

# A Study of Sexism in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of An Hour'

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## Abstract

*This paper makes an attempt to explore sexism subtly knitted in Kate Chopin's The Story of An Hour by applying post-feminist perspectives which not only raises voice against women's subjugation by patriarchal ideology but also against women's patriarchal attitude towards women who often ventilate sexist language- the product of masculine tutelage-towards women. This paper is to find out why they use such opinionated language at women rather than practicing its fair use. Even their assisting utterance also becomes sympathetic and sexist. It is usually masked under the veil of support and sympathy. Chopin's assumption of the use of gendered language can be seen in Mrs. Josephine upon Mrs. Mallard of this story. This paper will mainly be based on textual reading, feminist interpretation, and library consultation. This paper will follow mainly eight chapters division: I. Topic II. Abstract III. Keywords IV. Introduction V. Theoretical Framework VI. Textual analysis VII. Conclusion VIII. References.*

**Key words:** Sexism, feminism, Patriarchy, verbal violence, discrimination, women relationship

## Introduction

This paper makes an effort to explore sexism subtly knitted in Kate Chopin's "The Story of An Hour" by applying post-feminist perspectives. Josephine takes every precaution before she breaks the news of the death of the husband of her sister, Mrs. Mallard. She thinks that she has no power to withstand the situation. The situation in the first sentence shows that she is helpless- a receiver of pain. Josephine has taken care on one hand that she is afflicted with heart trouble and she is a woman on the other. The news is parceled into "veiled hints" as if any big news shatters her life. The word "killed" is bracketed with double inverted commas suggests that Mr. Brently's death was not corroborated with a reliable source. The Richard family is hastened to break it to Mrs. Mallard. Richard had "only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram and hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in breaking the sad message." Mr. Richard should have inquired if there were other passengers with the same name. Such news gathered by a man and is passed on to a woman, who without any doubt of accuracy took it to be true, and was broken to another woman. His message, with what malevolent, is channeled to women through a woman. Since Mrs. Mallard was loyal to her husband, she weeps with "sudden, wild abandonment." She wants to unbosom her heavy heart in her personal space. She needs it so that no one would

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pester her. Even the way the “open window and roomy armchair” are described signifies her desire for freedom. Mrs. Mallard does not like simply to belong to just window and chair but it is an “open window and roomy armchair”. These two images stand for her outlet of repression in this time of year when it brings changes. The story has profusely used other concrete images that also aerate her aspiration for freedom. They are “open square,” “top of trees a quivering with the new spring life”, “the delicate breath of rain”, “a crying peddler, a distant song”, “countless sparrows twittering in the eaves” and “the patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds.” Mrs. Mallard associates herself with these sensuous images that are welcoming and waltzing; chanting and changing; and celebrating and singing in their free will. She slowly recourses to nature outside that is quite appealing to her to be free from all bondages she is subjected to. Mrs. Mallard sees a new world ahead out of the routinized world with no constraint upon her where she remodels herself a new woman with her own free will. Her sob “like a child to sleep continues to sob in its dream.” She is to begin a new life that is deeply rooted in her psyche.

The researcher has found that there is a gap between Josephine and Mrs. Mallard in terms of what the former says and thinks of the latter and how the latter reacts. After the close observation of their remarks through the lens of feministic approaches, the researcher claims that women also undervalue women for being women. They use patriarchal supposition upon women which permeates into their language when they figure out their own gender. The purpose of this paper is to find out reasons why women unconsciously undervalue women for being women and why they use biased language at women. Although women use such language towards their own gender in order to sympathize, but cannot help being sexist. Patriarchy has not only made males but also changed women biased towards women. Therefore it will only focus on the study of female characters, Josephine and Mrs. Mallard. There are many reasons why women adopt such an outlook towards women and use sexist language upon them. Josephine is sexist too.

