THE IDEA OF A “THRESHOLD” IN KATE CHOPIN’S “BEYOND THE BAYOU” AND “MA’AME PÉLAGIE”

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Abstract

Kate Chopin (1850-1904) was born into an age when the rough frame of the so-called modernist lifestyle has already crystallised and took its infamous shape. She witnessed the rapid industrialisation and she saw how people underwent some difficulties in terms of social, financial, and health conditions. One of her aims in writing novels and short stories was her desire to picture people’s social and psychological wretchedness. This study will pursue the idea of a “threshold”, or crisis time, in Kate Chopin’s two short stories, “Beyond the Bayou” and “Ma’am Pélagie”. The concept of a threshold can be seen in Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895-1975) theory of the carnival, which he discusses in his study on Dostoevsky. Bakhtin’s term of threshold refers to a character’s being in-between two states or two choices. Bakhtin stresses the importance of being in-between as a stage that leads to a radical change in a character’s life. Chopin’s stories portray characters that are sundered from the rest of the world and driven to the absolute loneliness until the moment of their inner crisis. The characters’ lapsing into the crisis moments is intrinsically motivated by the urge to comprehend and comply with the change-charged reality – the threshold stage. The reality of the absolute flux and transformation, unity and coherence that awaits the characters in the future is opposed to the province of social deficiency and debilitating incapacity for progress in which the characters are almost suffocated. In Chopin’s short stories, thresholds inaugurate the renunciation of staunch beliefs and, thus, are the doors to new beginnings.

KATE CHOPIN’IN “NEHİR ÖTESİ” VE “BAYAN PELAGIE” ADLI HİKAYELERİNDE “EŞİK” KAVRAMI


Anahtar Kelimeler: Kate Chopin, Modernizm, “Nehir Ötesinde”, “Bayan Pélagie”, Eşik

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INTRODUCTION

Seen as a forerunner of the 20th century feminist writing in America, Kate Chopin (1850-1904) wrote nearly a hundred of short stories and novels within 15 years. Her short stories mainly dwell upon the ways through which patriarchy effectively limits and suppresses women. In her works, Chopin is insistent on the fact that women’s voices are silenced and even if they are not, they are regarded as insane. Her goal is to express the concerns of everyone who is repressed under the “imperial, misogynist and capitalist system” (Baysal 8). So, she wants to give voice to the repressed. Sandra Gilbert states that Chopin’s reaction to the world can be considered significantly feminist and the critic adds the following statement: “Indeed, the next literary woman to employ the same mode and the same techniques would be Virginia Woolf, and she too would . . . valorize and mythologize femaleness” (46). In other words, Chopin is seen as a writer who prioritises women, their need to express themselves, and their existence as an inseparable part of society. Thus, Chopin’s feminist stance is very close to that of Virginia Woolf. Elaine Showalter even claims that Chopin’s works led to the sense of “awakening” in feminist criticism (39). Chopin is undeniably a great figure in women writing; yet, her writings are not narrowly limited to the feminist content.

Some of her short stories, moreover, are largely informed both by a female condition and a human being in general. In the world rapidly moving towards infamous industrialisation, a human being becomes lost somewhere between the desire to gain more money and the urge to get rid of everything that is associated with materialism. Some of Chopin’s characters fail to withstand the rapid change in their lives and remain stuck in their past. Such characters decorate Chopin’s artistic output as she delineates their inner conflicts, which was also one of her goals in creating literature. Elmo Howell underlines Chopin’s interest in internal conflicts and states that “she scorned those authors who write about social ills instead of the heart in conflict with itself” (215). In fact, her works focus on social ills, but they also celebrate the expression of the internal world. Some of her works, for instance, deal with the ways of solving the internal conflicts and as Martin Scofield states, the “emotional liberation of women is a persistent theme” in Chopin’s works (98). This study will analyse two short stories by Chopin, namely “Beyond the Bayou”
“Ma’amé Pélagie”, in terms of the characters’ transition from one period in their lives into the other. Both stories present female characters who are physically stuck in their little cabins and psychologically in their past. The study will base its analysis on the concept of “threshold” which the characters pass during their crisis time and after which they move into another phase of their lives and are freed from their staunch principles marked by traumatic experiences.

