



ADULTEROUS FEMINA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'S EMMA BOVARY AND NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S HESTER PRYNNE

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ABSTRACT

Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Secret Letter* in 1850. It is a romance set in the 17th Century Boston where Puritanism was the leading religion. In this novel he created his beautiful adulterous heroin Hester Prynne who was punished by the Puritans to wear the scarlet letter 'A' on her bosom for having committed adultery. Though Hawthorne's ancestors were Puritans, he did not believe that adultery was a heinous crime. In his view it was subjective and he believed that through good deeds and sufferings the adulterer could reach the heights of spirituality. Through her sufferings Hester ascent spiritual heights. Gustave Flaubert gave birth to his heroin Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary* in 1856. For him adultery was a quest for perfect love and he found something poetic in it. He strongly identified with his adulterous heroine Emma Bovary and glorified her as the apostle of love and romance.

This article explores how Emma Bovary and Hester Prynne were created equal by their respective creators. Adultery was a part of their quest for ideal love and in this act they were following their instincts. They were alike in their physical beauty and their romantic temperament. They both found their marital life insufficient and indulged in adultery as they believed it to be the search for perfect love. Having a romantic temperament, they repudiated social codes and conventions. Finally, both Hawthorne and Flaubert deified their respective heroines as the goddesses of love.

Key words: Adultery, love, romance

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INTRODUCTION

Hester Prynne and Emma Bovary were created equal by Hawthorne and Flaubert respectively. They were painted by the same brush. They were coming from two different parts of the globe and lived at times with a gap of two centuries. Hester lived in the 17th Century Puritan Boston and Emma Bovary came from the 19th Century French bourgeois society. Still they were akin in many respects. They were similar in their physical beauty

and they both possessed romantic hearts. These adulteresses were perfect beauties. Hester's tall figure, rich black hair and her glowing white skin recalled oriental queens. Flaubert endowed Emma with pale skin, black curls and large black eyes. Imagination, dreams and fancy held them above their societies. Hester had a "wild and picturesque peculiarity" (Hawthorne 82). Emma was in the perpetual search for the intoxicating joys of love. They were also alike in their hatred for their

husbands and their mediocre married life. Hester could not love her old hunchback husband who valued scholarship over his young wife. Emma grew sick of her stupid husband who couldn't satisfy her romantic needs. These adulteresses viewed adultery as an act of pure love to which they attached a spell of spirituality. Hester thought that her act of love "had a consecration of its own" (Hawthorne 186). For Emma adultery was a poetry that initiated her into the dazzling world of passions. Hester and Emma both despised the social and religious codes and conventions. Hester's union with the young clergyman Arthur Dimmesdale went against the rigid Puritan moral codes. Emma Bovary's romantic spirit was in conflict with the conventions of the French bourgeois society. Lastly, Hawthorne and Flaubert placed their heroines at spiritual heights. Hawthorne glorified Hester as the angel of love and maternity. Flaubert exalted Emma as the goddess of ideal romantic love.

First of all, the physical beauty of Hester and Emma has to be compared. Both of them were perfect beauties. Hester's tall figure, rich black hair and her glowing white skin made her an angel of feminine beauty. Feminine gentility and dignity shone out of her "lady-like" person. Depths of beauty rippled in her black eyes. In the case of Emma, her white fingers, rose-colored cheeks, smooth black curls and above all her large eyes "black in the shade, dark blue in the broad daylight" (Flaubert 26) formed her a queen of beauty. Margaret Lowe in her book *Towards a Real Flaubert* says that the name 'Emma' was the name of Norman Queens (30). Emma's beauty made her lover Rodolphe call her "Madonna".

Next, both Hester and Emma had a romantic bent of mind. Imagination, fancy, dreams, love of beauty and passions, such aspects of romantic hearts dominated in them. Hester's was the case of a romantic woman trapped in the hostile Puritan world. "She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous oriental characteristic, a taste for the gorgeously beautiful..." (Hawthorne 85). Though her adultery with Arthur Dimmesdale was punished with the scarlet letter 'A' on her bosom, she adorned the letter with golden needle work in which she wrought her dreams. Wearing the scarlet letter, she

fantasized about an "unchristianised" land of love where she could join her lover. Coming to Emma, "Imagination that supreme tyrannical faculty" (Baudelaire 93) filled her. During her convent years she read many romance books that shaped her temperament. She felt herself lost in the mystical fumes and flowers of the church. She was obsessed with romantic love at a very young age and often dreamt of a celestial lover who could take her to the far off land of passions and mysteries. Oriental sultans and weeping sweethearts in the arms of lovers "brave as lions" (Flaubert 28) came in her reveries. The sermons that explained love and marriage touched her soul.

In addition, Hester's and Emma's disillusionment with their married life is to be taken into consideration. Marriage sealed the doom of these women. They were disgusted with life and wanted to be free from their loveless wedlock. Hester could not love her aged hunchback husband Roger Chillingworth. He matched Hester's "budding youth" with his "decay" (Hawthorne 76). He was a scholar and he loved his books more than he did his young wife. Books formed his world and he married young Hester to satisfy his physical needs. She increasingly hated him and began to feel that her husband had hugely wronged her. He never realized her worth and she "felt no love, or feigned any" (Hawthorne 76). "The man was in no position to love Hester physically or to felicitate her emotionally..." (46), said Janesh Kapoor in his *Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*. Sterility crept into her married life and she wanted to be free from her life that seemed bleak.