The significance of the study is in the analysis of language women use upon women in a male-dominated society. This study is to discuss sexist language in use and its impact upon women. The specific objective is to find out the reason behind women’s use of biased language towards women. It enables us to know about the feminist perspective. Chopin’s assumption of the women’s prejudice upon women can be seen in her character, namely Josephine. This story anticipates bridging the breach between women. This proves that the practical feminist study of this story will be widely advantageous.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Feminists have observed the relationships between language and social order that put women at odds. Since patriarchy has, from time immemorial, been in practice, it has evolved many different courses of action to perpetuate its prevalence. The preliminary proposition is to put a check upon matriarchy and its enterprises by controlling resources to women either

in economic forces, languages, and cultures and social consciousness and expectations. Women have been rigorously imposed into patriarchal cultivation and therefore their approaches have become vigorously macho. The medium of their approaches, language, has no doubt become sexist. Women follow the thumbprint of culture and social script. Hamilton McCubbin and Barbara Blum Dahl say that the “script” comes from social expectations. (qtd. in Peter S. Gardner). Therefore, women’s attitude towards women is also not fair and therefore within questions. Within sisterhood, there are layers of discrimination. Though they use such language towards their own gender in order to sympathize, without any vested interest in underestimating them when it is expressed it loses its nonaligned stance and it functions sexualized way which has been neglected in many critical analyses of this story. Many critics concentrated on collecting sexist words used commonly by men and advocated to avoid them but none focused on the sexist function of language without being sexist in sight and sound.

Sexism in language exists when language devalues members of a certain gender (Wikipedia 2020) Sexism is made up with and propagated through language and is culturally practiced upon another gender. Sara Mills (2003 Jan.) defines sexism as it is a concept based on the idea that discrimination against women is systematic and that sexism is imposed on women by those in positions of power, is ingrained in social structures and works to the benefit of all men. It reflects the power relationship on its use. It is always imposed on culturally the less powerful ones which are mostly women. Kenneth K. Ruthven (1991) also gives similar views that sexist language, in many instances, promotes male superiority. Dale Spender (2020 Aug. 27) writes that sexism in language affects consciousness, perceptions of reality, encoding and transmitting cultural meanings, and socialization. Kennison and Trofe (2020) posit that language conveys consciousness and reflects culture with its values and therefore affects socialization. Likewise, Katherine Wyly Mille (2002) adds that this results in sexism as the male becomes the standard and those who are not male are relegated to the inferior. **According to** Vetterling and Braggin (1981), sexism is created and constituted to promote an unfair or irrelevant distinction between the sexes.

Sexism is the use of language which undervalues members of a certain sex. It is almost invariably imposed upon women, fostering gender inequality and maintaining patriarchal domination. It functions through ideological, communicative, behavioral and attitudinal practices which oppress women in term of their sex. It victimizes women by tarnishing their visibility and trivializing their audacity, and nourishes the notions of patriarchal supremacy. It is quite visible in this story. Many critics have given their views about women’s roles agreeing upon common trends and tendencies. Seyersted (1969) claims that it is a story of an extreme example of self-assertion (p. 54). Likewise, Emily Toth (1999) takes this story as one of Chopin’s “most radical attack on marriage, on one person’s dominance over another”(p. 34). This story exposes how the marriage system has imposed obligations upon women. Martha is of the opinion that the news of her husband’s death had released powerful unconscious desires for freedom that she had previously suppressed (p. 87). Likewise, Winn Harbour (1992) says that Chopin’s female characters have departed away from traditional roles by striving for independence and

individual freedom. Many critics have discussed the sexist language used by men upon women but the use of such gendered language by women upon women has not been discussed.

## **Overt sexism**

Benokraitis and Feagin have identified different manifestations of sexism in our current social-political climate: overt, covert, and subtle. They have defined them as blatant, unequal and harmful treatment of women that is readily apparent, visible, and observable, and can be easily documented. It is an open endorsement of the unequal treatment of women. It is intentional, visible, and unambiguous. We find the common use of generic pronouns like 'he' to refer to both genders, and the insulting words such as 'witch' or 'bag' used to describe women.

