

## Chapter 2

### Backgrounds of the Novels

The social context and the author's background influence a piece of work, for they inspire the author while serving as materials to comment on a social issue. However, a literary composition may be banned if its content is at odds with contemporary social conventions, as we can see in the case of *The Awakening*. This novel, as well as *Khwamrak Khrang Sutthai*, illustrates the novelists' views of women's positions and feeling of alienation. This chapter will delineate the social contexts of the two novels, beginning with general backgrounds of the women's status in each society with special focus on the publication periods, the American 1890s and the Thai 1970s. The lives and works of Kate Chopin and Suwannee Sukhontha, as well as their contemporaries, are also included as literary contexts of the two novels.

#### American Women's Status : Historical Context

Different and unequal sex roles have long been a part of most cultures. Through the ages, women have had more social limitations than men. They have been "victims of sexism in much the same way that the black are victims of racism not only in education, employment, and politics but also in social life" (Coleman and Cressey, 1980 : 278). Most women have had awareness from childhood that they are second-class citizens or belong to the inferior sex and lack the abilities of their male counterparts.

In the United States and most other Western societies, men hold social positions involving "leadership, power, decision-making and interacting with the larger world," while women's positions center around "dependency, family concerns and childcare" (Farley 1990 : 149). Men are expected to be leaders, to take control, to make decisions, and to be active and unemotional. Women, in

contrast, are expected to be dependent, emotional and unable to exercise leadership or to make decisions. They are believed to be unable to direct their own lives without men. Women may be seen as wives and mothers of important people, but individually they are seldom considered important in their own rights (Coleman and Cressey, 1980 : 278).

Women's attempts to join men in the public sphere are limited because of traditional beliefs about women's roles and taboos. Men continue to dominate economic and political life and their contributions are more highly valued (Richmond-Abbott, 1992 : 28). Despite being the majority of the population, women in the United States are a "minority group" in terms of their power as well as in the sociological sense. This phenomenon is the result of the "individual and collective discrimination that they experience and because of their inability to resist being either thought of or treated as inferior" (Figueira~McDonough and Sarri, 1986 : 11).

## 1. Before the American Civil War

In 1830, which was during the period of the abolition movement, women began to perceive themselves as human beings. They saw differences between their lives and those of the slaves, and at the same time felt their subordinate positions in relation to their husbands due to many legal inequities. Women participated in the women's rights movements, which at first focused mainly on legal restrictions more than on women's right to vote (Jordan and Litwack, 1994 : 140-142).

During that time upper-class Southern women were less assertive than their counterparts in other regions. They were locally admired for their traditional femininity. They were neat, graceful and modest. They had refined and cultivated minds, along with gifts and qualities. Most importantly, they devoted themselves to their family with spotless purity of thought and character (Tillett, 1976 : 122-127).

## 2. After the American Civil War

As time went on, the women's rights movement became a campaign in its own right (Jordan and Litwack, 1994 : 140-142). The American Civil War (1861-1865) was considered the first period of the American women's movement, exploring women's potential for new roles outside the home. It was an era of "aggressive and energetic women" (Smith, 1984 : 661). During the war, while men had to go into the army, women went outside to work and earned money to support their families. Many of them became nurses, working in hospitals both near and far from the battlefield, while some of them became workers in industries. Women began to perform new duties, entering the work force, which was once considered the male domain, and had more chances in education. However, due to prevailing sexual biases, those educational and professional improvements did not give women economic advances. Educated women were rarely admitted to work in some professional areas such as law and medicine. Moreover, there were differences in pay between men and women. The lowest-paying and lowest-status positions in the work force still belonged to women (Jordan and Litwack, 1994 : 224-228).

Regarding the right to vote, several events after the Civil War mobilized women to pursue their suffrage. While they were allowed to vote on some local issues like school, tax and bonds, they did not win the right to vote nationally until the twentieth century. (Norton and Kateman, 1982 : 555-557).

The American 1890s, in which *The Awakening* was written, was "a decade of social tension"; traditional ways of life were beginning to change through class divisions, urbanization, and industrialization (Culley, 1976 a : 117). Among the many changes which were the direct result of the Civil War and its aftermath, the change in women's role was very significant. Women actively attempted to get equal rights and a better life after having been confined to domestic life (Culley, 1976 a : 117). Some of them, especially from the upper class, attended college, entered professional spheres and participated in women's organizations: social,

political, intellectual and philanthropic. They joined in many campaigns, such as those to improve women's legal status and women's citizenship. Still, they did not have the right to vote in general elections and could not hold public office nor sit on juries due to discriminatory laws and legal codes.

