



EMMA, THE ETERNAL FEMININE: A STUDY OF GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'S *MADAME BOVARY*

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ABSTRACT

Flaubert's most discussed work; *Madame Bovary* came indeed to be considered as a paragon of the genre. Writers admired it as one admires a lesson. For Henry James, Flaubert was the "novelist's novelist". Though he was filled with moral admiration for Flaubert, he found *Madame Bovary* morally shallow. For Zola, *Madame Bovary* represented the 'roman type'. The theme of *Madame Bovary*, and in particular the central motif of adultery, had been a major obsession of Flaubert ever since his adolescence. *Pasion et vertu*, written at the age of eighteen is a striking miniature version of *Madame Bovary*. Emma Bovary's passion was felt and experienced by a number of heroines who lived before and after her. Emma never felt guilty of her infidelity; to put it in other words, she loved her passions more than reasons. She never allowed reasons to intrude her vitality. Emma really suffers for her quivering passions, which she felt at first towards her husband and then towards her two lovers. Had she been sincerely loved by any one of her lover's, her end must have been totally different. Her passion remains to be a burden for her till the end of the novel. *Madame Bovary* is dedicated to the passions of its main character Emma, her eternal quest for the male deity, which extends to her tomb. The paper tries to extend thoughts on the fall of the eternal feminine.

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Flaubert is a writer who must always appeal more to other authors than to world at large, because the art of writing, the indefatigable pursuit of perfect expression, were always before him; and because he hates the lax felicities of improvisation as disloyalty to the most sacred procedures of the literary artist. (Giraud 2)

Flaubert is presented in the history of literature as the father of realism. "I myself am *Madame Bovary*".

In his fabulous novel *Madame Bovary* he was able to metamorphose himself into a woman. "The work has revealed Flaubert's narcissism, his onanism, his idealism, his solitude, his dependence, his femininity, his passivity" (Sartre 15).

The protagonist of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, is a nineteenth century romantic woman, who dreamt futilely of escaping from a life that has become a prison to her. She has got a highly romanticised view of the world and craves beauty,

passion and wealth. The first glimpse that we have of Emma is through Charles' eyes. Flaubert creates a fragmentary and progressive portrait of Emma, the whiteness of her nail, her deep black eyes, and her full lips. She was soaked and whipped by the men who took everything from her and dipped her into the marshy grounds of adultery. They could never quench her romantic thirst, lest bid adieu throwing her all alone in to a dark abyss, thus crushing her dreams to smithereens.

"Emma is still, in Baudelaire's words, seeking that elusive goal so stressed in early nineteenth century, I 'Ideal' (Lowe 20). Right from adolescence, Emma was in search of a 'God' whose image she saw in her books and reveries. Emma appears as a victim of her own naiveté and inexperience. It is really a fall on her part to misjudge her importunate lovers.

Emma appears as the eternal feminine in her tragic relationship throughout her life with the male, presented by Flaubert in many forms, culminating in the very poison itself, the etymological sense of the word arsenic being 'male'.

(Lowe 27)

She is the eternal feminine. Even after her death, Emma certainly seems to hover around some of the characters. Charles becomes a spinner of romantic dreams, disillusioned and betrayed in the death of Emma, holding a lock of her silky hair in his hands. Felicite, her servant, who shared all the secrets of her mistress, seems to learn nothing from her tragic fall thus eloping with her lover, as Emma has desired to do.

Emma's was the passion, which was felt and experienced by a number of heroines who lived before and after her. She never felt guilty of her infidelity; to put it in other words she loved her passions more than reasons. She never allowed reasons to intrude her vitality. Though sometimes she was disturbed by her "duties" towards her family, soon she overcame it by following solely her unobtrusive passions.

