



THE PERSONAL DESIRE AND THE SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS IN EDITH WHARTON'S *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*



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ABSTRACT

*As for as researchers' concern, most of the countries represent that women are dominated by men at various levels. The levels can be explained in terms of social behaviour, dress code, food habit, speech patterns, thought, sex, etc. the men state or argue to justify their domination; they have replaced the concept as Culture. Hence, the words feminism and culture together function prominently in literature. In some contexts, a woman dominates women or vice-versa. For example, socially well-developed or elite women dominates poorer or others for showing their power on various reasons. So, it is one of the most important and interesting topics for many American writers particularly novelists. Along with male novelist, women novelists have also started to create their permanent mark in writings. Thus, this paper deals with one of the well-known American woman novelists named, Edith New Bold Jones Wharton (1862 – 1937). She grants many women protagonists' characters in her popular novels. Among them, one of the famous novels of Wharton is, **The Age of Innocence**. It represents the shadow of the nation's various conditions on men and women. The main*



theme of the select novel is the conflict between personal desire and social obligation of various concepts in American culture.

Keywords: *Culture, domination over women, desire and social obligation*

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the twentieth century has witnessed changes in almost every aspect of the day-to-day lives of women from the domestic sphere to the public. Various women's movements of that time have been emphasizing on advocacy of equal rights. The newly formed women's organisations have given rise to a new generation for women writers. Women in the early twentieth century have been more active and influential as writers. The advent of the new century has also observed a change in the style and content of women's writings. There is also an increase in the depiction of feminine images and themes in literature.

Women's literature is the voice of a group of people who have remained, oppressed, ignored, and rejected by centuries of biases and political interests of the dominant males. They have always aligned with each other to reduce womanhood in typical characteristics of inadequacy, impurity, weakness, and eternal silence. Women are no longer a mere sign in the writing of men are merely the muse of the idealised inspiration of the men writers and thinkers. Men may be the all-pervasive aesthetic procreator and the father of the text and whose pen is their instrument of generative power. But women are the creators of their selves and an imaginative being of their discourse is a subversion of their silence. That speech is a real challenge to peripheral status.

The increase of women literacy and a corresponding rise in the number of female readers open the gateway to number of female writers. Poetry and drama remain primarily male experts and the novel has had a number of female practitioners. Various women's movements have lead to the increase in number of women writings. Feminism particularly has given rise to the gradual development in female writings in many parts of the world from eightieth century onwards. Along with them, one of the most familiar American woman novelists, Edith Wharton sketches various colourful women protagonist in her novels.

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was born in a wealthy New York family. She was educated at home and Europe by governesses and tutors. She started her literary career as a nonfictional book on Architecture and Interior decoration. Then, she gradually turned to write garner like novel, criticism, poetry, and short story collections. Her subject matter, tone, and style have often compared with Henry James, her friend and mentor.



Wharton is well known for novelist of manners. From her upper-class perspective and link with the authors help her observe power and knowledge of writing the fictions. Her orating manners and cruel excesses of aristocratic society life of Americans are elegantly presented in her novels. As a member of New York's upper class society, she can easily bring out the reality of the women's condition in America through her novels.

Wharton's subject should have been the biography of her own class. Her education and training had given her literary generation the best classes to it. The greater consequence of Edith Wharton's failure in marriage life; she likes to fulfil it herself by the art of writing. In this background, most of her novels are expressed tragic flow. The catastrophe in Wharton's novels is almost invariably the upshot of a conflict between the individual and the social group.

This novel deals with the theme of conflict between an individual's desire and public obligation of New York. It focuses on the influence of societal values and moves on representative of the upper class society during the ninetieth century. The novel has been portrayed as both melancholy and some amount of pessimistic description of the New York of Wharton's child-hood. Success of this novel, Wharton has enjoyed with a popular acclaim and critical recognition throughout the twentieth century. The novel is *The Age of Innocence* (1920). It has also won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1921.