Despite the improvements of women in the United States during the 1890s, women in New Orleans still encountered disadvantages in almost every aspect of their lives. They were still believed to be best suited to domestic labor which was considered the most sacred duty for women, especially creoles, who, according to Shaffter (1976 : 119-121), were valued primarily as tender and loving mothers who were economical and industrious housekeepers. They seldom figured in domestic scandals. For them, women's rights were "the right to love and be loved, and to name the babies, rather than the next president or city officials" (121). According to the Napoleonic Code, the basis of the laws governing the marriage contract, most married women were the property of their husband. They could not sign any legal contract without their husband's agreement, and they could not "institute a lawsuit, appear in court, hold public office, or make a denotation to a living person" (Culley, 1976 a : 118). The husband was the legal guardian of the children both during marriage and after the event of divorce, which, however, rarely occurred and was considered scandalous among creoles because of Catholic beliefs.

In 1919, when Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment, women were allowed to vote and enabled to influence the democratic process. This symbolized women's persistence in efforts to break out of old patterns of domesticity. They encompassed a variety of issues, the workplace, sexuality, marriage and the home. Although securing political advances, women were still considered second-class citizens due to stereotyping. They were considered inferior to men, who retained a sense of superiority (Ashley, 1982 : 163).

After the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919, American women's rights and feminist movements declined because of social and economic depression, but reemerged in the 1960s and 1970s due to the civil rights

movement, which had the issues of injustice, inequality and second-class citizenship as the main focuses. In 1963, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed to eliminate legal inequities and economic disparities. In the 1970s, sexual discrimination in employment and education were prohibited according to Federal legislation, and in 1973 the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutional right of women to have an abortion in the early stages of pregnancy (Jordan and Litwack, 1994 :440-444).

Entering the twenty-first century, the American women's rights movement may not seem completely successful to some. However, compared to the previous century, there have been remarkable advances. Women have higher education, more working opportunities as well as more active political participation.

### **Literary and Biographical Contexts of *The Awakening***

Works around women's issues were also composed by some of Kate Chopin's contemporary female writers. The first example is Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), who created "an idyllic picture of American girlhood" (Smith, 1984 : 763) in her novel *Little Women* (1868-1869), which has been praised as the most popular American classical literature for female youth and the legend of American women. This novel is the story of the Alcott family, represented by the March's girls - - beautiful Meg, delicate Beth, romantic little Amy and hot-tempered Jo, the protagonist, intent on self-respect, seeking fortune and fame from her writing career. This character is critical to Alcott's literary success (Haviland, 1973 : 64). Its heroine, Jo, is outstanding and very interesting because she is not a stereotypical woman of her time, but a revolutionary woman who possesses individual freedom.

Throughout the story, we may infer that Alcott doesn't believe that marriage is the only goal in women's lives. She surprises her readers with the marriage of Jo to a middle-aged German professor rather than the ideal man of a

young lady at that time. Her decision illustrates her confidence in her right to choose her husband.

Marriage failure is illustrated in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), a work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). This short story is considered one of the most psychologically haunting tales in American literature with the depiction of a nearly insane married woman. She suffers deep depression and is “cured” by her insensitive doctor-husband, “the modern, rational, scientific American male” (Smith, 1984 : 765) with the method of complete isolation which drives his wife into deeper and deeper nervous depression. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a diary of Gilman, whose marriage was not successful. She divorced her husband, finding that she was overwhelmed by domestic responsibilities. She suffered a nervous breakdown, much like the heroine of this short story, but Gilman’s treatment was passionately throwing herself into the women’s movement. She composed many short stories and articles and lectured on women’s rights, labor and the cooperative movement. Gilman believed that women could not receive true freedom and equality without economic independence.

Alcott and Gilman’s heroines are different in their situations. However, one convergent aspect is the authors’ intention to portray women’s images ☞ Alcott’s self-confident woman Jo and Gilman’s a mentally disordered protagonist.

