

Virtue and Self-assertion in Kate Chopin's *At Fault* (1890)

Esraa Sahah Muhammad

Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to define the concepts of virtue and self-assertion and debate them in Kate Chopin's *At Fault*. Chopin makes a reconciliation between the two concepts that socially challenged one another at the turn of the nineteenth century. The paper proves how a Victorian woman can be both self-asserted and virtuous. The paper highlights the struggle between love and traditional ethics. It presents *At Fault* as a story of possibilities of woman's freedom, self-assertion, and equality. The heroin is a self-asserted woman who overcontrols everyone around her. The novel spotlights how Chopin perceives virtue and self-assertion, and how she considers the code of righteousness. It finally illustrates how Chopin criticizes religious misconceptions, society, and the moral reformers who decide for a person. The paper discusses moral and ethical issues in the Victorian era. It also asserts the importance of love in a new-woman's life. It does not only discuss the issues of marriage and divorce, but it also focuses on the cultural experiences of the incompatible marriages and their destructive consequences for women. Chopin through *At Fault* asserts the importance of work for women and how it helps them discover their abilities and attain their financial independence that will eventually lead to a fulfilled self. The study achieves its purpose through using a historical, a feminist, and a psychological approach.*

Key Words

Virtue

Self-assertion

Patriarchy

The New Woman

المخلص العربي

الغرض من هذا البحث هو تحديد مفهومي الفضيلة وتأكيد الذات ومناقشتهما في رواية كيت شوبان "علي خطأ". تقوم شوبان بالتوفيق بين المفهومين اللذين تحديا بعضهما البعض اجتماعيا في مطلع القرن التاسع عشر. كما تثبت الورقة البحثية كيف يمكن للمرأة الفيكتورية أن تكون مؤكدة لذاتها وفاضلة معا. يسلط البحث الضوء على الصراع بين الحب والأخلاق بمفهومها التقليدي. يقدم البحث رواية "علي خطأ" كقصة تدور حول إمكانية حصول المرأة علي حريتها ، وتأكيد ذاتها ، وتحقيقها للمساواة. فالبطلة امرأة مؤكدة لذاتها مسيطرة على كل من حولها. يسلط البحث الضوء على طريقة إدراك شوبان لمفهومي الفضيلة وتأكيد الذات ، ونظرتها إلى قانون الصواب. و أخيرًا يوضح البحث كيف تنتقد شوبان المفاهيم الدينية الخاطئة والمجتمع والمصلحين الأخلاقيين. تناقش الورقة البحثية أيضا القضايا الأخلاقية والمعنوية في العصر الفيكتوري. كما تؤكد على أهمية الحب في حياة المرأة الجديدة. فالبحث لا يناقش قضايا الزواج والطلاق فحسب ، بل يركز أيضًا على التجارب الثقافية للزيجات غير المتوافقة وعواقبها المدمرة للمرأة. تؤكد شوبان عبر روايتها "علي خطأ" أهمية العمل بالنسبة للمرأة وكيف يساعدها على اكتشاف قدراتها وتحقيق استقلالها المادي الذي سيؤدي في النهاية إلى تحقيق ذاتها. تحقق الدراسة هدفها من خلال مقارنة تاريخية ونسوية ونفسية.

Throughout history women were oppressed in societies dominated by patriarchal cultures. Men exerted their utmost efforts to enslave women's minds. Women were brought up believing that they are less than men in all their capacities. Hence, should be controlled by men for their own good. Stereotypes and false assumptions of women led to think of them as less humans thus destroyed a female sense of the self. As Mary Wollstonecraft illustrates in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, "men have increased that inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures" (26). Thus, for centuries, patriarchy was the most powerful institution which allows men to control women. This unjust system gives the patriarch the full right to be superior to women and anyone considered weak.

Patriarchy is used by Bhasin "to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (*What Is Patriarchy*, 3). Patriarchy is an unjust social system that makes women systematically subordinated and oppressed in almost every sphere of life. Mary Wollstonecraft assumes that the prevailing opinion that woman is created for man has probably started since Adam and Eve as, in religion "Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam's ribs" and through this religious fact, "man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to show that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke; because she as well as the brute creation, was created to do his pleasure" (*Vindication*, 18-19). Thus, women were dominated and abused by men for centuries.

Bias against women prevailed since the Greek time. The Greek philosophers formed people's beliefs on the concept of virtue and the proper distribution of roles in society. Woman's role and worth in society is to take care of the household. In his *Politics*, he illustrates that "there should be political rule of the husband over the wife" (*Men and Women*, 115). A woman's virtue lies in obeying her husband's commands and plans. Aristotle explains that "the virtues, too, must be something good; for it is by possessing these that we are in a good condition, and they tend to produce good works and good actions" (25). These actions are followed by a feeling of happiness and pleasure. Virtuous actions, he believes, can make human beings' lives ordered, good and happy.

Historically, virtue was regarded as coordination between the laws and customs of a given community. However, virtue as argued by Plato is knowledge. It is pleasure as well as a balance of the soul. In *Protagoras*

Plato argues that virtue is "knowledge", and knowledge is an awareness of how to attain pleasurable ends. "Such knowledge is not merely true; it is self-certifying, indubitable, a rock-solid foundation on which to build scientific understanding" (*Barry Allen*, 1). Knowledge or virtue according to Plato is not a piece of information or a body of ideas that can be communicated simply; rather, it is an inward process. Virtue is then the ability to perceive what will bring most pleasure. So, what separates the virtuous person from the un-virtuous person is not a desire for what is good, but rather the perception of what the good really is. (*Protagoras*, 354b).

