

Sounding the Self: Soundscapes, Spatiality, and Place in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Manal Shahid

Kinnaird College for Women University, Lahore

mshahid29000@gmail.com

Abstract

In her seminal work, *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin's central theme of identity is an expansive basis upon which a broadened understanding of the theoretical frameworks of Soundscape and Spatiality allow scope into the concept of Identity. For Chopin, sound marks itself as an evocative force linked to the subconscious and when laid parallel to spatiality, identity formation becomes a complex map. However, existing literature rarely anatomizes both concepts, therefore resists expanding from the abstract to specifics. Leaving room to identify how linguistic spaces are heard and affect experiences of objects, events and self-awareness. To that end, auditory perception also becomes key to marking out spaces of various spatial positioning, specifically vertical spatiality, an underutilised concept in literature regarding Chopin's works. Thereby, an imperative is set to create a theoretical and critical analysis to interpret the intersection of sound and space in the creation of identity, as well as to offer new ways of thinking about the sense of space, sound and the self in relation to literary studies regarding Kate Chopin and her literary achievements.

Keywords: Soundscape, Spatiality, Gendered identity, Kate Chopin, Acoustic Environment.

Introduction

The structural and thematic properties of identity foreground Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* as its principal character Edna Pontellier finds herself in a gradual process of selfhood. Set at the end of the nineteenth century in New Orleans and the Louisiana Gulf Coast, the local colour which permeates the novel and its contextual Fin de Siecle mode, allows Chopin to navigate the anxieties presented to the self. A journey begins for Edna, as she marks out her old life in order to create one suitable for herself, exploring her sensuality in the form of emotional and sexual adultery with other men. By that means Sound becomes a vivid pitch

at bringing this sensuality and selfhood to a height. As it becomes a marker of sensation that inform Edna's action. By placing sound upon a landscape and spatially regarding it, new furrows of research present themselves.

As within literary studies, soundscaping is relatively a new area of research, sound by itself is considered a minor aspect in an overall analysis of literature as Helen Groth and Julian Murphet express in the *Edinburgh Companion to Music*, sound studies tend to "treat [literature] as a minor territory within its domain. Yet, this material often makes abundant use of many of the most significant literary resources for transcribing sound" (da Sousa Correa et al. 3). As a relative fact the impact soundscaping produces on gender identity is also then an overall underdeveloped area, if sound is not understood as a multiplex ground for research. Rather than approach sound one dimensionally, it should be analysed as a property with textures, tone, dimension and a production of thought.

As Sound within literature is not produced in isolation, the textuality of sound "situates [itself] in a larger context of embodied perception and reflection and commits itself to a general phenomenology and psychology of experience" (da Sousa Correa et al. 3). In order to give sound a tangibility and a rationale, spatiality becomes a significant feature due to a similarity in property with sound, specifically producing an atmosphere, as well as not being an arbitrary phenomenon but a result of subliminal imagination. An imperative is then set to understand the self from a combined force of spatiality and the soundscape.

Significantly then, this study aims to fill a gap in knowledge that has not been adequately explored in relation to identity, sound and spatiality within *The Awakening*. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent can compounding Soundscape and spatiality generate an effective paradigm to analyse experiences and representations of femininity in literature?
2. In what ways can sound be understood as a gendered phenomenon and what role do conscious and unconscious mechanisms play in this process?
3. How do the intersecting dynamics of gendered spatiality and affective environment shape narrative structure and character development in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*?

Literature Review

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, female identity resonates at the center of the narrative, for Edna Pontellior. The particularity of identity which Edna seeks find similarity in the framework

of sound and spatiality as they become markers of self. By anatomizing both concepts the research expands from the abstract to specifics. In order to do so a sound framework of spatiality and soundscape is required. Thus, a framework is created by adopting the principles of foundational texts, *Sound and Literature* by Anna Snaith, which relates “soundscapes” as ‘auditory or aural landscapes’ to foreground perception in addition to the sounds themselves” (Snaith 21). Alongside, Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*. The terminology ‘soundscape’ is borrowed from R. Murray Schafer in *Soundscape: Tuning of the World*. However, it is supplemented in meaning by Helen Groth and Julian Murphet work titled the *Edinburgh Companion to Music*.

