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## EDNA AND MITSUKO

*Anu Kadampelil*

Shakespeare's character Polonius from *Hamlet* stated it perfectly: "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man (1.3.78-80)". These words encapsulate the notion that before anyone can grasp the role they have in society, they must first understand who they are and what satisfies them. Women, specifically in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, were seen as submissive beings that had no voice in any matter whatsoever. However, Kate Chopin and Shusaku Endo, authors of *The Awakening* and *Deep River*, respectively, rejected to use this approach when exploring the two women in their novels: Edna and Mitsuko.

Both characters were faced with adversity, but each of them overcame every obstacle they faced to achieve fulfillment in their lives. Throughout Chopin's *The Awakening* and Endo's *Deep River*, Edna and Mitsuko's journey to self-discovery illustrates how fulfillment can be obtained but comes with dire consequences.

Gratification is a feeling that many women did not fully receive back in previous centuries, due to archaic ways still being in effect. The United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, where Edna's story took place, was a crucial moment that showed that women were undermined by their male counterparts. In the article, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860" written by historian Barbara Welter, she indicated the four traits of the ideal woman of the time: *piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity* (Welter, 1966).

These words carry negative connotations that illuminate that women were seen as property in the United States during this time; however, Edna did not fit the definition of the ideal woman. Throughout the novel, *The Awakening*, Edna proclaimed that she was overall bored and unsatisfied with her current living situation in Grand Isles, since she did not love her husband and was emotionless towards her children (Chopin, 1969, p. 29). She was willing to try new things and experience life to its full potential, but she was also faced with challenges along the way. In relation, Mitsuko, who lived in Japan during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faced societal standards that were comparable to Edna's in the United States. According to Pulitzer Prize journalist Sheryl

WuDunn, who specializes in Asian culture, “A man is in heaven when he has an American house, a British salary, a Chinese cook and a Japanese wife (cited in Ito, 2001)”. WuDunn is emphasizing how a Japanese woman was imagined as being a hushed, loyal servant to her husband during this era. In *Deep River*, Mitsuko was an outgoing woman who never built a connection with her husband and felt she was incapable of loving (Endo, 1993, p. 67).

She felt the same dissatisfaction that Edna felt and wanted to have satisfaction in her life by going to India and discovering herself.

Unfortunately, both Edna and Mitsuko were forced to undergo changes that caused conflict to arise.

Completely changing a lifestyle to have fulfillment in a person’s life is not a small decision to be taken lightly because it creates tensions from outside forces. Kimberly Radek, a professor of Women in Literature at Illinois Valley Community College, explains how women during Edna’s time were restrained from participating in any sexual activity before marriage, but it was perfectly acceptable for a man to engage with servants (2008). This double standard is reflected clearly in Chopin’s novel when Edna developed feelings for Robert and began her affair with Alcée (1969, pp. 34 & 106), showing that she was an independent woman that did not want to be tied down to her past conservative lifestyle. Many people did not approve of Edna’s change of lifestyle, especially her husband, Mr. Pontellier. He took extreme measures to find the root of Edna’s problem; he even went to a physician and told him “She’s odd, she’s not like herself (Chopin, 1969, pp. 88)”. Being true to oneself can be uplifting, for instance, in Edna’s case, she had satisfaction in her life and understood her role in society, but it caused others hardship and worry over what would come next. As for Mitsuko, Anne E. Imamura, professor of sociology at Georgetown University, clarifies that Japanese women were expected to have children, fulfill household responsibilities, and marry only once in their life (1996, p.14). Based on these standards, Mitsuko was not the ideal Japanese woman during her time, since she had a failed marriage before her journey to India. Mitsuko’s transformation was subtler than Edna’s, considering that she never changed who she truly was but rather gained a new perspective on life. While in India, she encountered Otsu, an old college classmate, who gave her wisdom about “The Onion”, or God, and she took that information to the Ganges River to discover that it’s “a river of humanity” (Endo, 1993, p. 211). She was finally able to see she was human and was allowed to make mistakes within her life. She also gained a better grasp on why Otsu worshiped “The Onion”, meaning her journey to India was not a complete waste. Both characters went through major changes, either mental or physical, but in the end, they each had to face consequences for their actions.

Self-discovery allows people to realize who they are in the world, understand their role in society, and gain fulfillment in their life, but it could

also come with drastic consequences. Edna spent the whole novel becoming the person that she wanted to become by cutting ties with her family, giving in to her sexual urges, and being an independent woman. Despite this, the one thing she wanted in life was Robert, the man she loved. However, Robert realized he could never act on his love for Edna and left for Mexico with a note saying 'I love you' (Chopin, 1969, p. 132-136). Robert's actions caused Edna to spiral into depression, knowing that the one thing that she truly wanted, she could never have. Therefore, she decided to do one final act: swim into the ocean, which ultimately led to her demise (Chopin, 1969, p. 139). The journey she went on indicates that people can get fulfillment by thinking of themselves, but if they do not get the item they desire most, then it could lead to unprecedented consequences. Similarly, Mitsuko was faced with unforeseen repercussions after discovering why she went on her journey to India. After understanding why Otsu worshiped "The Onion", she found the blood-splattered body of Otsu on the ground in pain, and when Mitsuko took him to the hospital, he took a "turn for the worse" (Endo, 1993, p. 211-216). Mitsuko's journey allowed her to finally determine that her decisions caused her to think she could not love, but in return, it brought suffering to those she knew. When someone considers finding fulfillment in their life, they should carefully evaluate how it will affect themselves and others around them.

Edna's and Mitsuko's pilgrimages toward self-discovery serve to highlight how fulfillment can be achieved through the act of being one's true self, but no matter what, there will be repercussions that are out of one's control. Even today, people are faced with obstacles that they wish they could escape and they choose to change and discover what they want in life. Fulfillment is never-ending journey that everyone must go through and will continue to go through until their very last breath.

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