

## Dirt of Art in *Madame Bovary*

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**Abstract-**Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a unique literary piece that incorporates aestheticism and witty disposure to Emma's complex reality. The pronounced acceptance and reputation of the novel despite of a prolonged period of criticism proves that the universal appeal of this French novel lies in the artistic and tactful disclosure (in precisely calculative and measured style) of the dark secrets of a feminine mind. The fact that the English translation of this ingenious creation is so influential attests the superiority of its quality in French. The splendor of the narration overreaches the boundaries of life, experience and death and abounds in the exaltation of becoming a masterpiece. This article illustrates the features that make the manuscript so overwhelmingly "dirty" yet inviting. In course of appreciating the novel, the prospects of readers' fascination and the author's intentions are also evaluated from the archive of appreciations of the book. The richness of the story is imparted by the pragmatic effect of the objective correlatives in Flaubert's style and the details of the emotional intensities. This study urges to dismantle the complicated value of literature in realizing life. It also reinforces the poetic justice to prevail where art must exist for its sole sake. Emma, the centre of interest in *Madame Bovary*, is the ambassador of human beings who fail to achieve the mused state of their existence. Flaubert with his strokes of wisdom and dexterous artistic maneuver reveals the ultimate paradox of anarchy in the social conventions designed to annihilate the self in order to discover it. This study unfolds how the story of shame and guilt turns into an allegory of life by the writer's magic wand.

**Keywords-** Aesthetic Splendour; Psyche; Realism; Stylistic Features; Femininity

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert was a highly influential literary realist who was very well-known for his scrupulous devotion to style and aesthetics. The writer has also a life history of mischievous and unruly relationships which is also evident from his biographies. The author had to face prosecution on moral grounds for the tale of obscenity and immorality in *Madame Bovary*. The undoubtedly rich style and aesthetic grandeur of the novel appeals the readers to a better understanding of one's psyche and behavior. Though the research on *Madame Bovary* is not very wide, it is explicit that the stylistic features of the novel contribute to the effect created by the story. The gracious glory in between the lines of the novel are never demeaned by the naked and clawed sinful obsessions of Emma's reality.

The delight of going through *Madame Bovary*, a book of nearly two hundred and eighty six closely printed pages, lies in the delicate craftsmanship of pictorial magnificence that discloses the dark secrets of Emma Bovary's life. The novel explores the coincidence of the implicit psychological turmoil in Emma, the temporary exuberance of her experiences and the details of the surrounding real objects, environmental nature and her external physical responses. The dexterity of the crafty knitting of the novel changes the obnoxious, appallingly sad, sordid secrets and peccadilloes of Emma's life into a hailing piece of exclusive art. The author justifies his prospect of digging up dirt and revealing the seamy side of the vulnerable character of Emma by the worth of the novel's artistic venture. In the following extract, Emma's seductive spell is described poetically where on the

contrary Leon, primarily dissociates and abandons his carnal desires for Emma and soaring her high as virtuous and inaccessible on the pinnacle for the status she secured as a dutiful wife and mother:

*Emma grew thinner, her cheeks turned pale, her face looked longer. With her black hair, her large eyes, her straight nose, her gliding step, always silent now, did it not seem as if she passed through life almost without touching it., bearing on her brow the pale mark of a sublime destiny? She was so sad and so calm, so gentle and yet so shy, that by her side you felt under the spell of a frosty charm, just as you shiver in church at the scent of the flowers mingling with the feel of cold marble. Even other people were not safe from this seduction. (1992, 85)...*

Later the writer continues:

*But she was filled with lust, with rage, with hatred. That elegantly pleated dress concealed a heart in turmoil, and those lips so chaste told nothing of her torment. She was in love with Leon, and she sought solitude, the better to take her pleasure, undistracted, in images of him. The actual sight of him upset these voluptuous meditations. (1992, 85)*

In one of her depressed days when she is watching the sky, the novelist provides the sensitive description of the inner mind through the outer world:

*They (the clouds) were massing in the western sky towards Rouen, a fast-uncoiling blackness, its edges trimmed with great strands of sunlight, like golden arrows on a display trophy, while the rest of the empty sky was white as porcelain. But a gust of wind curved the poplars, and now the rain was falling; it spluttered over the green leaves. Then the sun came out, the hens clucked, sparrows shook out their wings in the damp bushes, and as the pools of rain on the gravel ebbed away they took the pink flowers fallen from an acacia. (1992, 96)*

The status of women in the society and in art has always been driven by the patriarchal notions and dogma. The depiction of women is again subject to the linguistic and structural components that construct the literary base of literature. The “weakness” of women and their unawake selves often serve as lucrative materials both to be written on and to be read. Emma Bovary represents just another feminine figure growing in a patriarchic society (and also a conservative covenant school). She is the prey of her unidentified growling and gnawing biological desires that guides her through the path of “dirt” to unleash the beast in the mind. In other words, the undefined superego of Emma Bovary allows her id to rule over and drive her ego. The author with merciless precision draws the (naked!) story Emma’s raging hormones and her moral degradation and gradual but shocking perishment. The occasional filthy indecency in the story compliments the balance of reality and shame therefore, results in the flawless literary creation, a piece of real art. It arouses moments of tingling fascinations and sensuous appeals to its readers and makes the experience of reading the book enjoyable.