From a traditional point of view, virtue is then, "an enduring trait that is ordered toward the good by practical reason, where "the good" should be understood in general terms as the conception of human flourishing" (*Virtue and Oppression*, 25). Virtue is not seen as a matter of an outward behavior, but an inward process that involves a special kind of knowledge. It is knowledge of the soul or the self, knowledge of one's reality, knowledge of one's needs, and knowledge of how to satisfy those needs in accordance with reason. T. H. Irwin defines traditional virtue as "a capacity to provide and protect 'goods' and a capacity for conferring many and great benefits, and all sorts of benefits on all occasions" (*Essays on Virtue*, 44).

Virtue of women throughout history are misused and only service patriarchal purposes. Virtue becomes a mean to oppress women and control them. They were deprived of practicing equal human rights or equal moral worth with men. For example, Aristotle's believes that women were not equal to men in terms of virtue. Men's virtue was favored over women's virtue. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, he discusses the nobility of a quality or an action saying, "Again, one quality or action is nobler than another if it is that of a naturally finer being: thus a man's will be nobler than a woman's" (40). He argues that the virtue of the rational is to rule while the irrational is to be ruled. The man is the rational while the woman, a child-like, is the irrational. The virtue of a man, for example, lies in giving orders while that of a woman lies in obeying. As women are naturally inferior, they are qualified for lesser virtues and lesser roles. Their roles are restricted to their families. Thus, Aristotle's views hold subordination of women.

Chastity, obedience, and self-denial were the most required virtues. Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that "Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this ground, consistently recommended as the

cardinal virtues of the sex” (*Vindication*, 25). The imposed morality and the oppressive uses of virtue subordinated and victimized women. A wife had to be submissive to her husband, otherwise she faces severe social censure and even deprivation of social life for being selfish. Chastity, however, seemed to limit women's choices as well as their lives. Blackwell believes that social life was gendered, political life was gendered, “space and time too were gendered” (*Victorian Literature*, 9). All these factors resulted in women’s poor sense of the self.

Modern Philosophers and theorists hold bias against women. Nancy Snow in *Virtue and the Oppression of Women* illustrates that even in modern periods, virtue of a woman has also been expressed in terms of a deficiency. Women were believed to be incapable of reasoning or of acting on principles as they are emotional and intuitive. Philosophers like David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Kant believed that men and women have different virtues or the same virtues but with different degrees and for different reasons. The virtue of chastity, for example, is not applied equally to men and women. It has many restrictions as the moral obligation prevents women from enjoying the same sexual liberty as men. Women should be more chaste, and this puts them under social pressure. (9-12). Thus, the moral theories of virtue seem quite one-sided and incomplete. Grimshaw in *The Idea of a Female Ethic* suggests that “virtue is in some way gendered, that the standards and criteria of morality are different for women and men” (82-83).

Rousseau’s views on virtue of women is gendered and oppressive. In *Emile*, he argues that those characteristics which would be faults in men are virtues in women” (83). He believes that a woman’s virtue lies in being obedient and gentle. It is her duty to make man pleased and happy. She should be taught those principles while she is young. Rousseau suggests that women’s virtue is based on their dependence and subordination within marriage “for a woman to be independent, according to Rousseau, or for her to pursue goals whose aim was not the welfare of her family, was for her to lose those qualities which would make her estimable and desirable” (*Female Ethic*, 84). Thus, being independent makes a woman undesirable, and being a true selfless woman is the main criteria of femininity and virtue.

From a feminist perspective, virtue of men and women are expected to be the same and “unless virtue be nursed by liberty, it will never attain due strength” and she extends this notion to mankind insisting that morals must follow fixed principles and that “the being cannot be termed rational

or virtuous, who obeys any authority but that of reason” (165). Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* criticizes Rousseau's notion of virtue as gendered. She calls for equality because she believes that “liberty is the mother of virtue” (28). Thus, virtue should be the same for a woman as for a man. She assumes that “women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men” (148). Thus, Wollstonecraft assures that women are not inferior to men and that their virtue is not less than that of men.

Analyzing the concept of virtue from the previous points of view, the researcher assumes that the patriarchal view of virtue of a woman has an oppressive connotation. Women had a responsibility to be virtuous. Chastity, obedience, gentleness, docility, spaniel-like affection and self-denial were the most required virtues. It is a woman's duty to make man pleased. Women's virtue is based on their dependency and subordination within marriage. Thus, being independent makes a woman undesirable, and being a selfless woman is the main criteria of femininity and virtue. A virtuous woman in the Victorian age is selfless, passive, and mother-woman by nature. Traditional moral philosophers believed that women were not equal to men in terms of virtue.

A female sense of the self was difficult to develop in a patriarchal atmosphere. As a result, thinkers of the Victorian age started to state their case through their literary works. They presented new rebellious women who struggle to attain their goals in this patriarchal society that limit women's lives. The new woman concept was a social, a cultural and a literary phenomenon through which literature was used as a political mean to affect social change. “The New Woman arrived in the late nineteenth century, primary in fiction but also in real-life society, and threatened the Victorians' traditional idea of female gender roles” (*Unconventional Woman*, 55). It was the spark that later ignited feminist activism. In fiction, the new woman concept is presented through novels written by women for discussing the needs of women. It discussed gender relationships, sex, women's independence, women's autonomy as well as women's position in society and within marriage. All these ideas were rejected by the Victorian society and formed a threat to the patriarchal traditions.

Women's selfhoods have systematically been subordinated and belittled. Woman was never the self. She was always the 'other' as Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, in which she studied women across the

centuries. While man was the Subject, the Absolute; woman was the non-subject, the non-person. In turn, the feminist reconceptualization of the female self has challenged the stereotyped role of women in society and the standard philosophical models with their biases. De Beauvoir criticized the traditional masculine view of the self. She objects to the view that “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (26). These false conceptions of woman made it difficult for a woman to believe in herself or her abilities.

