home, takes care of children, teaching morality to their children, decorates and cleaning the house, and serves their husbands and dedicates their life for their family. Chopin in her novel *The Awakening* writes : “The mother women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. 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.” (Chopin, 2014:11)

The mother woman in this case is defined as the woman who idolized their children, worshiped husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege. They are formed by the society to be mother women who fully dedicate themselves to their family. In the novel, *The Awakening*, Chopin symbolizes women as ministering angel means that women are placed to be ready anytime when their family need them. Victorian society believes that Victorian morality with rigid moral and strict to the rule will bring peace, often portrayed as peaceful, comfortable, but it is actually a time of truly breathtaking change and oppress women. Women find that social expectations and family pressure absolutely prohibited their presence in the workplace. Moreover, they have to follow the society rules and society expectation instead of experience multiple oppression. The husband has role to a leader at home, feed the family and make money, while women have to stay at home doing the household duties. Mr. Pontellier gave his wife half of the money which he had brought away from Klein's hotel the evening before.(Chopin: 2014:9)

Victorian women don't have any roles to have place working outside. Men has to accept and exercise leadership. He lives up to his own standards, as a businessman or a professional man that was honorable and dependable. Men have economic control over their family,

their wives, and their children because the family depends on his income. In family, men have strong authority work in business and spent long hours in their professions. Men send their wife money while women arrange the money for household requirement.

The Awakening introduces the reader to the life of Edna Pontellier, a woman who struggles to find love and her true identity in a rigid society that expects women to be nothing more than devoted wives and nurturing mother. Her identity is defined by the awakening of her soul, the awakening of her social life, and her role in society. Edna transforms herself with a disobedient character and emotions which she no longer has to repress. Her transformation is shaped by her surroundings. Her behavior turns to be more shocking and horrifying because of her position in society, it is that position which causes her to feel restrained and makes her yearn to rebel. Edna attempts to find the deepest truth about herself by not conforming to society's norms. Moreover, Edna discovers that she wants more out of life; something about her marriage is not allowing her to achieve fulfillment. Through her relationships, confrontations, and conflicts with other characters and society norms, Edna discovers herself of being under control.

Edna's behavior questions morality that exists at that time in the novel. Edna Pontellier, places herself in the position to be the individual going against society from the beginning of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Edna's characteristics and actions worthy of rebuke lead to a breakdown of her moral integrity. In social life, people live with two concepts, bad or good moral. The good thing is something that brings benefits but the bad thing is something that makes people lose something, or having a harmful effect. From that idea, bad moral is defined as a peculiar behaviour which results in violating the laws and norms of the people in a certain circumstances. People can be considered doing bad moral according to the context of the social condition surroundings. Kant provides more emphasizes to the understanding of bad moral in different contextual situation. He asserts reason and knowledge as a tool to determine people behaviour, in this case bad moral.

The rule of right and wrong must help us to the knowledge of what is right or wrong in all possible cases; otherwise, the idea of obligation or duty would be utterly null, for we cannot have any obligation to that which we cannot know. On the other hand, in our investigations of the phenomena of nature, much must remain uncertain, and many questions continue insoluble; because what we know of nature is far from being sufficient to explain all the phenomena that are presented to our observation. (Kant, 1991:288)

However, Kant's theory cannot answer the whole negativity of the world because the knowledge is unlimited until it is developed. The novel describes the social condition in the Victorian era where women are expected to provide well-kept homes and being mother women. Edna as the main character in the novel describes her protest toward Victorian morality that ties and limits her. In her husband's eyes she has failed in her duties as a wife and as a mother

to her own children. What her husband expects from her is never what she does. He reproaches his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it is not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it. He himself has his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way. (Chopin, 2014:8)

Desire as the natural needs of women is not a taboo thing. They do not have to ignore it because it is also to get their satisfaction and happiness in the field of sexuality. Edna shows her idea about sexuality where she does not care about society norms and forgets to dedicate herself only for her husband. She does whatever what makes her happy and rejects the society's judgment. Every person has many choices in their life and they have their own rights to decide what the best thing for their life. Edna decides to fulfill her sexual desire with Alcee Robin, her emotional feeling with Robert, becomes an independent woman as well as financially independent. On the other hand, she rejects being a mother woman such as reject taking care of children and serves her husband. Her rebellion in Victorian rigid moral is seen as bad moral or immoral. She is different from other character in the novel, Madam Adele who is portrayed as an ideal woman in Victorian Era. She overdoes her mother and wife role while at the same time allowing glimpse of her true self to emerge from the role. She is labeled as a mother woman who has passionless and self-sacrificing. She is a good mother woman in Victorian Era. On the other hand, Edna wants to stay away from society norms, her husband oppression and family restraint. She simply wants to place for herself to be a woman in her own way and not to give her soul for her family. She wants a life for herself and she can enjoy her life according to her willing. Edna is expected to be a woman in Victorian Era, to be a good mother and wife for her family, but Leonce treated her as the property.