## **Covert Sexism**

Benokraitis and Feagin summarize covert sexism as it involves engaging in unequal and harmful treatment especially upon women in a hidden manner. For instance, individuals may say that they favor gender equality but engage in behaviors that intentionally undermine women's work that lead them to fail. Covert sexism is not using the obvious words as traditionally related to women but using such words which have after all negative association and connotation. When we say whoever has hair on the chest can dare it best, it does not obviously hurt women. We think that it is a target to those men and immature boys who do not have hair on their chest which is culturally a sign of 'bravery'. But if we think for a while this sentence completely excludes women from being brave forever as if being brave is only a patriarchal privilege.

## **Subtle Sexism**

Subtle sexism is known by openly unequal and harmful treatment upon women that goes unnoticed because it is perceived to be customary or normal behavior. Individuals who perpetrate such treatment may also be in favor of gender equality. These same individuals may not notice when they or others are treating individuals unfairly based on their gender or they may not realize that such behaviors contribute to unequal and harmful treatment upon women.

Subtle sexism is contextual and situational. Therefore, the addressor and addressee while communicating may not realize that patriarchy is spinning a web around them. If this is discharged upon women by women, it is no doubt, the woman upon whom it is used is its first victim, and the woman who discharges it is the second. Banaji and Greenwald (1994) observes that the individuals who use it are likely unaware that they are disparaging women. Subtle sexism is also consistent with research demonstrating that stereotyping can reflect automatic cognitive processes that may be unintentional or outside of the stereotyper's awareness (p.

56). It works so unconsciously that the user ultimately expresses them even when they are aware of overt and covert types of sexism. It is working subtly in this story.

## **Textual Analysis**

Josephine has taken great care to break the news of her husband's death. With a shock, she departs into her room. Josephine is afraid that she is going to put an end to herself. Though She defies her doubt with dignity and comes out with a glorious spirit, but she dies seeing her husband alive. Chopin's story contains thousand words within only Fifty-five sentences and she has given ample space for her breaking psychological barriers and refurbishing herself into a powerful woman upon which she has used forty-six sentences that describe her renovation out of patriarchal authority. It was her new awakening – an epiphany. She realizes her changed identity. She has settled her sadness and has perceived that "There was something coming to her." It was her courage and voice that utters "free, free, free." She can't help lock up it but let it float out spontaneously. This repetition itself suggests her context of confinement she breaks. She welcomes this new change spreading her arms. She could not feel it as long as she was married. In her trance-like moment, Mrs. Mallard unites her "body and soul." She utters these words signaling her salvation from the repression of her marital life. "Louise, open the door| I beg; open the door." It is quite evident in Josephine's plea to open the door. Her expectation is traditionally and culturally conditioned.

Definitely, Josephine's plea has intervened in Mrs. Mallard's personal space but Josephine can't have known that her plea had tormented the latter. Mrs. Mallard is found to have been hurt and her sister who is calling her out of the room is found not to have been so aware of being an authoritarian. She must have rather requested from the footing of her duty or responsibility which might have been deeply rooted in masculine discourse she is unknown of. McElhinny(1998) asserts that women, when entering primarily masculine environments, adopt the language styles prevalent in those institutions, and those styles themselves are both an indicator of masculinity (p. 322). The situation of difference between women starts when women fail to acknowledge that women can ever generate the courage to withstand any situation in their life. Most women have a low expectation of women's courage and achievement and higher expectation of their vulnerability. Even women underestimate their defensive prowess whereas males' probabilities are overestimated. "...you will make yourself ill" (p. 62). Josephine's appeal infers that she could only be intact in the presence of her husband as if she can't exist with spirit and vigor in his absence. Josephine has not believed that her sister could prevail upon the situation rather than the situation could prevail upon her. She wouldn't certainly have thought that level of vulnerability of suffering if the bereaved member had been Mr. Mallard in the same situation. Josephine is sympathetic at her sister which is her responsibility but at the same time, she is misjudging her at the rate of masculine expectation. In her condition, it is quite clear that it is difficult to be sympathetic without being sexist. Her doubt upon her of possible damage expressed in her request comes from the gap between socially engineered strong men and weak women. It has made her sexist. Women like her can also be blamed for the propagation of patriarchy programming. Her unconscious

mind is fizzed with the thumbprint of society which drives more than her conscious mind which might disdain such biasness. LeBihan (2011) mentions, "Language is certainly neutral with respect to gender. But this in itself masks an underlying androcentrism: a belief that man is at the center of things" (p. 32). Ever since patriarchy controlled the society, both men and women have made out heuristically male to be powerful and women weak. Such types of natural biasness must have developed in women towards women.