The concept of “threshold”

In his comprehensive analysis of medieval carnivals, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) mentions the concept of the crisis time that happens in a space somewhere in-between two realms. Bakhtin discusses the physical spaces where the characters are seen by everybody:

*Up*, *down*, the *stairway*, the *threshold*, the *foyer*, the *landing* take on the meaning of a “point” where *crisis*, radical change, an unexpected turn of fate takes place, where decisions are made, where the forbidden line is overstepped, where one is renewed or perishes. (169)

The crisis time that Bakhtin discusses in relation to Dostoevsky’s fiction occurs in a real physical space that signifies the area open to the vision of everybody. Crisis time does not happen in a closed room away from the rest of the world. Bakhtin’s idea of crisis time can also be discussed with reference to an abstract being-in-between. Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky’s Petersburg in *Crime and Punishment* as a city between reality and fantasy, for instance (Bakhtin 167). With reference to it, Eduard Vlasov claims that Bakhtin “points out two instances of the ‘threshold essence’” (47). These two points are concrete and abstract threshold places. The importance of the threshold concept in Bakhtin’s theory lies in its potential to lead the characters towards a radical change in their lives. This change mainly occurs in front of the others. It is also the situation, time, or a place pregnant with the force to drive the characters towards action. Bakhtin calls these threshold moments “*crisis time*, in which a *moment* is equal to years, decades, even to a ‘billion years’” (169-170) because it is a moment where past, present and future merge. It is a moment when the characters examine all these periods and act accordingly. It is a moment when the characters should act and make decisions very quickly. Bakhtin develops the concept by stating that Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* is full with these threshold scenes because the characters are in a constant crisis time when they act and change their lives.

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3 All the emphases throughout this study are as in the original.
(170). The same unending possibility for a perpetual change can be seen in the idea of a threshold in Hilal Kaya’s study that focuses on liminality in a post-modern context of a Turkish novel. Kaya states that the idea of a threshold keeps in itself the tendency to shatter all binaries and hierarchies (61). It is a change in a person that resists any stability.

In the similar vein, Gary Saul Morson discusses the idea of an “unfinalizable” identity that he finds in Bakhtin’s theory. Morson states that threshold in Bakhtin’s theory is a space where a human being “can surprise others and themselves by making choices that no psychologist or sociologist . . . can wholly predict” (214). In short, threshold is a space where unpredictable choices take place.

The concept of liminality/liminal was analysed by Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist who worked on rituals. Turner dwells upon Arnold van Gennep’s idea of the “rites of passage” that consists of three phases: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. As Julia Maria Hammer puts it in her study, “[a] ‘rite of passage’ is the overall term in van Gennep which includes particular sub-rites which all aim at a person’s social transition” (18). Van Gennep’s idea of the rites of passage lies in the inevitability of a human being’s passage from one state into another. Turner develops this idea and mainly focuses on the liminal phase. In Turner’s terms, liminality is a space of absolute loss of the previous norms. It is a space where a character loses all his/her bonds with the previous condition; it is a place where time does not flow in a commonly accepted manner. As Bruce Kapferer states, “[i]n Turner’s conceptualization, the liminal is a chaotic vortex of counteracting forces, a singularity perhaps, outside space and time, a re-originating point, a wellspring of potential” (2). In other words, liminality is a space where the characters withdraw themselves from the previously accepted norms and acquire a new beginning. Judy Little studies the idea of in-betweenness in her book Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark and Feminism (1983). She calls this state “liminality”:

Liminality describes a threshold (limen), a transition, a border-line area or condition. . . . Rites which accompany major transitions in life – birth, initiation, wedding, death – have a tripartite structure of separation from society, transition or liminality, and finally reincorporation into society. (3)

