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## **Patriarchy, Gender and Politics in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary***

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**Abstract:** Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a land mark in the history of novel writing and its publication revolutionized both the style and the content of this genre hereafter. The publication of *Madame Bovary* as a magazine serial caused Flaubert to be tried for committing an outrage against public and religious morality. Emma Bovary's audacious behaviour sent shock waves to the nineteenth century French society. The andro-centric nature of the text becomes evident in the portrayal of Emma whose downfall is shown to be inevitable because she deviates from the already fixed path for women in general. Flaubert is technically disinterested in his style but a close reading from the feminist point of view exposes his politics in subjugating Emma to patriarchal norms.

**Key words:** Gender, Morality, Sex, Freedom, Politics.

Since its first appearance in 1857, Gustave Flaubert's ground breaking novel *Madame Bovary* has been held as the first modern novel by many literary stalwarts. The craft of fiction gained a new momentum in the hands of Flaubert when he declared that the only thing that matters is style and demonstrated it in this novel. Walter Pater aptly called Flaubert the martyr of style. The content of the novel is no less revolutionary which represents Emma unhappily married to a mediocre provincial doctor Charles Bovary. Emma, as depicted by Flaubert, revolts against the ordinariness of her life by pursuing voluptuous dreams of ecstasy and love. But her sensuous and sentimental desires lead her only to suffering, corruption and downfall. A feminist reading of the novel will expose many hidden facts like the patriarchal structure of discourse, subordination of women under the mask of culture, and politics of literature. The study of novel within this theoretical frame-work will bring out what is "latent in manifest."



The publication of *Madame Bovary* as a magazine serial caused Flaubert to be tried for committing an outrage against public and religious morality. Emma Bovary's audacious behaviour sent shock waves to the nineteenth century French society. Like Stendhal and Balzac, Flaubert offered no morality of compromise and adaptation to his female protagonist. Emma, till the tragic end of her life, does not feel any compunction for her prodigality and extra-marital affairs. Flaubert was no feminist and for him all progressive movements were forms of romantic illusion. But, unconsciously he was critical of the ways in which the lives of women were circumscribed by men. His distinction between sex and gender remains undercover. The novel, covertly, debates other issues like 'Eternal Feminine' and 'sexual politics' which were highlighted in the second half of the twentieth century by feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet.

(I)

Emma's situation is precarious in the nineteenth century France where males were effectively free to adulterate outside their homes and women faced severe punishment and imprisonment if they did so. Fathers and husbands were the guardians of women and the latter ought to be virtuous wives and mothers. Women had no positive role to play, and they were restricted to the confines of home and garden. The Napoleonic civil code had transformed marriage from an essentially religious sacrament to a legal contract in which authority was henceforth invested in the husband. Emma Bovary's conduct is at variance with these codes of the male-centered structure of society.

Emma shrugs off the reductive definitions of woman conceived by patriarchy. Emma, of course, is not a particularly self-conscious character and she does not conceptualize her dilemma in these terms. However, she does actively resist the position allotted to her and acts in such a way that unsettles the stable categories of wife and mother. The very first line- "It took her long time to find her sewing box" (Flaubert 14)- that introduces Emma to the reader shows her lack of interest in house keeping. Emma, being the only daughter of Monsieur Rouault is expected to run the farm but she finds it boring and burdensome. Flaubert provides Emma with such attributes as elegant look, refinement, and fine education that cause her to frustrate the expectations of her father and husband.



Emma does not betray a single feature of a farmer's daughter and it seems absolutely natural is she dislikes the country atmosphere that does not suit her. Flaubert describes Emma:

The hair over her temples was waved slightly, a refinement which the country doctor now noticed for the first time in his life. The tops of her cheeks were pink. She had a shell-rimmed prince-nez which she carried, like a man, tucked in between two buttons of her bodice. (15)

The above quoted passage foregrounds the fact that the demands of oppressive culture are likely to lash with the nature of Emma.

The patriarchal ideology demands a woman to be imprisoned in domestic life and assume the role of 'angel in the house'. Whatever her entity- be it a mother, a sister, a wife, or a daughter- she has to behave in a certain way defined by the masculinist culture and only after internalizing these pre-determined codes of conduct she will be called a good woman. Moreover, to be called an ideal woman she is required to do great sacrifices which may include compromising her self-respect, crushing her wishes and desires, abandoning her position and denial of self-expression. This is the position of women in a patriarchal society. The myth of 'Eternal Feminine' attempts to trap woman into an impossible ideal by denying her individuality and freedom as illustrated in *The Second Sex*: "Thus, as against the dispersed, contingent and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal feminine unique and changeless" (De Beauvoir 283). The very title of the novel - *Madame Bovary*- is sufficient to demonstrate how the individual is alienated in the patriarchal and myth perpetuating society of nineteenth century France. The individuality of Emma vanishes in 'Madame Bovary'. The word 'Madame' signifies the married name bestowed upon all women who entered into the institution of marriage at the time. Emma's existential malice and obsession with fantasy is the product of her limited role in a male-centered society.