However, primary and frequent texts to which this study shall turn towards is *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* in order to dissect the intersection between space and identity, utilising Edward S. Casey’s *Remembering: A Phenomenology* which assists in framing the body’s inward spatiality effected by the external environment. Subsequently, the research then turns to further break down the notion of space by differentiating between ‘space’ and ‘place’ using Jeff Malpas seminal texts *Place and Experience: A philosophy* and *Finding Place: Spatiality, Locality, and Subjectivity*.

For appropriate understanding of the work established around various similar aspects of the novel. These secondary texts aid in building the framework, creating a point of reflexivity and augmenting the argument. Melanie Dawson writes in *From Song to Silence*, “music serves as a means for understanding Edna’s growing sense of self in relation to social and artistic traditions” (Dawson, 4). This notion is challenged, whereas in her essay *Kate Chopin’s Narrative Techniques and Separate Space in The Awakening* by Xianfeng Mou narrative distance becomes a unique concept of spatial dimensions as they account of free indirect speech which “charts Edna’s remarkable journey of growth both as a woman and as a female artist” while “[putting]the greatest distance between Chopin and her characters” (Mou, 5). As a result, the independent space provided to Edna allows her to understand the “unresolved tensions” of her existence (Mou, 4).

Additionally, a few critics turn more specific and have even considered the multisensory role of the ocean as both the space it occupies and the soundscape it hence creates. In the study, *Salt Taste of The Sea* by Virginia Richter, the beach becomes the metaphorical “space along the waterline, where sea, earth, and air interact and where individual bodies engage on all

sensory levels with the elements” (Richter, 2). Briefly then, Richter engages with the spatial aspect inherent in Chopin’s work through the allusion of the sea.

However, as the elements of music and space evaluated by many critics of Chopin are fragmented from each other and not considered mutually codependent. If critics consider sound as Dawson does, they do not evaluate the concept of space and spatiality. Research is simply narrowed down to the understanding of music within Chopin’s novel. Hence, the symphonic like creation of ordinary sounds which also particularly caters and detracts from Edna’s growth is largely ignored. Similarly, if space is critically evaluated, as Mou does, it is disconnected from sound. Or rather, space is evaluated in the literal sense as Armin Von Ungern-Sternberg does in the essay *Dots, Lines, Areas and Words: Mapping Literature and Narration*. Similarly, so does Heather fox in *Mapping Spatial Consciousness in Kate Chopin’s Bayou Folk Stories*. Particularly, in the work of the ocean critic, Richter, where both space and sound is analysed, it is limited in its focus by addressing simply the ocean. These secondary resources become a point of contention to be evaluated.

Consequently, Sound is not addressed as a point in itself, nor is its contribution to the subject of spatiality within Chopin’s novel. Though inadvertently sound is evaluated as having a physical presence in the form of music and sea noises which has a lasting effect on the character’s bodily reactions to her environment as Dawson claims, “in essence The Awakening can be viewed as Edna’s awakening to music” (Dawson, 5). Thereby, the connection between sound and spatiality exists but is not evaluated as thus.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, textual, and thematic analysis of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* to explore the relationship between space, gender, identity, and sound. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Spatiality, Spatial Feminism, Soundscape. The analysis draws on key concepts to examine how the novel navigates sound and space in response to the self.

Analysis and Findings

To establish a framework, the understanding given to sound and space must abide in the textual, thereby establishing that:

The spoken word is not what it says it is, and writing clinches this unspoken truth of all language: none of it is what it declares itself to be. It is a symbolic tool-kit, a medium, and like all media, it facilitates certain ratios between signal and noise, sense and nonsense, according to the precision of its use (da Sousa Correa et al. 4).

Thus, sound and space acquire a quality of dynamism apart from its existing understanding in actuality, if sound or space are bound in flux in real life they appear doubly so in the written word. As such, identity becomes an increasingly complex structure weighted down by not just narrative, but by memory, sense and subjectivity that aligns itself within the textual. Further on, the general consensus of Edna Pontellier's journey by critics have routinely been under the impression of a static journey, a slow awakening as the title suggests, yet by processing Edna's growth not in terms of linear but as a non-linear passage, where space and sound expand and detract, Edna has moments of poignancy even before her eventual awakening. This becomes understood when we analyse spatial distance not just in terms of near and far but in verticality, and sound not simply being all around but a spatiality afforded to sound that imprints itself upon the material and symbolic body of Edna Pontellier.