It is possible to argue that what Little calls liminality is very close to what Bakhtin terms threshold. Both concepts stress the idea of transition, major change in life and social position. Little adds that “during the liminal phase of a ritual, individuals to be initiated have neither their old selves and old positions in society nor their new ones” (3). In other
words, this space is a transition phase which brings to mind the convergence of different time periods discussed above. Little mentions Bakhtin’s study on Rabelais in order to tie the liminality concept to the political context and adds that some “manifestations of liminality are a potential threat to the established social structures” (5). What she means here is the fact that some writers, like Rabelais, picture their liminal spaces by showing the behaviours that are not performed under normal circumstances. In other words, the world is turned upside down during the liminal phases in the lives of some characters. Hammer also links the idea of liminality and violation of the given norms and mentions Bakhtin’s carnival in her study on liminality (15). Nevertheless, the political side of the threshold and liminality concept will not be analysed in Chopin’s short stories in this study, although they are not totally apolitical. What should be underlined here with reference to the idea of the reversed world is that Chopin’s characters’ world is also reversed as they enter the crisis time. Chopin’s “Beyond the Bayou” and “Ma’am Pélagie”, in short, easily lend themselves to be analysed in terms of Bakhtin’s concept of the threshold or the concept of the liminality. Both short stories vividly depict the characters’ entrance into the liminal phase that helps them to reconceptualise their future.

**Concept of “Threshold” in “Beyond The Bayou” and “Ma’am Pélagie”**

“Beyond the Bayou” is about a middle-aged freed slave, Jacqueline, who is called La Folle, meaning crazy. La Folle lives in a small cabin and never goes beyond the territorial boundaries that she has inscribed for herself. Because of a traumatic experience in her childhood, that mentally imprisoned her to a particular territory, it is said that Jacqueline has gone mad and, therefore, she got her new name, La Folle. She adores Chéri, a small son of her ex-master. One day Chéri accidentally shoots himself in the leg and La Folle has to help him because there is nobody around. She has to take him to the place which is beyond her territorial limits. “Ma’am Pélagie”, the second story to be analysed in this study, presents a ruined mansion at Côte Joyeuse and its two inhabitants Ma’am Pélagie, who is fifty, and her sister Pauline, who is thirty-five. Two sisters live in a small cabin close to the dilapidated mansion. One day, their niece La Petite comes to visit them. La Petite stays with her aunts but finds it difficult to adapt to the lonely lifestyle of her aunts. When she announces that she wants to leave, the aunts become very disappointed and the time for a great change comes.

Kate Chopin’s short stories – “Beyond the Bayou” and “Ma’am Pélagie” – start with the introduction of the setting. The place where La Folle, the main character in “Beyond
the Bayou”, lives suggests social distance, isolation, and lack of interest in the rest of the world. La Folle lives in a small cabin among the abandoned and deserted fields. As Sema Zafer Sümer claims, La Folle is denied a “social place to live in” (273). So, it is argued that she is socially isolated. The bayou is the only space that La Folle knows and wants to exist in because she wants to avoid the unknown places of the territory beyond the bayou. Similar to La Folle’s limited self-invented space, Ma’ame Pélagie and Pauline’s spatial slot suggests an acute sense of self-imposed isolation and estrangement. An aching sense of loneliness in the sisters’ existence is defined as narrow by their niece La Petite. Although the two sisters get used to living in the shadow of their ruined house, the portrayal of their setting is not welcoming. The ruin of their old house “brood[s] like a huge monster – a black spot in the darkness that envelop[s] it” (Chopin 197). The sisters’ self-estrangement in their private space suggests their being doomed to alienation, loneliness, and decay.