Woman's self-assertion is the act of expressing or defending her rights, claims, and opinions in a confident and sometimes a forceful way. It is also the act of asserting her superiority over others. In a Western gendered system, any self-confident or self-assertive woman was regarded as being out of the predominant gender norms. Thus, the sense of the female self was so difficult to develop. The female self was imposed on women by society, and it was constrained by the cultural definitions of gender. Within this context, Kate Chopin in *At Fault* reexamines virtue along with self-assertion to negotiate the process of exercising self-assertion in a patriarchal society at the turn of the Nineteenth century, in which, self-assertion challenged virtue socially.

The notion of self has always been vital in the moral life and in ethical speculation. Aristotle treated the concept of the ‘self’ throughout his writings as a virtue. He discusses self-sufficiency ‘*autarkeia*’ by which he means “the relative freedom from reliance on other human beings above all, a freedom enjoyed by the wise when engaging in their characteristic activity as compared with the activities of the just, the moderate, and the courageous” (*Ethics*, 297). He discusses self-restraint ‘*enkrateia*’ or inner strength as a virtue which refers to “the capacity, separate from the moral virtues, to withstand the attractive pull of especially those bodily pleasures that admit of excess and that one regards as bad” (314). He emphasized the value of self-love through discussing self-renouncing friendship.

The concepts of virtue and woman's self-assertion were always interrelated. Virtue, according to the Greek philosophy includes inner strength, strength of character, self-sufficiency, courage, ambition, greatness of soul as well as knowledge of the self. Virtue as an inward process involves a special kind of knowledge. It is knowledge of the soul or the self, knowledge of how to satisfy one’s needs in accordance with reason. All these qualities spotlight self-realization and self-assertion.

Hence, self-assertion itself is nothing but a virtue, but women were deprived of practicing all these virtues as virtues of men and women differ. So, virtue and self-assertion are not contradictory concepts in themselves. On the contrary, self-assertion lies at the very core of the concept of virtue for self-assertion demands all the previous qualities. Hence, self-assertion does not contradict virtue on the moral level, but it contradicts virtue on the social level. This idea is what Chopin tries to prove through *At Fault*.

Kate Chopin is a libertarian author whose thoughts and perceptions were ahead of its era. She realized the importance of the body and the physical relationships to the process of self-realization. Thus, she was considered by her contemporaries as committing crimes against the Victorian society. The struggle for independence and self-fulfillment is a major element in Chopin's works. She addresses the theme of self-definition all the way through her career. *At Fault* is one of Kate Chopin's first writings. It is written between 5 July 1889 and 20 April 1890. Despite the popularity of *At Fault*, it attained only local attention at Chopin's time.

Like Thérèse, the heroine of the novel, Chopin experienced a decision between love and traditional values in her relationship with a man who was a southern Catholic called Sampite. Because of his religion, he could not divorce his wife and even if he could get divorce "in Louisiana when a couple did divorce, civil law prohibited either partner from marrying a lover." (*Bloom's Critical View*, 191). As a result, Chopin questions religion, the old traditions, and the code of righteousness that hindered her as well as her female protagonist from happiness. Per Seyersted in *A Critical Biography* argues that the novel expresses Chopin's "irritation with moral reformers" (91). In other words, Chopin criticizes the moral reformers through Thérèse's character and highlights some misunderstandings.

At Fault is set in the late nineteenth century in Louisiana and St. Louis. The heroin adheres to values and the traditional view of virtue which hinders her own happiness. The researcher adopts Fluck's belief that Chopin through the novel "illustrates in an interesting way a negotiation between dominant cultural values and genre patterns, on the one hand, and a wish for individual self-assertion on the other, which Chopin pursued throughout her literary career" (*Usefulness of Louisiana*, 248). In a patriarchal society, it was unusual for a woman who is married to a rich landowner to do anything outside her house. When a husband dies, more than often a woman would leave the responsibilities to

someone else who makes a living for her, but Mrs. Lafirme decides to take care of her properties and quickly learns to manage the plantation and assert herself as a successful business woman.

At Fault is rich in its plot, characters, and relations. The plot consists of a two-part structure that reflects the movement of the plot, the development of the theme, and the development of characters. The first one revolves around Thérèse Lafirme, a young widow, who has inherited a plantation stretched along the Cane River and becomes the Mistress of Place-du-Bois. Neighbors around her thought that discipline and authority are collapsed by the death of Mr. Lafirm. The widowed woman unexpectedly surprises her society by successfully managing the plantation all by herself. She decides to assert herself and her new powers by becoming as firm as her dead husband. Then, she sells the wood rights to David Hosmer, an outsider from St Louis. Later, they fall in love; but she refuses to marry him for her false idealism.

The second structure of the plot presents the unhappy marriage of Hosmer and his unvirtuous wife Fanny Larimore who suffers due to losing her child. Fanny is a victim of Thérèse false idealism. She is a selfless woman. When Hosmer asks to remarry her, she accepts and sacrifices living in the city although she feels unsure about her future with him. The narrator mentions that “Fanny Larimore's strength of determination was not one to hold against Hosmer's will set to a purpose” (*At Fault*, 37). She adapts slowly to her new life in the countryside as Thérèse offers her help. Then, Hosmer's marriage goes from bad to worse as his wife resumes drinking alcohol; and later she discovers his deep love for Thérèse.

Mrs. Lafirm has her own values and moral judgments that make her control not only everyone around her but also her own desires. She sacrifices her love to Hosmer for the sake of her moral principles. She convinces him that “love isn't everything in life; there is something higher” (28). She even convinces Hosmer to marry his ex-wife once again as it is the right deed according to her morality. She eagerly says, “I would have you do what is right” (28). The right course of actions according to Thérèse “required certain conduct from others, but she was willing to further its accomplishment by personal efforts, even sacrifices that could leave no doubt of the pure unselfishness of her motive” (14). Thus, Thérèse sacrifices and struggles to maintain virtue and social order in a time of change.