It is sheer situation that makes a person commit "adultery". In Emma's case, she was as I have mentioned earlier in search of a 'God' whose image she sought to find in the face of three males,

Charles, Leon and Rodolphe. It was only after reaching the pinnacles of destruction that she realizes she was piling all her dreams in a world totally apathetic to her. Though we see her life ebbing away, the wetness of the passion, which she spilled ashore, seems to twinkle without being dried up by the blaze of the sun.

Emma's drowning began with the introduction of masculinity into her life and ended with her incredible surrender to death. She herself exclaims, "In my case...it began with my marriage"(Flaubert 83).

The adulterous passion, felt as liberation, awakening, spontaneous growth, authentication of the self, is the natural correlative. But the need to have an unforced but responsible relationship – to love and to be loved – either in marriage or out of it, brings into play the dangerous impulses of the self [...] (Poulet 26)

Emma was put in a convent at a very young age. There she was lost in the mystical perfumes, the holy water and the lighted tapers on the flower-strewn altar. "The young girl was intoxicated by the colour of the stained-glass windows and by the oriental hues. She gorged herself on the solemn music of vespers" (Baudelaire 94).

Back from the convent, Emma found herself an odd man out. She found nothing in the gray flat country to devour her romantic spirit. It was in such a dry situation that she meets Charles Bovary, who was a country doctor. She took him as her celestial lover; man who excelled in manifold activities and who could initiate her into the energies of passion and refinements of life. But she has been too late when she realized his cowardice and docility. Her 'man idol' soon scatters and she stands baffled in front of her eternal dreams. Disillusioned and disgusted as she was, desperate and hopeless as she was, rush was to an 'other world', may be 'adultery' in a pejorative sense, but to her it was a key to her house of dreams. In spite of being disenchanted she rather continues her wild search for real deity. Her mounting hatred for Charles can be seen when she later observes "... his thick lips trembling, which lend an added stupidity to his face. Even his back...was irritating to see. His

frock-coat seemed to wear upon it the whole drabness of the personality within" (Flaubert 114).

The names Emma and Charles are of German origin. 'Charles' is derived from the German 'Kerl' by way of the Latin 'Carolus' and means quite simply 'male'. The name Emma, in origin was the 'Embla' whom Grimm mentions in his "Teutonic Mythology" as the 'first woman' (Lowe 30).

Emma though preferred a midnight wedding with torches; her father Roult could not digest her idea. After marriage, Emma and Charles went to their house at Tostes, where the coughing of patients from Charles consultancy reeked into her kitchen. Charles was a person without much dreams and ambition compared to Emma's insatiable and never-ending dreams. He narrates to Emma, how he was humiliated in front of the assembled relatives, by a colleague from Yvetot. Though she feels to hit him up, she runs out into the passage screaming, 'what a poor creature!'. The more she realizes his passivity the more she becomes deliberately aware of hating him. Flaubert gracefully describes her budding irritation to Charles, when Emma watches her husband's despicable habits.

He used to whittle down the corks of the empty bottles during dessert. He sucked his teeth after eating. When he drank soup he made a gulping noise at every mouthful and now that he had begun to put weight, his puffy cheeks seemed to be pushing his eyes... (Flaubert 75)

Her irritation almost ends up with a culmination in hatred when he commits an imprudent mistake in the operation of recovering Hyppolyte's clubfoot. She was then really convinced that Charles was not at all 'that ideal man' whom she is in search of. God in her imagination would undoubtedly cry out in mortification if it were Charles' commonplace dull words. He remained a stupid husband towards the end who was incapable even to understand the altering passions of his wife and blindly believing that he satisfied her in every sense. Charles will never know any more than that. For him she will always be that indecipherable stranger that she will cease to be for us.