The setting suggesting alienation from the rest of the world evokes pity and sorrow from the beginning of the story. Both stories, though, provide some subtle hints throughout the text about the characters’ physical and mental strength. La Folle “had more physical strength than most men, and made her patch of cotton and corn and tobacco like the best of them” (Chopin 180). It is not difficult to gauge the protagonist’s self-confidence and independence. Therefore, Nixon states that La Folle “personifies action, strength, and self-sufficiency” (941). La Folle’s initial reaction to moaning Chéri right after his accident with the rifle confirms her physical and mental power. She grasps the boy and starts running as fast as she can. La Folle’s mental strength is seen in the fact that she does not hesitate to cross the boundary that she has established for herself. Pélagie is also a physically strong character. She has strong arms as Pauline remembers from her childhood. When their house is under the attack of the slaves, Pélagie wants to die protecting her house. Pélagie, moreover, stoically withstands financial difficulties to save money for the rebuilding of the house; she manages the plantations that are left to her by her brother Léandre. In other words, there is a sharp difference between the setting and the characterisation in these short stories. The dilapidated houses, lonely tiny cabins, and prying companies starkly contrast the protagonists’ characterisation because these women possess the inherent basic personality trait – their strength, which, in fact, thrusts them towards change.

Indeed, it is precisely this instinctual tenacious grip that pushes these characters to have ambitions, plans, and tendency to create something in spite of their withdrawnness. La Folle does not go beyond the bayou, but she creates stories about the places where she
has never been – she has “morbid fancy” related to these places (Chopin 180) and children love listening to these stories. Yet, the world that La Folle and Pélagie imagine for themselves is very different from the real world. La Folle’s imagination exaggerates the space beyond the bayou and Ma’ame Pélagie’s ambitions about her future are not real. Pélagie and Pauline want to rebuild their old mansion, which is financially impossible. Their dream makes them stuck in the ruins and they do not take part in the world outside their plantation. Ma’ame Pélagie’s dream about the future is limited to her desire to see the past and to bring it to the present. Even when she meets her niece, she wants to see the past in her eyes. Ma’ame Pélagie lives in the past and she wants to return to that past by building the house in the future. So, the future will lead her to her past.

Notwithstanding La Folle’s fears about the beyond of her space and Pélagie’s obsession with the past, life pushes them towards the boundaries that promise a substantial change. The catalysts in both Chopin’s short stories analysed in this study are children or child-like adults who stand in the centre of the protagonists’ lives. The link between the protagonists and the catalysts is precisely delineated in the stories. La Folle undergoes a drastic change because of Chéri. La Folle meets several children in her life, “[but] none of them had stroked her black hand quite as Chéri did, nor rested their heads against her knee so confidingly, nor fallen asleep in her arms as he used to do” (Chopin 180). The relationship between them is instinctively built upon affection and love. And their affection is mutual. The link between La Folle and Chéri can be analysed in terms of female urge to experience motherhood. La Folle’s treatment of the boy is that of every day mother-child relationship. In other words, the bond between La Folle and Chéri is intrinsically motivated by the sense of motherhood, which, in turn, is informed by the indelible instinctual drive to protect, save, and, if needed, die for.

Pélagie’s child-like figure is her sister Pauline. In “Ma’ame Pélagie”, the link between the protagonist and the catalyst is similar to that in “Beyond the Bayou”; yet, the network of the relationships in “Ma’ame Pélagie” has a double frame. The first frame includes the relationship between Pélagie and Pauline, in which Pauline has always been Ma’ame Pélagie’s dear child. A big difference in age between two sisters makes Pélagie a mother-like figure for Pauline. Indeed, the urge to save little Pauline was Pélagie’s main drive to survive during tempestuous years in their past. The second frame of the relationships in this short story includes the bond between Pauline and La Petite, the niece. It can also be argued, though, that Pauline’s obsession with La Petite is the revelation of her desire for a change. Indeed, Pauline’s genuine affection and obsession with her niece
adds intensity into the movement towards the change. La Petite’s visit makes Pauline extremely happy: “Mam'selle Pauline was terribly excited; the flush that throbbed into her pale, nervous face showed it; and she locked her thin fingers in and out incessantly” (Chopin 190). In fact, Pauline’s uncontrollable physical movements foreshadow the shattering of the stable, rigid, routine existence. When La Petite comes, Pauline seems to be refreshed and energized. Thus, both stories establish a safe ground on which it is possible to create the idea of the crisis; the crisis during which the loss of these strong bonds would mean perishing for the protagonists.