Chopin, through *At Fault* presents Thérèse, a virtuous woman who develops a standard of moral behavior that helps her adhere to virtue. Thérèse's virtuous world is seen by Bloom as "built on firm and high morals, on individual sacrifice for the common good, the sacredness of a trust" (*Bloom's Critical Views*, 37). She has an individual moral judgment that allows her to gain confidence of her community and is thus known as the advisor of her acquaintances. She draws heavily upon virtue to restore order to her life after her husband's death. She "acts as martyr and moral guardian to David and Fanny. Thérèse thus appears to be morally and spiritually superior, sexually pure, the womanly ideal" (37). She lives by her moral principles and the old traditions that are assumed to be the only right way to virtue.

Thérèse rejects Hosmer's love due to her social conceptions not her religious beliefs as she claims, "religion doesn't influence my reason in this" (*At Fault*, 25). Thérèse is a Roman Catholic but "she is Catholic more in tradition than in conviction" (*Kate Chopin in Context*, 21). She rejects love because of the stigma attached to divorce. During this period, divorce was something not widely practiced. So, when a single man proposes for marriage, the general impression is that he is a widow man not a divorced one. When she accidentally knows that Hosmer was married, she asks Melicent, his sister, "how long has his wife been dead?" (*At Fault*, 22). Being a widow man is considered a morally acceptable way for starting a new marriage, but a divorced man is not, even if the two partners agree to separate.

Divorce according to society, as Fluck illustrates, was an easy way out of a commitment. It was a selfish way to get rid of one's moral and social responsibilities instead of bearing them manfully. Thérèse's blame thus reminds Hosmer of his responsibility and frees Thérèse from all suspicions of selfishness which may be created by her own love to Hosmer. (*Usefulness of Louisiana*, 252). She gives Hosmer a chance to carry responsibility, retrieve his virtue and correct his faults through self-sacrifice for the sake of the social good which is a higher moral principle. Thus, Thérèse's rejection to Hosmer's affection is not a self-asserting behavior, but it is out of her virtue and her moral responsibility to help others. Hosmer "felt her to be a woman with moral perceptions keener than his own and his love" and this feeling "moved him now to a blind submission". (*At Fault*, 28)

Thérèse is an independent woman who takes real actions in facing problems. Her first self-asserting behavior appears in the very beginning

of the novel. When her husband dies, her servant warns her against things that are going wrong in the plantation. She “felt at once the weight and sacredness of a trust, whose acceptance brought consolation and awakened unsuspected powers of doing” (1). She takes the role of a man as a kind of a duty and a moral responsibility. Thus, she becomes firm. She is a woman who can arrange her life and control her emotions. She decides to put her sorrows aside and manage the plantation all by herself. She discovers her powers and becomes a successful businesswoman who succeeds in keeping her plantation in a good working order. She also guarantees financial prosperity by renting the land to the sawmill project. Thus, she realizes her own capabilities.

The new woman qualifications and the self-asserted behavior appears from the beginning of the novel. She is the master of her own land and her own self. Her self-asserting behavior appears through two things: her insistent opinions as well as her overcontrolling behavior by making others succumb to her will. Grégoire, her nephew, believes that “they ’aint no betta woman in the worl’ then Aunt Thérèse w’en you do like she wants” (11). She has a strong will and a great influence upon others to the extent that “there was hardly a soul at Place- du- Bois who had not felt the force of her will and yielded to its gentle influence” (14). She lives by her own rules which no one can violate. For, example “there was no one on the plantation who would have felt at liberty to enter Thérèse bedroom without permission” (20). She always leads her conversations with David. The narrator believes her to be “completely mistress of herself, and during remainder of the ride she talked incessantly, giving him no chance for more than the briefest answers” (18).

Thérèse has a determination to do right actions that stems from her traditional virtuous beliefs. From the traditional view, virtuous people are expected “to set aside their own happiness, and to follow the virtuous course of action even at severe cost to themselves” (*Virtue Ethics*, 33). Virtue, then, is superior to one’s own happiness. Like the traditional view of virtue illustrates, right action will bring happiness and pleasure. Thus, she wants to share with others the pleasures of leading a virtuous life. She wants others to see from her own lens as she takes the right actions, and her motives as the third person omniscient narrator describes are free out of any selfishness. When she knows that Hosmer wants to marry her while he is divorced, she tells him “there is an unsuspected selfishness in your inclinations that works harm to yourself and to those around you. I want you to know, the good things of life that cheer and warm, that are always at hand” (*At Fault*, 6).

Thérèse's virtuous behavior appears crystal clear when she knows that Hosmer is a divorced man. She does not think of her own happiness, but as social former who is against individualism, she always thinks of others. The traditional view of virtue demands that "the virtuous person should choose virtue and virtuous action for its own sake, and not simply for its consequences" (*Virtue Ethics*, 34). The virtuous person should do the proper action for it is the right one and for it benefits other people. Thus, she does not appreciate Hosmer's decision of separating from his ex-wife. Instead, she oppresses him by insisting on remarrying Fanny, believing that it is the best for all of them and it is the only moral course.

Chopin criticizes the social traditions represented in Thérèse's virtue and moral code. Thérèse's insistence on remarrying Hosmer to his ex-wife also presents how society obliges married couples to stay together, no matter the circumstances or the consequences are. And when someone chooses to get out of a destructive marriage, one is criticized instead of being understood because society considers marriage as a sacred relationship and divorce as a taboo. Like everyone else, Hosmer surrenders to her moral standards and complies with her wishes, returning to St Louis to marry his ex-wife as he considers Thérèse a woman with moral perceptions.