Kate Chopin lives in Victorian Era which appears in 19th century. The spirit of Victorian Era comes to imply prudery, hypocrisy, sexual repression, and rigid social control. Rigid social control is especially to control woman movement. Through her novel *The Awakening*, she protests and criticizes towards Victorian Morality which is tied woman. In addition, *Victorianism* remains a living concept in social and political debates, although its meaning is ambiguous: it is used to describe exploitation and class division, sexual repression, hypocrisy, values of hard work and self-help, moral certainties about family life, and a wide variety of arrangements intended to solve public problems. (Mitchell, 2009:xiii).

Through her novel *The Awakening*, Chopin against Victorian Morality and it influences the way of life in her novel. It is because she disagrees with the rigid rules which take the people's rights and freedom, especially women. In Victorian Era, discussing about sexual repression is a taboo and it is considered immoral if someone flirts with someone

else. Chopin's ideology is against Victorian Morality because during Victorian Era people are tied by rigid moral, especially for woman. As a form of her ideology, she creates a character in her novel *The Awakening* who has rebellious, unmotherly, and eccentric characteristic. The rebellious character who is created by Kate Chopin is Edna Pontillier, a married woman. Her rebellious characteristic rejects to take care of children, neglects to serve husband, flirts with another guy, and commits suicide. In the novel, Chopin wants to show that rigid moral in Victorian Morality can make a married woman suffer and has bad moral. Then, it will make her commit suicide because to stay alive doesn't make her life happy.

Victorian Morality strongly controls Edna's life until in the end of the story she commits suicide. After her rebellion, she still does not get what she truly wants in her life such as love, sexual desire, independent woman and happiness. Edna rebels against society because of expectations and responsibility a woman must have in the Victorian Era. Kate Chopin as the writer of *The Awakening* conveys a message to the readers and show how Victorian Morality working on an individual who has free soul. The novel has tragic story in the end of the novel. She brings her ideology to her novel against Victorian Morality based on her opposition to the Victorian Era through rebellious character in the novel.

Conclusion

The Awakening is a novel which criticizes Victorian Morality with its controversial topics dealing with women, marriage, sexual desire, and suicide. Women in Victorian Era are expected to have a good attitude, follow the rules of the society with its concerns about morality, proper behavior and manners. They have to keep the essence of morality, stability, and comfort at home. Woman is legally subordinate and obedient to her husband and somehow supposed to rule the home. Men have economic control over their family because the family depends on his income. The manager at home is woman. She is as a provider for food, clothing, cleanliness, and comfortable necessary to health, and for the good nursing necessary in sickness. Women have to keep safe at home, their perfect compliance, obedience, and being mother woman would make them accepted in society life as good wife and mother. From the explanation above, it can be concluded that Victorian morality has come to imply rigid social control.

The Awakening is a novel which portrays a life of Edna Pontellier, a woman who struggles to find love and her true identity in a rigid society that expects women to be nothing more than devoted wives and nurturing mother. Victorian Morality strongly controls Edna's life so Edna rebels against the society because of the expectations and responsibility a woman must have in the Victorian Era.

The rebellious character that is created by Chopin are rejects to take care of children, neglects to serve the husband, flirts with another guy, and commits suicide. Edna neglects being mother woman at home who takes care

of children, serves her husband and dedicate herself for family. She has to be an angel at home who supposed to be ready anytime she is needed. Furthermore, her relationship with Robert and Alcee is a form of her sexual desire fulfillment that she never has before. She must be a woman who is expected by the society in Victorian Era. In can be concluded that Edna wants to set her freedom and reaches happiness. She commits suicide as her success and chooses to make her life better after her death. In Victorian Era, all her rebellions are considered as bad moral. Chopin wants to show that Victorian Morality in Victorian Era does not peaceful and comfortable for some people. It is actually a time of truly tied women for being mother women at home.

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