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* challenges the traditional image of Victorian women, who, according Ashley (1982 : 152), had the duty of managing the household, correcting their children’s behavior and taking care of their husband. But Edna, the novel’s protagonist, doesn’t feel that home is “a place of rest for the husband where a woman finds her highest pride in the sweetest humility and the tenderest self-suppression” (152). She seeks a more authentic dignity for women.

To Seyersted (1976 : 180-186), *The Awakening* can be compared to Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, its contemporary novel of the early American realism, in that, the heroines’ violations of “society’s “arbitrary scale” of morals” are directly and honestly described. To Chopin and Dreiser, their protagonists do not commit a sin, but fight for their opportunities for self-expression. However, to this critic,

Edna's spiritual evolution is greater than that of Carrie. And Chopin is considered "ahead of her time" and "a link in the tradition."

Kate O'Flaherty was born in 1850 to a wealthy Roman Catholic French and Irish family in St.Louis, the city of an old French Catholic elite. After getting married to Oscar Chopin and settling in New Orleans among his creole community, she bore six children and fulfilled heavy social obligations while remaining a handsome and brilliant woman. Her husband died in 1882. Two years later, Chopin returned to St.Louis with her children and began her literary career with the creole life of New Orleans as her special subject. Chopin was sensitive to the currents of women's emancipation (Smith, 1984 : 767). Most of her stories were set in late nineteenth century Louisiana, with the portrayal of characters from all social classes of the time and place, and relationships between men and women. One of the earmarks of Chopin's stories was the theme of women breaking away from conventional lives. Her masterpiece, *The Awakening* (1899), shocked the public and caused a storm of criticism when it was first published. This is because Chopin allowed her female protagonist to take control of her own life and "abandon herself to a suddenly aroused sexual desire" (Smith, 1984 : 769) and her narrative did not condemn the character for doing so. Fifty-four years later, *The Awakening* came alive when a French critic, Cyrille Arnavon, praised this novel and compared it to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a French masterpiece, as a piece of work which completely embraced a woman's search for self-understanding and freedom (Hart, 1965 : 155). Since then, Kate Chopin has been appreciated as a pioneer in American literature for women's rights.

### **Thai Women's Status : Historical Context**

Like women in the United States, Thai women have traditionally encountered sex discrimination. They have been subordinated to men who are believed to be the dominant sex in Thai society. In the past, women were considered mere assets. They first belonged to their fathers, then became properties of their husbands.

Worst of all, they could be legally bought and sold. The stereotypes of Thai women were not much different from those in the United States. Thai women were expected to be men's followers, as shown in an old Thai maxim, "Phuchai pen chang thao na; phuying pen chang thao lang" (Men are elephants's front legs; women their hind legs). Women's great duty was to be good wives and mothers. To better their positions, there have been many movements to improve their status as well as to make legal considerations to enhance women's social opportunities from time to time.

### 1. Before the Political Change in 1932

Before the dramatic political change from absolute monarchy to democracy in 1932, Thai women enjoyed less social respect than men, both legally and practically. Men were traditionally expected to be leaders who were supposed to be "physically strong, aggressive, and dominant" while women were considered "weak, passive, and gentle" (Bandhamedha, 1985 : 95).

Marriage seemed to be women's necessity because of their low education and need for male protection. Thai women usually got married when they were young, between fifteen and seventeen years old. Marriage then was a match prearranged by parents. Because of the need for men's protection, a Thai husband had to be older than his wife. A married woman was considered her husband's property and had to submit to his control, whereas married men were more independent. They had more sexual freedom. It was acceptable if a man had other women apart from his wife.

In ancient times, women, especially the middle and upper classes, did not play important roles in economic concerns. Academic knowledge was then less of a necessity for women because they received training in domestic matters at home, while men received higher education from Buddhist temples where monks were teachers. However, this did not mean that women were entirely uneducated,



because they received informal education to fit their role (Bandhamedha, 1985 : 105), and aristocratic women also developed artistic as well as literary skills.

During the reign of King Mongkut (1851-1868), improvements in the status of Thai women took place with the modernization policy. Women of royal and aristocratic families received education from a group of missionaries. However, this academic chance was still limited to those classes of women. Lower class women from poor families did not receive this opportunity. If parents had to make a choice in sending only some of their children to school, preference was often given to their sons.