Through the portrayal of Thérèse, Chopin attacks irresponsible men as well as selfless women. Thérèse considers Hosmer a coward to leave his partner in a serious time instead of supporting her. Thérèse attacks him saying, "You married a woman of weak character. You furnished her with every means to increase that weakness, and shut her out absolutely from your life and yourself from hers. You left her then as practically without moral support as you have certainly done now, in deserting her. It was the act of a coward" (*At Fault*, 27-28). She accuses Hosmer of being a cruel egotist. Thus, he must face the consequences of his own actions. Chopin through Thérèse stresses the idea that selfless women are victims of selfish men who intentionally weaken women to control them.

Chopin highlights the struggle between love and traditional virtue. Thérèse prefers the interest of society to the interest of the individual. She sacrifices love for a virtuous principle. Thus, Mrs. Lafirme's virtue and moral code prevent her from happiness. This great sacrifice makes her suffer an inner struggle. As a virtuous woman, she cannot wrong another woman; and she knows that she will be criticized by her community if she accepts to marry a divorced man. Thérèse starts to question her actions in encouraging Hosmer to remarry Fanny, especially after Fanny relapses

into alcoholism. She starts to regret and reconsider her own beliefs. She keeps thinking “was I right? Was I right?” (96). She inquires “Were Fanny, and her own prejudices, worth the sacrifice which she and Hosmer had made” (66). She realizes that her morality costs Hosmer his happiness, but as a virtuous woman, she supports them morally so that they could bear their deformed relationship.

By the death of Fanny, Jocint and others, Thérèse struggles a self-doubt and a doubt of righteousness. She feels responsible for all the mess happened. She learns that the incompatible marriage she forced on Hosmer and the unsuitable work forced on Jocint led to miserable lives for all of them. She realizes that her morality to save Fanny has only killed her and that assuming the role of the reformer is her fault. She admits, “I have seen myself at fault in following what seemed the only right. I feel as if there were no way to turn for the truth. Old supports appear to be giving way beneath me. They were so secure before” (*At Fault*, 126). Thérèse awakes and discovers that she was at fault for the advices she had given to others which were negatively life changing. Bloom emphasizes that “her self-sacrifice is shown to be futile and selfish; her morals become less self-glorifying” (*Bloom’s Critical views*, 41). She realizes that sacrificing one’s life for assumed morality would destroy her life and others’ lives as well.

Throughout the novel, Thérèse’s character undergoes moral, spiritual, and social change, and so is her way of thinking. She adopts new perspectives that make her less stick to virtue and social convictions; and help her attain a more asserted self. She wears new glasses and adopts a new world view. Love changes Thérèse as “it was her first sign of weakness” (*At Fault*, 28). It helped her discover that by following blind virtue and through her eagerness to do right, she was at fault. She emphasizes this idea through confessing to Hosmer that her husband used to tell her “in my eagerness for the rest of mankind to do right, I was often in danger of losing sight of such necessity of myself” (5). She wants others to do right, but she loses sight of what the right really is.

Chopin believes in the power of love during the process of self-realization and how it empowers women with the will to change their old ways of living. Love leads women to self-realization rather than self-denial. Love helped Thérèse and Hosmer reach their full abilities as “it was moving them to the fullness of their own capabilities (127). By the end of the novel, Thérèse’s becomes fully aware of the constant changes taking place inside her. She identifies her desires and confesses her faults.

After her returning to Place-du-Bois, she was “sensualised and with a new awareness of her body in terms of clothes, other possessions and reading matter” (*Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, 157). She now dresses in a Parisian clothing style. She turned to be a different person from the inside and from the outside.

On the contrary, Fanny is one of the first female alcoholics in American fiction. She is stereotyped by critics as a fallen woman and met criticism from reviewers for not being a true woman. Bloom defends her saying, “she is a woman fallen into alienation, a true woman in that she is powerless and self-less” (*Bloom's Critical Views*, 39). Like most women of her time, she marries a man whom she knows little about. His absence makes the couple drift away from each other. Fanny becomes alienated from her husband despite living in the same house. Her sense of the self only existed with her social circle until she gives birth to a child. Fanny discovers a new sense of the self in motherhood. Being a mother changed her for a while. Unfortunately, her child dies at the age of three years. She feels herself again with no value and surrenders to alcohol. Addicting alcohol damages her reputation and her marital relationship. Since then, Fanny suffers more in her marriage.

Hosmer destroys Fanny's sense of the self by divorcing her. Instead of supporting her at that hard time, he gets rid of her easily and lets her down. This divorce deforms her psychologically. The irony is that she agrees to marry him again when he apologizes and regrets, just like a bird which turns back to its cage. The narrator illustrates this irony saying that “the elation which she had felt over her marriage with Hosmer ten years before, had soon died away, together with her weak love for him, when she began to dread him and defy him. But now that he said he was ready to take care of her and be good to her, she felt great comfort in her knowledge of his honesty” (37). She knows well that a second marriage is useless and pointless, but she surrenders to his will as she does not have one. She is a passive woman who cannot decide for herself.

Fanny is typically a true woman in the sense that she has no free will and no sense of the self. She sacrifices her life in the city hoping that a second marriage might relieve her of all her sorrows and loneliness. It is implied in the novel that perhaps Fanny did not want to get back with Hosmer, but she may have felt social pressure into doing so as it was uncommon and hard for a woman to get divorced and to live all alone. Fanny suffers a moral blindness. Mary Papke notes that the coming of night suggests not only the mental darkness of Fanny; but it also

foreshadows Fanny's dramatic end as well as the moral and spiritual blindness (*Bloom's Critical Views*, 39). Morally blind, she asks Gregoire to attend a card or a dance party to enjoy herself. She steals a flask of whiskey from old Morico and leads him to blame his son Joçint.