Taking into account the definition that gender is a “behavior, a learned or conditioned response to a society’s view of how men and women should act” (Gamble: 2002), the novel also turns to be a fictitious documentation of the gender roles played by the poignant figures in it. The vulnerability of Emma and her controversial “feminine” behavior designs the oppression of her “being” firstly as a woman (wife/mother), secondly as an emotionally victimized mistress (twice!) and thirdly as a frustrated individual. Kate Millet’s *Second Sex* (1970) (cited) analyzes “women’s oppression” to be rooted in social conceptions of “femininity” (Gamble: 2002) Therefore, the novel reinforces the concept of gender as “a complex discursive construction” (Gamble: 2002)

Flaubert, “eagerly claimed by romanticists, realists, and naturalists alike” (1921: 809), never intended to “preach” or “tease” as it is in vain to do so, he believed. Lewisohn in “A Modern Novel” justifies Flaubert’s “impersonal narrative, a perfect rhythm of style and movement, a close analysis of the emotional life” (1909:

467) as his firm indifference of the consequences. Emma, “an average mortal” (1899: 407) grows as a capricious lady in this “imaginative narrative” (1909:467), where her adultery and irresponsible behavior with her family simply narrates what is most likely real in life with no didactic or moral message. The technique of naturalism and romanticism in this modern French novel is uniquely art for art’s sake. Similar to what is pointed out in *Authorship and Liberty* (1918: 917), Flaubert’s uncompromising portrayal of Emma intends to represent the truth as it is in real life and not the visionary moral ideal world.

The aesthetic splendor of Flaubert’s masterpiece *Madame Bovary* remains in the “unity of final impression (1909:467)”, the delightful gratification the readers end the book with. Even the monstrosity of death seems to produce catharsis and purgation of the feeling in the readers because of the cause-effect based plot (therefore, realistic), cohesion of compositional elements (image, feelings, setting, relations, etc) and super effective holistic depiction (author’s style). By the end of the novel when Emma is dejected at Rodolphe’s rejection decides to get arsenic from the pharmacist’s shop to commit suicide, her faintly condition and tormented senses are described as follows:

In a darkening sky, crows were on the wing.

*All of a sudden, it looked as if fiery red globules were bursting in the air, like bullets that explode on impact, spinning, spinning, and melting away on the snow, among the branches. In the centre of each one, Rodolphe’s face appeared. They began to multiply, they clustered together, they penetrated her; everything disappeared. She recognized the light from the houses in the distance, shining through the mist. (1992, 256)*

The novel takes the task of dismantling truths of Emma’s sinful temptations, her sensuousness obsessions and her abject mind clouded with the calamity of adultery. The symbols and imagery incorporated in the story of Emma’s life unpack the essential facts of her life into bursts of shocking experiences. The readers enjoy the “delicious charm” of “creating” in imagination when the symbols in the form of the concrete for the abstract or the unnamed feelings, allow to get the “satisfaction of guessing its nature, little by little” (2015:32). The pleasure of sharing the feelings of Emma and being with her journey of life to death in lucid yet the powerful narration heightens through the stylistic grandeur with which the narrator lavishly flows describing both the external and internal worlds.

In the entire novel, Emma, the Goddess of sensuality, always waited for something –romantically surprising- to happen but later her disappointments made her visualize “a bolted door” at the end of the passage. The jolting restlessness of her soul in her conjugal life is also apparent from the horrible tormenting death pangs, “ghastly jolting of her ribs” and “furious breathing” as her death “rattled” before her soul was set free (1992: 266). The romanticist-realist Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* is poetic due to the

dominance of imagination but concurrence of reality which is embedded in “his (Flaubert’s ) conscience” (1921: 813). Charles chooses “a large piece of green velvet” to put on Emma’s coffin which carries her extravagance and mischievous youth to the grave. Flaubert unfolds the pathetic consequence of Emma’s deed and understanding. The abstractness of the emotions and feelings of the character is rightly excavated by the use of objects as symbols and the objective correlativity which declares the tone and mood with the narrator’s witty humour and ironic observation behind. Sánchez-Palencia in his discussion on interpretations of modern era evolves with the idea that the use of artistic language is necessary where the direct expression of the “peculiar, fleeting and vague” by statement and descriptions do not work. The authentic expression is “through a succession of words and images, which will be used to make suggestions to the reader” (2015: 32). To uphold the witty narrator’s ironic observation the following scene leaves an impression of the pitiful mental state of Charles and the horrible and deplorable reality of Emma at her death. The abstract sense of abhorrence in beauty finds its tangibility through the sensual portrayal of the sheet covering different parts of her body juxtaposed by the ghostly projections of her mouth, her fingers, the slimy eyes and dull look.