Public vs The Private Sphere

To preface, two distinctive understandings of the public and private sphere shall set stage in understanding how spatiality and soundscape discuss identity within the two spheres. Nancy Duncan in *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, writes of "the public/ private division [as being] an important structuring principle upon which characteristics commonly associated with masculinity and femininity are arrayed" (Duncan 3). These hegemonic dualisms find power in the "productive effect through its reiteration of naturalizing norms" (Duncan, 59). This narrative opposes Erik Erikson's own analysis of the inherent quality of public and private spheres with:

Identity formation of women differ[ing] by dint of the fact that their somatic design harbors an 'inner space' destined to bear the offspring of chosen men and, with it, a biological, psychological, and ethical commitment to take care of human infancy. [...] since a woman is never not-a-woman, she can see her long-range goals only in those modes of activity which include and integrate her natural dispositions (qtd in White, 7).

Duncan further extrapolates upon Judith Butlers concept of identity performance within real and non-real spaces. The real relating towards the “material, experienced, concrete, social, actual, geographical [...] [while] The non-real proliferates [as the] imagined, symbolic, metaphorical, imaged, cultural” (Duncan, 59). Without expanding into details, the examination of real and non-real spaces as spatial sites and soundscapes, an understanding is created of these spheres as being expansive, constantly disruptive and where meanings are ordered.

The opening of the novel more or less presents through spatial positioning that which corresponds to the shared idea of Erkison of a public and private sphere demarcated by gender and upon which the female is confined to an inner space. Edna is pulled back into the family home, as her husband Leonce Pontillier, disappears to his club. However, to borrow briefly from Husserl, the concept of:

to return to things themselves, is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks and in relation to which any scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie, or a river is (Husserl, 1959, p.8).

Meaning, the public space should be re-evaluated by understanding the body as a thinking subject, a body with material experiences that inhabits a space rather than simply exists in it. The novel opens with the distinctive cry of a “yellow and green parrot” (Chopin,19) whose non-anthropological voice disrupts the linkage of the family sphere to a female identity, instead its harsh discordant voice overpowers the atmosphere. Eleonora Rocconi emphasis in *The Development of Vertical Direction in the Spatial Representation of Sound*, voice is perceived as “a body [with] extension towards height, width and length [...] that which is peculiar to the body ... syllables have height in tone, width in loudness and length in time” (Rocconi, 2). As such the parrot gains height in volume which pushes Mr. Pontellier to rise “with an expression and exclamation of disgust” (Chopin 19), foreshadowing a breaking down of the normative order. Moreover, Mr Pontellier finds himself framed by the doorway of his house, spatially positioned inside the family sphere as an acousmatic array of discordant sounds displace the notion of traditional masculine identity and spheres, as the narrative voice accounts

There was more noise than ever over at the house[.] The chattering and whistling birds

were still at it. Two young girls, the Farival twins, were playing a duet from "Zampa" upon the piano. Madame Lebrun was bustling in and out, giving orders in a high key to a yard-boy whenever she got inside the house, and directions in an equally high voice to a dining-room servant whenever she got outside (20).

In this moment the roles are briefly reversed with Edna in the distance, away from the family/public sphere. When she arrives, she brings a noticeable silence, which further adds to the disrupted positions, as her silence separates her from the family sphere and positions her within an inner sphere that is her own. Instead, it is her husband, who in turn finds himself in an excluded space despite being positioned above both his wife and Robert Lebrun upon the porch. While Edna and Robert monopolise a space "upon the upper step of the porch, facing each other, each leaning against a supporting post" (21). With which linger memories and emotions that Mr Pontellier cannot penetrate, and this is made apparent in the ineffectiveness of the joke which cannot carry through to him:

she looked across at Robert and began to laugh. [...]. He sent back an answering smile. "What is it?" asked Pontellier, looking lazily and amused from one to the other. It was some utter nonsense; some adventure out there in the water, and they both tried to relate it at once. It did not seem half so amusing when told. They realized this, and so did Mr. Pontellier (21).