Fanny is a victim of Thérèse's traditional virtue and hypocritical values. "Fanny is neither evil nor morally bankrupt but simply a victim of circumstance: she has married the wrong man and is born to live in the city, not the country" (*Companion to Chopin*, 37). Fanny was quite satisfied with her life, living in the city, spending money, and having friends. She lacks an identity and a knowledge of what she really wants. She can easily be controlled and affected by others. Fanny, through Thérèse's insistence, finds an illusionary chance to start a virtuous life with a new sense of the self. She decides to quit alcohol and to start a new life. Fanny starts again to feel like a valuable person who worth living a happy life. Now, everybody around her in Place-de-Bois appreciates her, which is a new feeling, for Fanny has "always felt herself of little consequence" (*At Fault*, 57). However, this sense of the self will be destroyed soon when she realizes that David and Thérèse deceive her. This knowledge distorted her soul once again. She loses herself in her constant feeling of otherness wishing alcohol would heal her pain.

By the time, Fanny starts to develop a sense of the self and to have a voice of her own. When she felt betrayed, she felt jealous and she could not hold those negative feelings. She changes her attitude towards Thérèse with a more aggressive one. Then, she summons her courage and confronts David with her knowledge of his love for Thérèse. She shouts at him saying "I won't shut up", then she cried excitedly back at him; "And what's more I won't stay here and have you making love under my very eyes to a woman that's no better than she ought to be" (115). He threatens to kill her, however, "The strongest resultant emotion was one of self-satisfaction at having spoken out her mind" (115). She is satisfied that she could relieve her pain and have a voice of her own, but she is more satisfied that she could finally say no to David. She refuses to return home with him, saying no one more time, "I guess you're dreaming, or something, David. You go on home if you want, nobody asked you to come after me anyway, I'm able to take care of myself, I guess" (119). When Fanny starts to become a new self-asserted woman; she loses her life.

Chopin criticizes the modern urban life and portrays women of the city like Fanny and her friends as selfless, uneducated females, living a

blank and absurd life. These modern women differ from the nineteenth century mother-women. They were “ladies of elegant leisure, the conditions of whose lives, and the amiability of whose husbands, had enabled them to develop into finished and professional time-killers” (39). Their children do not occupy their attention and their time anymore. These representative characters have a significant effect on the theme of the novel. They share the feelings of selflessness, loneliness, and uselessness. They are time killers, doing nothing but hanging around and attending *matinées*. They spend money, time and effort on their appearances and their modern furniture. These modern women lack morals and are described by Hosmer as morally corrupted friends. One of them is portrayed as an ignorant woman who does not appreciate the value of books. The other woman cheats on her husband.

Chopin highlights the idea that a woman in her way to discover her selfhood needs to satisfy her sexual urges. Mrs. Dawson needs physical, spiritual, and emotional connection. She needs a partner to enjoy the pleasures of life with, not just a man who pays her bills. Chopin presents the Dawson's marriage as another unsuccessful marriage. Mrs. Dawson is a modern woman who is used to leaving alone as her husband works as a travelling salesman. He comes home “once in two weeks_ sometimes seldomer_ never oftener” (40). She does nothing during his absence but entertaining herself till his return. So, she always keeps the company of others. One day, her husband discovers her unfaithfulness, and this leads him to shoot Bert Rodney. The irony is that she cheats on her husband although she loves him. The couple was “on the most amiable of terms together” (56). Thus, her unfaithfulness is due to his constant absence. So, being unvirtuous results from her desire to assert herself as a woman with sexual needs and a free will.

Chopin again asserts the importance of love in a new-woman's life through Melicent. She believes in the rights of women to love and to be loved. Melicent is an attractive woman who likes to be flirted and who has a strong tendency towards self-assertion. Chopin always stresses the importance of the body and the physical relationships to the process of self-realization. Melicent's physical relationships will help her during the process of self-definition. She desperately needs love, but she cannot find the right person who fully satisfies her emotional and spiritual needs. Fanny illustrated this through referring to the various people Melicent has been engaged to and she adds that “if she likes a person she goes on like a lunatic over them as long as it lasts; then good-bye John! She'll through them aside as she would an old dress” (83). So, when a man gets close to

her, she spends time with him to satisfy her womanly desires. Then, she leaves him to search for love elsewhere.

Melicent is a stubborn new woman who does not obey orders blindly even of her own brother. She likes to know why she should do things. The narrator illustrates that “it was not her fashion to obey at word of command” (9). She is independent in the sense that she can live alone without needing anybody to take care of her. Her brother believes that she can look after herself as she is a wise girl. Her free soul makes her always happy to experience new things and the idea of doing something new was more important to her than the dangers she may encounter. She tells Thérèse that her brother positively affected her character so that she is “perfectly independent” (22). Melicent continues her life making trips and searching for excitement which, in fact, is a metaphor for searching for herself and her identity.

Chopin illustrates the patriarchal view of women and their role in society through the character of Mr. Worthington. It is a common motif in Chopin’s literary works to present the way in which women are seen by men. Mr. Worthington believes that woman’s role is limited to giving birth as they are “propagators of the species”. The irony is that he has only one daughter. Women, as he thinks, have “a weak and inadequate mentality”, and cannot adapt to the various conditions of life (40). Thus, it is men’s duty to endure, with patience, women without trying to change them. Chopin proves wrong this patriarchal view of women through Thérèse’s success in adapting to the various conditions she experiences in the novel. While Women’s outer appearance is often stylish and praised, the men in their lives see them having weak mentalities. Mr. Worthington sends his daughter to his aunt, a nun, to educate and raise their child. In a way or another, he does not trust his wife to be in charge of their own daughter’s upbringing. His view of women negatively affects his wife. He destroys her sense of the self by not trusting or respecting her.