Eventually, when La Folle and Pélagie are involuntarily faced with the crisis time and when they know that they can lose their beloved ones, their strong characteristics do not let them down. Both women thrust themselves into the new experience. La Folle grabs the injured boy and carries him beyond the self-imposed territorial edge. Chéri’s condition makes her transcend her limits and shatter her beliefs. She voluntarily enters the crisis time and decides to experience the change. Pélagie, in the same manner, approaches the self-drawn psychological boundary and acts when she has to make Pauline believe that La Petite will come and stay with them. Pauline’s fear of loss of La Petite disturbs Pélagie and she acts. Ma’ame Pélagie understands the link between Pauline and La Petite. She understands that it is very similar to the link between herself and Pauline, a link between a mother and a child. These are the scenes where both protagonists stop on the edge which they cannot overstep under normal circumstances. Yet, what they feel now is something extraordinary for them; it is the moment when they have to choose, life or death. And they choose life.

In the light of Bakhtin’s threshold concept and Little’s liminality concept, it is possible to claim that La Folle and Ma’ame Pélagie experience crisis time. La Folle’s crisis time starts when she sees Chéri lying on the ground after the accident. And Pélagie’s crisis time starts when she understands that she has to save Pauline and keep La Petite at home. These two moments bring these two characters to the edge, to the threshold. Eventually, La Folle crosses the edge because, as Bakhtin claims, characters make important decisions during the crisis time. Everybody watches La Folle’s crossing the boundary. It is very similar to Bakhtin’s crisis time concept because La Folle’s change takes places under the observation of the crowd. In Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of a threshold scene, Dostoevsky’s characters experience their crisis time in a public place as well (Bakhtin 169-170). Indeed, this publicity makes threshold a carnivalistic element. La Folle’s crossing the
threshold becomes her rebirth moment because this event was like a closure of her loneliness. She comes out of her “comfort zone”, as Nixon calls it (941). She experiences the crisis time and after that she enters the realm of a social life. Actually, what she experiences might be just her imagination or her realisation of the fact that the other side of the bayou is not more dangerous than her side. She regains her consciousness in her own cabin which suggests the idea that everything might be seen as simply her imagination. As regards Ma’ame Pélagie’s act of crossing the edge, she does it in a more solitary fashion than La Folle. While in “Beyond the Bayou” there is a crowd around La Folle when she crosses the limit, in “Ma’ame Pélagie”, the crowd is in her imagination. After seeing her sister’s wretchedness marked by the potential loss of La Petite, Pélagie acts and decides to change her life. However, before she initiates her progress towards change, she wants to indulge in her dreams and tell goodbye to the ruins. She remembers their mansion and as Gary H. Mayer claims, past and present merge into one moment (98) just as it happens in Bakhtin’s theorization of the crisis time. This silent and lonely moment becomes Pélagie’s threshold moment during which she makes an irrevocable decision.

These crisis moments that bring the characters into the liminal space or a threshold that is between being and non-being, life and death, loneliness and unity, lead them into a lively and bright atmosphere. Even with the first opening of La Folle’s eyes, it is evident that the atmosphere is positive as there is moonlight illuminating the room. After her healthy sleep, La Folle crosses the boundary again as if she has been doing it every day. The depiction of La Folle’s Sunday morning is full of self-confidence, ambition, joy, hope, freshness and ignorance of the past:

She donned her new blue cottonade and white apron, for she remembered that this was Sunday. When she had made for herself a cup of strong black coffee, and drunk it with relish, she quitted the cabin and walked across the old familiar field to the bayou’s edge again.