Some women also may find the sympathy upon them by their own gender more lethal than deceitful flattery by their husbands. This difference is due to their different situations including their class consciousness, situational constraints and cultural call. On women's part, it is their situation whereas on men's part it is their intention. Women are sexist even by the situation as often as they by their intention.

Being a woman doesn't mean that she stands for the freedom of women because they don't share the same 'fate or same level of subjugation. Butler (1992) says, "for surely all women are not mothers, some cannot be, some are too old or too young to be, some choose not to be, and for some who are mothers, that is not necessarily the rallying of their politicization in feminism." (p. 15). Women do not mean they prefer their collective freedom to male superiority upon them. Thinking also would play a major role in deciding gender. All women are not similar in their ways of thinking. Sometimes their gender is male being female and sometimes they are female being female and male being female and male being male. Many women don't want that the issue of women against women is public but they want to retain it indirectly. Butler (1992) has coined the term "factionalizations" (p. 15) to address the conflict and unstable female identity within the sisterhood. In some cases, women knowingly or unknowingly don't want their freedom and are rather content with male superiority. Knowingly because they want to suppress other women either in terms of class, race, or culture or to exploit them for their personal benefit or interest. Knowingly because they are no longer inferior as in the past and therefore venture to be 'sympathetic' just in the manner men sympathize with men and they no longer have to risk their freedom. Knowingly because women's freedom is achieved and therefore their vulnerability is just taken for granted in discourses. Therefore, they knowingly or unknowingly oppress women. The case is not finished here. The oppressed may knowingly or unknowingly be hurt or they may ignore. It shows that there are also layers of plight within the sisterhood.

Josephine suspects what formidable pursuit Mrs. Mallard undertakes so long as she closes herself in the room. "What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door." Certainly, Mrs. Mallard was mustering her new identity which was taking place as long as she locked herself in the room. It was the reason she gets frowned with her sister's repeated request to open the door. "Go away; I am not making myself ill." Mrs. Mallard finds her sister's sympathy much too pestering and bullying which she abhors. She reminds her to regard herself quite differently. It shows the difference between what Josephine was thinking of her sister and what the latter turned out to be. Mrs. Mallard has found Josephine more deterring

to her courage than assuring her fortitude. For Mrs. Mallard, her sister's urge has had an aura of vulnerability. It is the patriarchal cultivation of her consciousness actually circumscribes Josephine to be sexist. Therefore, Josephine was playing her traditional role following the script of masculine culture whereas Mrs. Mallard was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window for her new beginning.

## Conclusion

The Story of An Hour chronicles age-long patriarchal injustice upon women. As a woman, Josephine comes to use patriarchal nuance while sympathizing with her sister, Mrs. Mallard. It was not authentic news of the railroad disaster where Mr. Mallard is said to have been killed but it was just a coincidence that his name was matched to the one on the list. From the beginning of the story, Mrs. Mallard has been judged as very frail and sickly by her sister and brother-in-law, Josephine and Mr. Richards respectively. It is because of her heart trouble and gender. They think that such news can have an adverse impact upon her physically and mentally and she will have to lead her lonely existence in suffering. Quite contrarily, she warms up psychologically not only to cope with the situation but also for her new life on her own. Mrs. Mallard's new beginning is not acknowledged by Josephine since she was making out her to be very powerless who could only be capable enough to make her ill rather than strong to prevail upon the situation. Her reading of Mrs. Mallard seems conventional and her language is dripping with masculine discipline. It is because of her culture and consciousness swayed by patriarchal cultivation, very subtly her language turns out to be sexist. Josephine does not seem to have been aware of being sexist while sympathizing with her own sister, Mrs. Mallard. If she had avoided sexism and had taken another course of action, Mrs. Mallard's life could have sustained quite differently. Sexism is as contemptible as verbal violence which is better to be replaced with gender-neutral language.

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