Chopin highlights the idea that even a man can be obliged by society to accept things against his will. She proves that society defines even the virtue of a man. David comes from a different country with a different culture that allows him to divorce which is an unethical behavior according to Thérèse’s moral code. Then, he becomes a more virtuous man, from the viewpoint of society, who sacrifices his love for the moral good. However, when he awakes, he blames Thérèse for obliging him to remarry Fanny saying “I didn't do it because I thought it was right, but because you thought it was right. But that makes no difference” (*At Fault*,

73). To prove his virtue, morals, and love; and to defend himself against being a coward, he yields to Thérèse wishes though they are against his. As a result of this social obligation practiced by Thérèse, two people were trapped in a loveless marriage. Jane Hotchkiss considers Hosmer a victim of two women: “one whose life is steeped in error, another who in spite of her many virtues and attractions is guilty of a fatal error in judgment” (*Confusing the Issue*, 35). She also refers to the faults of Hosmer which result in the death of his weak but certainly not evil wife, Fanny.

David raised his sister in a way that makes her an independent woman. He gave her all his love, respect, and trust; and “the young lady fully justified his belief in her” (6). By the time, he changes his view of women as he learns to carry responsibility and to appreciate women in his life. He allows Thérèse to run the plantation as he learns the importance of sharing work, opinions, and life with his wife. He allows her to run the plantation herself. When Thérèse suggests to Hosmer, her new husband, that he could now help her run her successful plantation, he simply laughs. “No, no, Madame Thérèse, I’ll not rob you of your occupation. I’ll put no bungling hand into your concerns” (*At Fault*, 128). Chopin thus believes that love changes men and makes a man a better human being. It also makes the partners reach their full capabilities.

Chopin presents her own philosophy of life, criticizing traditional view of virtue and moral conventionalities. She creates an illusionary character Homeyer, a friend of Hosmer who does not have a real presence. Homeyer refuses Hosmer’s second marriage of Fanny and rejects Thérèse’s moral convictions. Homeyer “had railed of course as usual, at the submission of a human destiny to the exacting and ignorant rule of what he termed moral conventionalities” (*At Fault*, 35). He believes that a man should follow the promptings of his character and should hold on to his personality. He advises Hosmer to redeem Fanny using any other way than sacrificing his own happiness. Homeyer thinks that “all religions are but mythological creations invented to satisfy a species of sentimentality—a morbid craving in man for the unknown and undemonstrable” (50). So, Chopin implies that religion does not exist. It is only a myth created to satisfy spiritual feelings. Thus, virtue that stems from religion is only a myth that should not be followed. One should follow what suits him/her best not what suits society.

Chopin’s attitude towards religion and virtue is again expressed by the black cook, Aunt Belindy, when the little girl Lucilla imagines joining a convent and never getting married to devote her virtuous life to God

saying, “he religious never get married and don't live in the world like others” (97). Aunt Belindy answers, "Religion _ no religion, whar you gwine live ef you don' live in de worl'?" (97). Thus, Chopin rejects religion that requires self-sacrifice and self-denial as she equates living in a convent with losing one’s life. She again wants to separate religion from the life of a woman.

The river that borders Place Du Bois is a symbol of movement and change that occurs to Thérèse’s views. When the river floods, it becomes a symbol of a new life with a more asserted self and a less virtuous misconceptions. A beginning of a life of freedom and equality. Koloski notes that Thérèse always accepted natural change, in both people of her plantation and in the physical boundaries of the country. He says, “She is well aware that the river which borders her land carries off each year large sections of its banks, forcing her to move back her fences and re-route her roads” (*The Structure of At Fault*, 92). Thus, all that Thérèse’s needs is time to accept moral and social change as she accepts natural change.

One of the common motifs in Chopin’s literary works is the idea that religion and the traditional view of virtue oppress people’s lives and choices. The religious teachings received by Thérèse hinder her from pursuing happiness and make Hosmer hate religion even more. Chopin assures that religion with the virtue it represents should not be above humans and that everyone should have a free will to decide what he/she wants from life. Chopin implies that following religion blindly might cost one his life. Marie Louise, Thérèse’s old nurse, lost her life for she depends only on her religious beliefs. When Thérèse urges her to move her cabin as it is located near the edge of one of the riverbanks, she refuses believing that God will protect her and if not, then, it is her fate. Her cabin is surrounded by Catholic symbolism. According to Cole, the cabin represents the old-world attributes as it is set deep in the pine woods. She deeply believes in God and fate. She is “the link to Catholicism that reminds Thérèse of why she had meddled in David Hosmer’s marriage” (*A message*, 70). Thus, by Marie Louise death, religion and the old-world symbols perish.

The love story of Thérèse and Hosmer represents a union of past and present, old traditions and new values. Donald A. Ringe in *Cane River World* views the marriage of Hosmer and Thérèse as “a symbolic union of opposites necessary for survival in a changing world” (qtd in *Critical Reputation of Chopin*, 188). It is a chance for women to have both an asserted-self and a virtuous life. A promising love unites them by the end

of the novel in a future filled with the possibility of equality. Hosmer declares that he will leave management of the cotton plantation to Thérèse while he continues running the sawmill. They will work together side by side, a recognition that their combined strengths promise a place for a self-asserted woman.

Self-assertion in *At Fault* “is not presented as a finished product, a commodity that one can purchase cheaply, but as a process one must effect” (*Bloom’s Critical View*, 43). Thérèse is already self-asserted from the beginning of the novel, but she developed through the time until she become fully aware of herself, her needs, and her capabilities. Her role as the mistress of Place de Bois opens the way for her to assert her new powers. Bloom believes that “the new world is born through the influence of a new woman, small but sure of self” (50). Chopin simplifies the dilemma of gender and social roles by portraying Thérèse as embodying a male character while Hosmer personifying a female character. However they changed roles, both achieve success.

At Fault is a self-searching for what is vice and what is virtue, who is right and who is at fault. The novel shifts from the admission of Hosmer’s faults to the admission of Thérèse’s faults. When an early reviewer of *At Fault* claimed that Fanny is the person who was at fault, Chopin replied to his interpretation in the *Natchitoches Enterprise*, to clear his misconception:

“Thérèse Lafirme, the heroine of the book is the one who was at fault—remotely, and immediately. Remotely—in her blind acceptance of an undistinguishing, therefore unintelligent code of righteousness by which to deal out judgements. Immediately— in this, that unknowing the individual needs of this man or this woman, she should yet constitute herself not only as mentor, but an instrument in reuniting them” (*qtd in A Life of the Author of The Awakening*, 194).