She did not stop there as she had always done before, but crossed with a long, steady stride as if she had done this all her life. (Chopin 185)

After she crosses the boundary, she sees “a field where the white, bursting cotton, with the dew upon it, gleamed for acres and acres like frosted silver in the early dawn” (Chopin 185-186). This image of the field is very different from the abandoned fields which were shown as her territory at the beginning of the story. Mayer says that “the bayou at the beginning and the bayou at the end are two different places” (97).
the boundary, she enters the world of the unknown and she smells and tastes it and feels its delicious and soft rustle. According to Sümür, La Folle’s crossing the bayou is her act to determine her individuality (273). This is an image of a real La Folle devoid of any fears or discriminations. Pélagie and Pauline now have a nice home on which the sun shines. They start living with their brother Léandre and La Petite. They chat with the neighbours who have come to visit them and laughter is heard everywhere. The sound of the piano comes from the house. Pauline changes physically. Pélagie, on the other hand, wants to be alone. Unlike La Folle, Pélagie cannot welcome the change enthusiastically; she dreadfully misses her bygone days. Still, it is possible to argue that there is a slight hint of hope because it seems that Pélagie’s personality is divided into two distinct sides: “While the outward pressure of a young and joyous existence had forced her footsteps into the light, her soul had stayed in the shadow of the ruin” (Chopin 199). There is a slight hint at her ability to get rid of her tendency to cling to the past. Moreover, as Fox states, “Chopin privileges the present over the past” (124) and she makes her characters push themselves towards the present moment even if it costs them some loss as is seen with Pélagie

CONCLUSION

Kate Chopin, a great figure in American fiction, paved the way for the development of feminist thinking in a different way. She boldly expresses feminine sexuality as well as feminine richness of expression and thought. Yet, her importance lies not only in her daring to explore the depth of feminine psychology, but also in her ability to exploit the short story form in order to show various aspects of a human being, particularly of women. Thus, Kate Chopin’s works, though have a bold feminist hue, can be analysed in terms of characters’ psychology, too. Two short stories – “Beyond the Bayou” and “Ma’ame Pélagie” – provide precisely this context in which the characters have an internal conflict. A beautiful story about La Folle presents an enchanting transformation of a woman from an asocial distanced human being into a helpful and happy member of a society. Pélagie, though still struggling against and resisting change at the end of the story, submits to the inevitable wind of change that is desirable by her family. Although the stories are very short, it presents a vivid picture of how La Folle and Ma’ame Pélagie fight against their own decisions, fears, and obsessions. Their physicality, thoughts, actions are clearly described in order to show how these characters find it difficult to overstep their psychologically drawn boundaries. The author skilfully portrays their arrival at their crisis time when they are forced to act and make their choices.
This crisis time in Chopin’s short stories is very similar to the concept of threshold in Bakhtin’s works because in both instances of the crisis time the characters experience a drastic change that is normally unexpected for them. Bakhtin’s concept of threshold is evidenced in his theory of the carnival deeply marked by the idea of a world turned upside down, various transformations, and merry making. That is why, the idea of threshold contains the idea of unexpectedness and a radical change. Chopin’s characters, in turn, reveal this capacity for a sudden change of life which makes it possible to link their crisis time to the idea of threshold in Bakhtin’s theory. The characters in Chopin’s stories and the characters that Bakhtin analyses in Dostoevsky’s works come out of the crisis time completely cleansed of their previous lives. They deliberately act and choose a new way of life. These characters are driven into this crisis time by a harsh reality of a human being’s existence: fear of loss of something vital. Chopin’s characters suddenly realise the dark shadow of possibility of loss, be this loss literal or metaphoric. In this way, Chopin shows the impossibility of any kind of stability in people’s lives. La Folle cannot be lost forever in the isolated fields of the bayou; Pélagie cannot be left in her past visions forever. This is a rule by which all human beings exist and which, in fact, prepares them for the last tough change – death, which, in Bakhtin’s theory, is just another crisis time and a new beginning.

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