The andro-centric nature of the text becomes evident in the portrayal of Emma whose downfall is shown to be inevitable because she deviates from the already fixed path for women in general. The question - where is she?- raised by Helen Cixous in her excellent essay 'Sorties' becomes pertinent in case of Madame Bovary. Cixous is of the view that a society based on male-biased hierarchical opposition leaves a virginal slot for woman which is the place where men can



imprint their own wishes and desires. Emma is unwilling to accept this place passively. She feels depressed in the atmosphere created by her husband and his surroundings. Emma wants liberation from the monotonous and rotten life, which has been imposed upon her, and in doing so she challenges the established, authoritative structure of society, which curbs her self-realization. Observing the phallogocentric orientation of society Helen Cixous remarks:

If we consult literary history, it is the same story. It all comes back to man-to his torment, his to be at the origin back to father there is an intrinsic connection between the philosophical and the literary... and the phallogocentric. Philosophy is constructed on the premise of woman's abasement Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order which gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's functioning. (580)

Cixous concludes that "she does not exist." A woman exists only as a matter subjected to the desires of men. In the novel Emma has been presented merely as a sex-object in the world of Rodolphe and Leon.

## (II)

Discriminating between sex and gender Simone de Beauvoir argues that one's sex is determined by anatomy while gender is a social and cultural construct. Gender refers to socially constructed roles, activities, attributes and behaviour that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Hence women are supposed to be acquiescent, timid, passive and emotional. Emma, usually, does not behave as women are respected to do. For instance, the day after her wedding it is told:

The next day, however, he seemed a different man. It was he who acted as though he had lost his virginity during the night, while the bride's behaviour revealed nothing whatever.(Flaubert 29)

Emma, like a conventional bride, is not shy of losing her virginity. On the contrary Charles behaves like a woman.

Furthermore, motherhood which is considered to be the most coveted and beautiful



experience in the life of a married woman turns out to be a disappointing affair for Emma. It is Charles who is excited to know that Emma is pregnant; she remains indifferent. Emma is extremely disgusted at the birth of a daughter as she was desperately expecting a son. She lacks the maternal instinct and leaves her daughter-Berthe- mostly in the care of her maid servant, and hardly gets time to feed her child. Sometimes Emma is cruel to Berthe to the extent of a step-mother. After her separation from Leon, in a fit of annoyance she shoves Berthe away and the little child sustains injury. What is defined as 'the heart of a mother' is absent in Emma.

Emma's sudden forcefulness and quickness of decision are considered to be the qualities of men created for action. In one of her clandestine meetings with Rodolphe in her house, Emma hears the sound of approaching footsteps in the lane and whispers to Rodolphe:

"Someone is coming", She said.

He blew out the candle.

"Do you have your pistols?"

"What for.?"

"Why ... to defend yourself, "Said Emma. (Flaubert 165)

Here, a conventional woman had tried to hide herself and let her lover do some act of bravery to defend himself. But Rodolphe is shocked to see the bravery of Emma who is not solely governed by her heart. In Emma one finds a mystical fusion of reason and passion typical of men.

Apart from that Emma had an unlimited urge to dominate and to seduce. Charles never dared to object to the way Emma spent money and strove to pursue a lavish life which their moderate income hardly allowed to do. Charles becomes extremely helpless when Emma is angry with him over his failure to cure the crippled leg of one of his patients named Hippolyte. She leaves him emotionally shattered when he is in desperate need of consolation. Further, she scolds Charles for being impatient on her coming home late and thereby snatches the permission to indulge in her escapades without restraint.

Similarly, Leon, the first lover of Emma in the second phase of their affair can help dancing to her tunes. He starts absenting himself from his office conspicuously under the influence of



Emma. She treats him as an infant. Leon is thunderstruck at her promiscuity as evident in the following passage:

He did less out of vanity than for the sole purpose of pleasing her. He never argued against her ideas; he accepted all her tastes; he was becoming her mistress more than she was his. His soul was carried away by her sweet words and kisses. Where had she learned that depravity, so profuse and so artfully concealed that it was almost intangible? (Flaubert 273)

Leon is as submissive before Emma as Charles. Hence, it is not difficult to perceive a conflict between Emma Bovary's conventional feminine role and increasingly powerful masculine urges which ultimately undermines her existence and leads her to suicide. Emma's sickness can be connected to her paradoxical existence figured out by Flaubert himself.