According to Chopin, thus, Thérèse is the person at fault and she is to be blamed for constituting herself as a mentor and for following the blind code of righteousness that stems from the old-world ethics. Chopin believes that everyone has different individual needs that one should be considered. Thus, one should follow his reason in taking decisions that suits him/her best, and not to follow what suits society or morality.

To conclude, the concept of virtue was gendered and only served patriarchal purposes. The traditional view of virtue oppresses women’s

lives. Chopin criticizes society and social traditions that are represented in Thérèse virtue and moral code. She highlights the moral of the tale in Hosmer's conversation with Thérèse when he tells her that the whole truth is not given to a man to know as it is something beyond human ability. Chopin suggests that one may live his life searching for morality and righteousness and may not find them at last, but at least, one has tried. Nevertheless, there is evil in the world that pretends to be good and virtuous. Thus, Chopin encourages people to continue questioning what right is and what wrong is.

At Fault presents Thérèse as a virtuous woman who has a standard of moral behavior that makes her adhere to virtue. She lives by the old traditions that she assumes the only right way to virtue. She has a determination to do right which stems from her traditional virtuous beliefs. Virtue, for her, is superior to one's own happiness. Thérèse enjoys all kinds of independence. She already has a free soul and a sense of the self. She also has a social authority supported by morality and religion, but she does not use this authority in the right way. By the time, she realizes that sacrificing one's life for assumed morality and hypocritical virtue would destroy her life and others' lives as well.

Chopin points to the problems which women face during the process of self-realization. She protests to woman's dependency which results in females' sense of helplessness and inferiority. Chopin highlights the importance of work for women. It helps them discover their abilities and attain financial independence. It is the first step to attain an asserted self. Thus, she was the only woman who knows what she needs. Thérèse succeeds in keeping both her virtue and her asserted self; and to live happily ever after. She gets the best of both worlds because she adapts to change; and she is the only woman who has an occupation and a social responsibility.

The conflict between virtue and self-assertion is then at the core of *At Fault*. Chopin is against self-sacrifice and any defined code of morality. Men and women should search for virtue and enjoy this experience together. She suggests that there is no one faultless way of living, and there is no absolute morality. She attacks morality that is defined by society and religion. She rejects self-denial that socially versus self-realization. She suggests that sacrificing one's own happiness and victimizing others by the means of accepted morality is not a virtuous act otherwise there is no difference between vice and virtue. Thus, she questions social traditions, religion and any kind of authority that might

control one's life-choices. The only authority, she suggests, should stem from one's own needs and one's own reason.

Works Cited

- "Knowledge." Allen, Barry. *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. 2005. www.encyclopedia.com. Accessed 9 Oct. 2015.
- Aristoteles, and Edward Meredith. Cope. *The Rhetoric*. Univ. Press, 1877.
- Bartlett, Robert C, and Susan D Collins, translators. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovaney-Chevallier. (Trans). New York: Vintage Press, 2011.
- Beer, Janet. *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Bhasin, K. *What Is Patriarchy*. Women Unlimited: New Delhi, 2006.
- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Kate Chopin- Updated Edition*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007.
- Chopin, Kate. *At fault*. Ed., Joslyn T. Pine. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2007.
- Cole, Karen. "A Message from the Pine Woods of Central Louisiana: The Garden in Northup, Chopin, and Dormon". *Louisiana Literature: A Review of Literature and Humanities* 14.1 (Spring 1997): 64–74.
- Crisp, Roger. *How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues*. Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Ewell, Barbara C. *Kate Chopin*. New York: Ungar, 1986.
- Fluck, Winfried. "Kate Chopin's At Fault: The Usefulness of Louisiana French for the Imagination." *Creoles and Cajuns: French Louisiana-La Louisiane Française*. Ed. Wolfgang Binder: Peter Lang, Frankfurt, Germany Pagination: 247-66, 1998.
- Gardiner, Stephen Mark. *Virtue Ethics, Old and New*. Cornell University, 2005.
- Garitta, Anthony Paul. "The Critical Reputation of Kate Chopin." Greensboro, NC, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Diss, 1978, pp. 1–228.
- Grimshaw, Jean. "The Idea of a Female Ethic." *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1992.
- Hotchkiss, Jane. "Confusing the Issue: Who's 'At Fault'?" *Louisiana Literature* 11.1 (Spring 1994): 31–43.
- Koloski Bernard J. "The Structure of Kate Chopin's At Fault" *Studies in American Fiction* 3.1 (Spring 1975): 89-95.
- Moseley, Merritt, and Emily Toth. "Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of the Awakening." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, 1991, p. 123.
- Ostman, Heather, and Kate O'Donoghue. *Kate Chopin in Context: New Approaches*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Plato. *Protagoras*. Trans. Rev. Benjamin Jowett. Ed. Gregory Vlastos. New York: L of liberal arts, 1956.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Jules Steeg. *Émile: Or, Concerning Education: Extracts*. Trans. Eleanor Worthington. Boston: D. C. Heath, 1889.

Seyersted, Per. *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2000.

Shea, Victor, and William Whitla. *Victorian literature: An Anthology*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Snow, Nancy E. "Virtue and the Oppression of Women." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. sup1, 2002, pp. 33–61.

Wollstonecraft, M. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1975.

Zamfir, Korinna. *Men and Women in the Household of God: A Contextual Approach to Roles and Ministries in the Pastoral Epistles*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.

Ziegler, Amber M. "Unconventional Women in a Conventional age: Strong Female Characters in Three Victorian Novels". Youngstown State University. Diss. 2009.