However, in the traditional system, women were indirectly given power, especially concerning household authority. In practice, while the men were serving their superiors, the family spending was managed by women (Khachon Sukhphanit, 1982 : 34-36). Men were major economic providers whose decisions were mainly on extra-household matters (Bandhamedha, 1985 : 106).

The social status of Thai women improved with the abolition of the sale of wives in the reign of King Mongkut. Women became more humanlike, not being bought and sold as objects. Later, in 1874, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the first school to provide formal education for women was founded. In 1920, during the reign of King Vajiravut, compulsory primary education was introduced for both boys and girls, giving girls equal legal right to education. The most significant change came with King Prajadhipok's introduction of monogamy (1923), which later became a law (Thomson, 1991 : 3).

Thai women's situation was gradually changed with social recognition of women's status. However, some barriers remained and inhibited women's opportunities until 1932, the year of the great political change in Thailand which helped to provide better conditions for women.

## 2. After the Political Change in 1932

The revolution on the twenty-fourth of June 1932 and its outcome are considered very significant for political change in Thai society. They profoundly affected the country, the governmental management system, and the trend in political thinking (Nakharin Maketrairat, 1992 : 297).

With this political change, Thai women's status further improved. The first Educational Plan of 1932 emphasized education for all without the barrier of gender and provided lower-class women more opportunities in higher educational sphere which was previously limited to the girls of well-to-do families. Women in the poorest areas of the nation began to receive short-term vocational training (*Women's Development in Thailand*, 1985 : 106).

In the political and occupational areas, the constitution introduced in 1932 granted the right to vote to women and stated that women could be political candidates. This was an important political right in democracy, which was rather difficult for women to immediately take advantage of. Therefore, it is noticeable that under this 1932 constitution, Thai women's political status was technically better than in that of their Western counterparts (Weerawan Srisamran, 1991 : 12-37). Moreover, their occupational areas have been broadened. They can be lawyers or, engineers; they can participate in social affairs and play more roles in business (Thomson and Bhongvej, 1995 : 35-41).

A significant number of realistic novels with social concern have been produced since this political change. Female novelists contributed several works which convey important social messages, especially in 1960's and 1970s, the time before and during crucial political events on 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976. Examples are Kritsana Asokesin's *Rua Manut* (1968), Botan's *Chotmai Chak Muang Thai* (1969), and Suwanne Sukhontha's *Khao Chu Karn* (1970). According to Sirirat Thaveelertnithi (1995 : 86), these "new wave" writers introduced their realistic stories, focusing on family problems "which, although seemed personal matters, were considered women's universal problems" such as

Kritsana's *Mai Phlat Bai* (1975), focusing on both success and failure in married-life. These works were considered "compromising means to achieve women's better status."

Women's situation in Thailand has gradually changed. Nowadays, women have better living and status as a result of their higher education, which allows occupational progress leading to economic independence. Women are no longer waiting for their husband's support, but can be providers themselves; meanwhile, they still remain efficient home managers. It seems Thai women at the present time work harder than their ancient counterparts, since they have more work under their responsibility.

### **Literary and Biographical Contexts of *Khwamrak Khrang Sutthai***

During the second half of the twentieth century, there were prominent female novelists in Thailand composing realistic works about women's issues. Examples of the group are Kritsana, Botan and Suwannee.

One of Suwannee's contemporary female colleagues is Kritsana Asoksin (penname of Sukanya Chonlasuk, born 1931). She is very famous for her realistic female characters. Khlia, the heroine in *Pa Kammathep* (1966), is an example. Although some readers consider this character much too good to be true in reality, according to M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan (1977 : 103), Khlia's virtue is plausible and can be an ideal attainable by the teens. Khlia is not different from any real person except that she has to make a decision all the time. To Bunlua, this heroine represents a kind-hearted person who is often taken an advantage of. According to Duangmon Chitchamnong (1993 : 66), through this character, the reader learns that "human in-born traits and instinct for the good together with efficiency in self-improvement are origins of maturity regardless of age." As a result, Khlia seems more mature than a person of her age is supposed to be.