### (III)

On being asked, "who is Madame Bovary?", Flaubert answered, "Madame Bovary c'est moi [is me]". So, it is not unsafe to guess that Flaubert intentionally denied Emma her complete female existence. Flaubert's attitude is, therefore, ambivalent towards Emma. The manliness which has been bestowed upon her serves only to highlight and aggravate her moral and physical degradation. Her masculinity does not make her the heroine of the novel but rather a villainous character who is gradually being vampirized by some evil.

Emma, for instance, is shown to be an escapist who neglects her duties for romantic delusions which she engendered by reading too much of romantic fiction and fashion magazines. It makes her immoral and irreligious and further results in the deterioration of her marital life. In this way Emma is solely responsible for her destruction. This may be the overt intention of Flaubert but there are passages in the novel which present a different picture. Charles's daily routine is enough to dismay a newly married wife. For the whole day he would ride all over the countryside treating his patients and Emma was left alone with no one around to share her feelings. To counter this loneliness she indulged herself in reading novel and magazines. Charles often returned home late in the evening to a comforting atmosphere, a dining table exquisitely laid for him and a charming,



attractively dressed wife prepared to impart a soothing touch to his weary soul. But to Emma's disappointment, having had his dinner Charles would immediately sleep as depicted by Flaubert:

He began to read it after dinner, but the warmth of the room, combine with his digestion, always made him fall asleep within five minutes; and there he sat, with his chin in his hands and his hair falling down to the base of the lamp, like a mane. Emma would look at him and shrug her shoulder." (Flaubert 60)

Thus, Charles prevents Emma from finding out the meaning of "words "bliss", "passion" and "rapture" which had seemed so beautiful to her in books"(Flaubert 34). Nothing can be more tortuous for Emma who expected married life to be an exhilarating experience. In Emma's meditation on her marital dissatisfaction we catch our first real glimpse of her thoughts, and the stage is set for the escalating crisis of her life.

Emma's pregnancy brings another burden upon her soul. Emma's desire of having a son may be the consequence of her realization of the pettiness of a woman's existence in her society. She often thinks of freedom of her childhood days which she has lost gradually in becoming a wife from a virgin. Emma is convinced that men are absolutely free to extract all kinds of pleasure in life and, therefore, she wants a boy who will have the power to enjoy life which she lacks. Moreover, this conviction of Emma gets stronger with the passage of time. The experience she gathers from her relationships with Leon and Rodolphe breeds only frustration in her life.

Emma deeply laments what Kate Millet has pointed out in her *Sexual Politics* that women are always denied sexual freedom and biological control over their body. Emma feels powerfully attracted to the local clerk Leon but she is unable to give herself to love because of the restrictions of her marriage. After Leon's departure to Paris, Emma becomes more irritated and neurotic. Subsequently she yields to Rodolphe only to be seduced and cheated.

However, it is not hard to find evidence in the text to corroborate the point that Charles acts as a catalyst to push Emma into her liasion with Rodolphe. But Charles's mistake is overshadowed by Emma's whims. Charles, despite all his thoughtlessness, has been portrayed as an innocent victim of Emma's action. But, he is as much responsible in incurring sufferings and woes on his family as





Emma is. To substantiate this point it is significant to quote Kate Millet who maintains:

The large quantity of guilt attached to sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the female, who is, culturally speaking, held to be the culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison, whatever the extenuating circumstances. (54)

In the present case when Rodolphe initially offers to loan Emma a horse to ride, she declines the offer. But it is Charles who insists strongly on her that she accept. Not only this but he also requests Rodolphe to manage the time of trip according to the latter's convenience. This proves out to be a golden opportunity for a libertine like Rodolphe who plays his card right. Thus Charles becomes an accomplice in initiating Emma's infidelity. In addition to that the classic masculine fantasy dictates the imagination of men to put women always in a vulnerable situation as illustrated by Kate Millet in context of great novelists like Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, D.H. Lawrence and Jean Genet. Flaubert also presents Rodolphe, when seen from Emma's point of view, as handsome, potent and irresistible to an almost mystical degree. It is therefore no very great surprise to the reader that Emma falls into his hands. After this Emma keeps sinking into the quagmire of debauchery and prodigality which claims her life.

To conclude we find that Flaubert's objective and disinterested handling of the subject-matter, as it appears on the surface, fails to do justice to the female standpoint. It is believed that Flaubert allows his characters to develop their points of view unhampered. But the feminist reading of the novel resists this notion and demonstrates that Emma's point of view is manipulated by the author and her demonic projection is the product of a system that remains male-biased despite all claims of equality, objectivity and impartiality.

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