Wharton's view is those who were born in the nineteenth century social elite of Old New York, they have observed the power and wealth from established society families to the nouveau riche of the Industrial Revolution. In this background, her novel *The Age of Innocence* has come out and got a great command from various dimensions. Wharton has seemed to embrace the convention of her husband and maintained fashionable homes in New York and Newport. Due to Wharton's divorce, she could not share her intellectual or artistic talents and interest towards writing. After rectifying from her situation, she has continued to write the novels. The central characters in *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer, May Welland, and Ellen Olenska reflect the moral, social, and intellectual dilemmas that Wharton has experienced in her personal and professional lives in New York.

The Age of Innocence is a simple story of two people trying to live up their deeply felt values. The novel explores issues of hypocrisy and fidelity, cantering on the conflict between personal desire and social obligation. Newland Archer is a socially prominent young lawyer. He has engaged to marry a pretty, respectable May Welland. Archer falls in love with Countess Ellen Olenska, cousin of May Welland. Ellen Olenska has left her unfaithful husband and returned from Europe to the old New York society where she was born.



Olenka's European superiority and clear self-assurance are very attractive and threatening to Archer. Unable to break or not willing to put an end to his moral code and disobey the standards of his society, Archer chooses to marry Welland. Then, he feels missing something in the marriage life, he forces for his life and turns to love Ellen Olenka again. May Welland is too much a product of their society to understand his desire for something more than their prescribed lives can offer. Archer and Olenka appear to be on the doorstep of establishing a more intimate relationship. They are come to know that May Welland is pregnant. Finally, Ellen Olenka returns to Europe and Archer stays behind to life as faithful husband, loving father, and upstanding citizen.

The Age of Innocence reaches its conclusion as Archer widowed and travelling to Europe with his son, Dallas Archer. He wishes to join Ellen Olenka there. Archer has remembered their marriage life and understood May Welland's love with him. At the same time, he has been conscious of his feelings towards her cousin, Olenka. At the end of the novel, incapable of acting in any situation which made demand on his emotional resources, he sits and watches the lights in Ellen's apartment until a servant appeared on the balcony and closed the shutters. Then Archer walks slowly back to his hotel.

Wharton has expressed the individual desire and the social obligation from the protagonist, Newland Archer and female dominants Ellen Olenka, and May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*. Archer remains a faithful husband to May as well as a dutiful father to his children. He marries a conventional beauty though he is in love with his wife's unconventional cousin, Ellen Olenka. She shows him the insignificant background of fashionable society of Europe. Finally, Wharton has designed as he becomes respected civic figure and philanthropist.

May Welland is a beautiful young girl and innocent lady. In an angel of the innocence, the American society's condition is also reflected in the character by May Welland. She is conventional, unimaginative, and does not think anything for herself. Her every doings we can see that she does not live for her own interest but for the society's responsibilities and her family's expectations. Hence, we come to know that the advent of Ellen, Archer has an affair with Ellen and not interested to her. She remains loyal to Archer and their family's prestige even though she suspects him of having the affair with Ellen.

Ellen has come from Europe, where she marries Count Olenki. She leaves her unhappy marriage life and returns to New York. Though she wants to be accepted by New York society, her behavioural activities are unconventional. She has a passionate nature and artistic and intellectual interests naturally. But these are not fit to survive in New York and its cultural values. She and Archer fall in love but not disrespect his marriage and society's



values. Realizing these things and a soft corner on her cousin, May Welland, she returns from New York to Europe to live with her aunt, Medora.

Thus, the interpretation of the novel depicts the conflict between personal desires of the individuals and obligation of the contemporary American society. Even Edith Wharton herself has endeavoured to get rid of her society's obligation of not getting married the person whom she has wished to marry after her divorce from the first husband. Finally she has failed to fulfil her wish. The individual characters like Archer and Olenska attempt to satisfy their desires irrespective of the society's obligations after the death of Archer's wife, May Welland. Since their domestic spheres are totally bonded with the society they would not succeed in their attempt. Over and above, the paper proves to understand the contemporary American society in her life span.

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