Kritsana's novels also portray realistic life and suggest that lust and love have crucial impacts on people of all classes and ages (Bunlua Thepphayasuwan,

1977 : 100) as depicted in *Nam Soh Sai* (1969). Emotional complexity in love and passion is elaborately delineated in this story, especially via the heroine, Phutkrong, who encounters inner conflicts between morality and emotion. A non-conformist widow, she challenges social tradition and morality by having an affair with her friend's husband. This character is similar to Ros, the heroine of Suwannee's *Khwamrak Khrang Sutthai* in that both surrender to passion. They have mental struggles and finally decide their own fate, leaving their lovers. More tragic, though, is the case of Ros, who leaves Pat by committing suicide. To Duangmon Chitchamnong (1933 : 66), the message of *Nam Soh Sai* is that "genuine happiness cannot exist on immorality...love and lust lead humans to frustration, depression and suffering."

Another contemporary writer of Suwannee is Botan (penname of Supha Sirising). Her works are notable for the solutions of the characters who are self-made through diligence, belief in virtue, and, most important, self-efficiency despite their poverty and deprivation of equal opportunity. Botan portrays the struggle of such characters in *Phuying Khon Nan Chu Bunrot* (1981), which is the story of a country woman whose patience and diligence bring her happy and successful life (Duangmon Chitchamnong, 1993 : 66).

Botan's works also suggest women's strength and their intelligence as shown through Mengchu and Angbuay in *Chotmai Chak Muang Thai* (1969), which sketches the difficult life of Chinese immigrants compared with those born in Thailand. The two strong female figures' personality traits sharply contrast with traditional Chinese beliefs which devalue women. Mengchu, the least-loved youngest daughter of the family according to such beliefs, is much stronger and more intelligent than her brothers. She is able to cope with the challenging life of dual systems, Thai and Chinese, while her brothers cannot. Another female character, Angbuay, is presented as an efficient businesswoman. Born in Thailand, she does not appreciate her Chinese tradition, especially the idea of women's inferior status. Although she loves her brother-in-law, she does not allow him to lead her way of living and thinking. She regards Chinese conventional

marriage as unacceptable. Angbuay's intelligence and business acumen support the idea that women and men should be equal. To M.L. Bunlua Thepphayasuwan (1986 : 476-524), "women like Mengchu and Angbuay constitute the strong structure of almost every society."

No matter how strong or fragile women are, female writers' works of quality are those expressing women's delicate inner self to make the reader, probably male in particular, realize that women are also humans with dignity. The portrayals of emotional and sensitive women are abundant in Suwannee's works. Her female characters are often elaborately depicted with delicate inner self as in *Khwamrak Khrang Sutthai*, the story of a lonely and sensitive divorcee.

"Suwannee Sukhontha" is the pen-name of Suwannee Sukhonthiang, an artist-turned novelist. She was born in 1932, the year of Thailand's great political revolution, into a middle class family in Phitsanulok province, where she received her primary and secondary education. She continued her study at an Art College in Bangkok and graduated with a diploma in Painting and Engraving from Silapakorn University, where she later worked as a lecturer before quitting to be an illustrator, writer, and later, editor of a woman's magazine. Suwannee has four children with her first husband but has none with her second one. Her first married life was not successful, much like Ros in *Khwamrak Khrang Sutthai*. She became a divorcee without asking for her husband's financial help when she was 34 years old (Prakaat Vatcharaporn, 1984 : 353).

Suwannee's artistic background underlines her writing style which often seems to be expressed through an artist's eyes. Her storyline was both dramatic and realistic, with parts of it deriving from her real life and relating to people around her. Her outstanding talent lay in her use of the descriptive language of an artist. She created an artwork through words, which were elaborately arranged to produce lively, beautiful and colorful literary pictures full of feelings, as seen in *Khwamrak Khrang Sutthai*. Her death at only fifty-two was a tragic loss for the world of writers (*Thai Writers' Biographies*, 1980 : 237-238).

The women's movements in the United States and Thailand are comparable in some respects. The women's issue became apparent during the American Civil War, which was about the middle of the nineteenth century, approximately the time when the Thai ruler initiated certain moves to better Thai women's position. Since then there have been movements yielding more rights for them, such as the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919 and the Civil Rights movement in the United States or the 1932 political change in Thailand. Although the cultural contexts were different, the realistic portrayals of the protagonists of both novels reflect the comparably limited situations of women. This will be pursued in depth in the following chapter.