He is that center of a circle, the source from which stupidity seems to emanate, the prototype of all the other examples of stupidity and professional incompetence which surround him. (Turnel)

When Emma became pregnant, she longed for a strong dark boy to be delivered. The reason of which she said:

A man, at any rate, is free. He can explore the passions and the continents, can surmount obstacles, and reach out to most distant joys whereas a woman is constantly thwarted. At once inert and pliant, she has to content with both physical weaknesses and legal subordination. Her will is like a veil on her bonnet, fastened by a single string and quivering at every breeze that blows. (Flaubert 101)

Contrary to her wish, as it used to be in her life, she gave birth to a girl. This was an inevitable blow on her life. Emma at her wits end for understanding and sympathy, approaches the village priest, Bournisien. She wanted to convey her anguish and frustration but the priest fails to understand her inner sufferings.

After her meeting with the priest, she woke up as if from a dream. It was then that Emma fell in love with Leon, the young clerk, whose name suggested 'Lion'. His poetic clichés and veil of his modest charming appearance weaved the web for her. Later we see her in mute love with Leon. She thought of eloping with Leon and start anew life somewhere far away. But Leon's hesitation to declare his love for her made Emma's dreams once more sink to despair. He was weary of loving without any results and so left Yonville with his untold passions.

It was then Monsieur Boulanger, a bachelor, "who has a mythological wolf in his name" (Lowe 36), strode into the barren life of Emma. He rode on strong horses in a velvet jacket full of silken laces. He was a womaniser who had a special adoration for 'pale woman' and the one and only grain of 'but' that hacked him was "how to get rid of, afterwards?" Rodolphe knew the art of courting and so he did not take much time in trapping her.

Emma's entrance into the world of passions elevated her soul above the habitual level of existence to the height of spirituality. An azure of affinity encompassed her. The light in her soul now put a sign of revenge in her black eyes. After a number of affectionate instances, Rodolphe promises Emma to flee from Yonville with her. Emma thus starts to count down days and to dream about her new life with Rodolphe. He on the other hand, was racking his brain with calculations. He was not such a fool to run away with Emma, who was nothing more than 'a pretty Mistress' to him. It was next day that a letter of adieu reached Emma, quivering in her hand was fragmented hopes of her on providence. The sudden realisation threw her into a nervous breakdown in which she tried to kill herself by throwing herself out of the attic window. The brain fever set her on her bed for months.

Emma's gifts to Rodolphe and Leon made her indebted to the shopkeeper Lheureux. When the sum reached ten thousand Francs, he sent her a bill. Her failure in paying the sum resulted in a court order to seize her house and articles. Emma could not inform Charles of the matter and her father was not in a position to help her. In her mad and despairing rush for money, she reaches Rodolphe's door. "I have no money" these words from Rodolphe came out of him like a slam on her face. She found it hard to regain herself from the numbness. "Together with Lheureux Rodolphe, incorporated in his composite figure can also be seen as one of those monsters, half man and half beast" (Lowe 88). During her mad rush home after Rodolphe's refusal; she was conscious only of her soul slipping away from her. Soon we see her on the deathbed.

When the men whom she loved and admired, deceived her wearing a smirk on their face, bewildered and despaired, she decided to surrender to death. She rushed to the druggist Homais' shop and from the blue jar she swallows a handful of arsenic. "There is not much in dying, I shall go to sleep and it will be over". She wishes her death to be as calm as a sleep but even her final wish was denied to her. Her death was very horrible and painful as her life was.

She died even more to escape from Charles and the intolerable weight of his

magnanimity than from Leon's cowardice, Binet's shocked disapproval, the disappointment of her whole relationship with Rodolphe and Lheureux and existence itself. (Lowe 60)

If death were an escape from the meshes of her life, she escaped. This world with its incapacity to realise her passions and dreams were not of her. She must have been transferred into a more solid world. It is to be noted that, she carried nothing of herself from this world. In a sense she was too innocent to underestimate her voracious lovers who considered her only as one among the many. Then how can they adhere to her yearning of elopement? Towards the end she learns nothing from life lest her yearning for passions, she was to live in her fantasy world and in her death she might have reached 'that world' where love's touchstone resides - to continue her quest for Him with her never ending zest.

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