Emma's dreams of a celestial lover who led her to "the energies of passions" (Flaubert 53) failed when she had to marry the stupid doctor Charles Bovary. He fell short of the lover of her dreams and she grew sick of him. She was filled with anguish when she couldn't feel the intoxicating joys of love. He was unable to give any emotional satisfaction to his romantic wife. Emma was chocked in her issueless life with Charles and she made it a habit to scan the horizon from her window in the hope a new life. But all her imaginative flights ended in disillusionment. Throwing her wedding bouquet into

burning fire she wished to be free from marriage vow.

Another factor that connected Hester and Emma was their shared view of adultery as an act of pure love. These adulterous heroines highly regarded their adultery as a quest for sacred love. Hester's husband Chillingworth had been missing for two years and was presumed dead. In the New England she gave her heart to the young priest Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester looked at her adultery with Dimmesdale as an act of sacred love. She found it heavenly and asserted that her love for the priest "had a consecration of its own" (Hawthorne 186). She never felt herself to be a sinner and so she adorned the scarlet letter in bright embroidery. Undergoing the punishments inflicted on her by the Puritan magistrates, she dreamt of a "marriage altar" on which she could unite with her lover. In the forest scene , Hester untied the scarlet letter from her gown and hurled it on the ground. This rebellious action demonstrated that she esteemed love and life over the puritan moral codes. She pursued her instincts and declined the puritan version of adultery. She enjoyed the "radiance" of love with Dimmesdale. Though she had options to escape from Boston, she took the scarlet letter on her bosom and underwent other punishments, in order to save her lover from public resentments. Her love for him was of the purest variety, which wouldn't alter under any oppressing conditions. Charles Child Walcutt in his *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Scarlet Letter* accentuated that "Her insistence that 'what we did had a consecration of its own' justified her adultery to herself..." (78).

Flaubert had a passion for adultery which he took as a quest for perfect love. The same was true of his adulteress Emma. For Emma adultery was a poetry or a marvelously sweet existence in the supernal realm. She contemplated it an ethereal state of being that elevated her above the petty bourgeois existence. Her act of adultery was part of her desperate effort to fly into the immense space from her mediocre married life. She relished its "Passion, ecstasy and delirium" (Flaubert 124). Embracing her personal moral codes, she reveled in adultery without any prick of conscience. Moreover, she made an all out effort to cling to adultery and

never repented her action. She sought the celestial lover of her dreams in two males--the Clerk Leon and the land owner Rodolphe. Love letters, tears and kisses touched sweetness in her. She never believed that adultery was a sin and her suicide at the end of the novel was not an act of repentance.

Further, Emma and Hester expressed a common disdainful attitude to social codes and conventions. They disapproved of social and religious codes and followed their own individual morality. Hester denounced the rigid Puritan moral principles and affirmed that her adultery with Dimmesdale had something divine about it. Her adorning of the scarlet letter with attractive embroidery demonstrated her rejection of Puritanism. Her rebellion against the Puritan Magistrates was exhibited when she hurled the scarlet letter on the ground while with her lover. Hester's "haughty " smile when at the scaffold was actually an embracing of a law and order of her own. Her disgust with the Puritan Boston led her to dream of an "unchristianised" and "lawless" land (Hawthorne 221)

Coming to Emma, she always hated the French bourgeois society. She transported herself above the bourgeois existence in her quest for ideal love. The 19th Century French bourgeois society appeared insignificant and contemptible to her. Her romantic self was in conflict with the bourgeois morality. Getting trapped in this hostile world, she couldn't attain her romantic aspirations. She declined the society's verdict that she was "compromising" her morality. She grew disillusioned with it and enjoyed the passions of love "without remorse, without anxiety and without guilt" (Flaubert 124).

Finally, these adulterous heroines were both deified by their creators. Though the society and religion labeled them sinners, these adulteresses were elevated to divine heights by their creators. Hester became an outcast in the Puritan Boston and was subjected to severe punishment for having committed adultery. Hawthorne didn't believe that adultery was a heinous crime to get the punishment of death. He justified her act of love and severely criticized the Puritan magistrates. In the scaffold scene, he pictured Hester with a baby in her arms as

"Divine Maternity" (Hawthorne 56). Through endless sufferings, Hester became the Sister of Mercy in the Puritan society. Dimmesdale adored her as "the better angel" and gradually the letter 'A' began to mean "Angel" instead of "Adulteress". Thus Hawthorne deified her as the angel of love. Mark Van Does emphasized in his *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, "Hester becomes a heroine, almost a goddess, into whom the characters of all other women in Hawthorne flows" (130).

Gustave Flaubert strongly identified with his character Emma and exalted her as the goddess of love and romance. He glorified his beautiful adulteress by calling her "Venus" and "Madonna on Pedestal" (Flaubert 122) in *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert made his character Homais call Emma "a Venus". Her lover Rodolphe praised her beauty by naming her "Madonna on Pedestal". At the time of her suicide she appeared "phantom like" and overawed the beholders. Here, Flaubert adored his adulteress making her Venus, the goddess of love and marriage.

All told, a striking similarity could be seen between Hawthorne's Hester Prynne and Flaubert's Emma Bovary. Hester came from the 17th Century Puritan Boston and Emma hailed from the 19th Century France. But their lives bore strong resemblance in many respects. They were akin in their physical beauty, romantic temperament, their spiritual quest for ideal love and their disapproval of social and religious codes and conventions. Both these beautiful adulteresses were created equal and deified by their respective creators.

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