Effectively placing him in an unbalanced position even as he is spatially above them, the auditory sphere that envelops both Robert and Edna where they communicate through laughs, unbalances him. it does not elevate him but put him down. As R. Murray Schafer intones in *Soundscape: The tuning of the world* "It is indeed possible that some terms employed in visual perception may have equivalents in aural perception" (Schafer 20). Thereby spaces cannot be understood simply through spatiality but their aural environment as well. By being within hearing distance of each other, Edna and Robert create an aural plane upon which Mr Pontellier cannot intrude. For Edna, her self actualisation arises through a dual and intersecting sense of space and sound in Chapter 3, where Mr. Pontellier tries to rebalance the hierarchy in favour of himself by exerting Edna's familial duties upon her. Yet, "She said nothing, and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her" (Chopin 24). The silence acts as a shield and arguably becomes the moment where the self moves towards a sense of awareness as she remembers the emotional space her mind was driven to in that state. "It moved her to dreams,

to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had over- come her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears” (28). These events infer the boundaries of gendered spaces and spheres are relative to spatiality and sound-scaping, both concepts produce their own identity structures, therefore a one-dimensional analysis is inadequate.

Lingering Spaces and Sound

It becomes apparent then, the process of Edna’s self-actualisation is not situated linearly, instead, Edna experiences the self through accumulative epiphanies. A significant epiphany takes place after her first foray in Chapter 3. It takes place in a moment of indecision to perform the role of a mother or to follow an inner desire and go to the beach, wherein turning “toward the Gulf, [the] sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative en-treaty” (31). This moment of giving in to personal desire sparks “a certain light [which] was beginning to dawn dimly within her, the light which, showing the way, forbids it. At the early period it served but to bewilder her” (31).

While, it is natural to cite the expansive nature of the gulf as the central point of identity formation, the ocean being indicative of a temporal space, as critics like Virginia Richter imply of the “the beach as the space along the waterline, where sea, earth, and air interact” (Richter, 6). For Richter, the ocean is multisensory and becomes “a rite of passage during which Edna turns into a threshold person” (Richter, 6). However, an argument can be made, that in fact, it is the vertical line from the point of the gaze to the horizon which acts as a point thereupon, a sensation of freedom rests spatially. The inability to see beyond a point, implies endlessness for Edna, and produces the “beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognise her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin, 31).

Alongside, the act of swimming spatially dislocates her from the ground and establishes her in free space, i.e., the ocean, where one swims as a vertical directed action. What Edna finds then is her life being directed from a point different to others. This is understood in detail when we differentiate between place and placeness. However, in simple terms, Chopin positions Edna on a vertical path different to everyone's horizontal journeys, it becomes a path she is unable to follow, which ultimately manifests into ennui and a hopelessness associated with life.

For now, the nature of these epiphanies represent what Sandra Humble Johnson describes as those spaces between, a “modern sublime” that acts as:

[a] moment [which] is sudden and intense with an exhilaration or pain that brings a new awareness. This moment is irrational in nature but brings an intuitive insight. Further, this illumination is authoritative and cannot be refuted by logical argument. It is fleeting and momentary. The mystical experience is an affirmation of God or a divine spirit and a denial of self [...]. In addition, it is marked by an impersonal tone. The epiphany, [...] is not necessarily a revelation of divinity but could as easily be a revelation of the self and, in this way, is entirely personal. The epiphany is [...] like the mystic's moment, fleeting, intuitive, and irrational (Johnson 7).

Chopin emulates the sensation of an epiphany onto the soundscape of the ocean, evoking emotions and commands similar to what Humble describes as being authoritative and irrefutable as the sound of the ocean turns into an “imperative entreaty”:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamor- ing, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace (Chopin 32).

Chopin effectively reconsiders space and sound as not an external entity but imprinting upon the body. The sound of the ocean follows Edna from Grand Isle to New Orleans as she searches for similar sensations but effectually having to return to the same ocean. Memory then turns into a new plane of spatiality as imaginative spaces reconfigure onto the self. For better comprehension, Edward S. Casey deploys how memory as an unconscious and conscious act creates:

external depth through which [...] physical body moves. What is at stake in the density of body memory is the interior depth in which the lived body resides-in short, its own depth. Such depth, [...] is not a purely objective phenomenon [...] It is a felt Phenomenal Dimension that is not measurable in any metric units. [Moreover] if the lived body's movements through depth-as-distance can be described as "horizontal" in their sweeping action, its own intrinsic depth is vertical and is remembered as such. As upright beings we engage in an upward and downward delving into depth: an

etherealizing tendency and a gravitating propensity, normally mixed in a delicate balance of aspiring and anchoring (Casey 167).

Casey finds habitual memory, that is unconscious remembered acts and skills, to “draw mainly on the downward- moving direction of bodily depth” (167). As such, for Edna acting as a mother is a habitual memory, a learned skill which pulls the spatial depth within her body downwards. It is the conscious memory of her own sensuality and her discovery of it as lived memories, which “are characteristically upward-moving” (167), that places Edna apart from the others. And which eventually pushes her back to the ocean.

Place and Placelessness

By memory displacing itself onto spatial realities and associating itself along the soundscape, it establishes a condition of an objective and subjective perception. To which the differential aspect of space and place parallel. By placing Edna as spatially aligned differently from others her selfhood becomes hinged upon finding place amongst space. Critics like Jeff Malpas and Edward S. Casey make clear that place is not secondary to space and is in effect related to the sense of situatedness. Edna’s consistent sense of placeness contributes to her growing self actualisation as she maps out spots of places and places-ness. The house she establishes does not effectively assist her sense of identity, neither does the life she curates and the affair she has with Alcee Arobin and Robert Leburn. These examples persist that space is a force that cannot be created, they must be existed wherein “ place is something only encountered ‘in’ experience, rather it is that place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (Malpas, 8).

This concept of place Malpas creates, points towards a bodily memory that takes one:

directly into what is being remembered [and] In such remembering, [one] leaves the heights of contemplative recollection and enter the profundity of [their] own bodily being. It is a matter of immersion in memorial depths beyond-or rather, beneath and before-the two-dimensional flatlands of recollected scenes (Casey 169).

Outside of place, Edna finds herself in space which Malpas defines as a void even though

it is always filled with bodies [...] characterising it further as 'a certain interval', measurable in three directions, different from the bodies which occupy it, and incorporeal in its very nature. Place consists of the dimensions alone and is empty of every body. In fact, vacuum and place are essentially the same thing.[...] thus place is empty, empty (vacuum) assuredly of anybody, but still never existing as a vacuum alone of itself (Malpas, 10).

The problem which arises and which Chopin's character faces is that of a perpetual existential outsidership which Edward Relph explains in *Place and Placelessness* as:

Existential outsidership involves a selfconscious and reflective uninvolvedness, an alienation from people and places, homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging. From such a perspective places cannot be significant centres of existence, but are at best backgrounds to activities that are without sense, mere chimeras, and at worst are voids (Relph 51).

which materialises as space is never linear but circular and each circle of space overlaps. Thus, Edna's search relies upon existential insidership which:

To be inside a place and to experience it as completely as we can does not mean that existentially we are insiders. The most fundamental form of insidership is that in which a place is experienced without deliberate and self conscious reflection yet is full with significances (Relph 55).

For Edna this lies in the crossroads between space and sound, effectively seen as the ocean to which she returns. She places herself within a material space in the form of the ocean, which for her holds bodily memory and imaginative space, that effectively doubles as the soundscape, as Edna also hears sounds from the past alongside the present murmur of the waves. This becomes the pinnacle of resolving her anxiety of the self as she ventures out:

naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached

out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. She went on and on. [...] She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. [...] She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air (Chopin, 137).

Conclusion

Chopin's novel provided deeper understanding of spatiality and contributed particularly to vertical spatiality and how it may be analysed textually alongside identity. Similarly, we discover the spatial realms of self-hood differ from the self, amongst the soundscape. The intersection became a crucial point, revealing identity formation as a meta-activity. The research found Kate seminal work a relevant, modern classic, with time only making its content more valuable.

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