*Emma’s head was turned towards her right shoulder, the corner of her mouth, which was open, seemed like a black hole at the lower part of her face; her two thumbs were bent into the palms of her hands; a kind of white dust besprinkled her lashes, and her eyes were beginning to disappear in that viscous pallor that looks like a thin web, as if spiders had spun it over. The sheet sunk in from her breast to her knees, and then rose at the tips of her toes, (1992, 270)*

Wright (1917: 458) is critical about Flaubert “superficial” style and in his revaluation he says “but with Flaubert the style is like a beautiful stained window which shuts our view of what is beyond”. He explains literary style metaphorically saying it “should merely be the glass through which you can see the glories that reside underneath”. As for example, in the following passage were Leon and Emma’s shameful adulterous relationship is hidden in the description and distraction of the other details:

*He (Leon) was savouring for the first time - and in the deed of love – the inexpressible delicacies of feminine elegance. Never had he met with such grace of language, such modesty of dress, such tableaux of drowsy maiden-innocence. He admired the exaltation of her soul and the lace on her skirts. Besides, was she not a lady, and a*

*married woman! A real mistress? (1992, 215)*

Scheifley (1921:809) in The Centenary of Flaubert asserts “Flaubert regarded his consecration to art as a priesthood, and prose as an art even more difficult than poetry”. It continues (1921:813) –“He excelled in producing powerful effects through metaphors, compressing into a single line an image of imposing proportions. He excelled, also, in rendering eloquent the slightest objects. His language was rich but simple.”

The readers of *Madame Bovary* would look for the strokes of poetic genius where the imageries and the symbols provide the objective correlative of the inner mind of Emma. The intellectual endeavor of achieving excellence of fiction and mockery inherent in the ironic style never fails to awake the conscious critical eyes of the reader. Charles wishes his (adulterous) wife to be buried “in her wedding dress, with white shoes and a crown of flowers” (1992: 268). As an expression of his utmost passionate love, he wants her sacred body to be at rest inside three coffins made of *oak, mahogany and lead* respectively. Ironically, Emma’s profound obsession with fashion apparel is in stark contrast of Berthe, her daughter, being “badly dressed” and her blouse ripped from arm to the waist after Emma’s death (1992: 281).

Emma and her unbridled amorous whims become the adulterous rumour the French society must have enjoyed gossiping about. She dwelled in illusions that drew her away from her “irritating” husband. Her passions were fed by being tangled in extravagance and attaining what she “lacks”. She is “at once the forbidding and fascinating” (1899: 403) portrayal of Flaubert. Scheifley (1921:815) puts it straight forwardly, “Emma’s life is a struggle between her real self and her imagined self, a false ideal, resulting in her misery and suicide. Her husband is a nonentity, deficient in intelligence, will, and imagination, but given a distinct individuality by the author”. Besides “the scrupulous portrayal of the pettiness of provincial life”, *Madame Bovary* is the depiction of “the decline from grace of a woman heartless and vulgar but fond of luxury and satisfactions of sense” (1921:814). The magic of the writer lies in his profound artistic ability to create each description in such a realistic and deep detail that it defines the simultaneity of “an external fact” and “a psychological moment” (1909: 473). This objective correlativity adds to the poetic value of the text. Emma’s moments of disillusionment, frustration, depression and escapism are supported by the psychological shallowness, romantic delusion, alienation and lack of formed personality. Therefore, Flaubert’s story book supersedes its literary boundaries and becomes a serious study of the mind, ideology, identity and existence.

As rightly figured by Gréville (1886: 310), Flaubert was a keen observer of reality who with the most artistic pity draws “the misery of a poor misled woman” in powerful language in poetic veil. His sense of beauty is apparent in the splendor of his art of balancing words, meaning, effect and style. The novelist draws minute picturesque details



leading to powerful imageries. Here the conjunction of nature and natural emotions illustrate practicality convincingly. The lucidity of the expressions adds to the acceptability of the passions even when they are unjust, irrational or immoral and irreligious. Emma's frantic shift of obsessions and her continuous engagements almost to the extent of insanity would never arouse doubt in the readers because the surreal environment is presented in an authentic yet vivid fashion. The poor Charles remains as an epitome of failure, who is tragically betrayed yet remains naïve till knowledge of her (Emma's) disloyalty apparently invites his death. Death, trauma, disillusionment, horror, disgust, illness, betrayal, etc. which are essentials of life are very flawlessly entwined in the tale of lust, beauty, love, sex, fascinations, dreams and other romantic dimensions of life. The structure of the story blends the ideal and the real creating a horizon of literary acceptance. The fusion of the restrictions and allurements generate a well-knit biographical story of Emma Bovary. She remains as the charming dancing maiden who leads the prohibited yet fantastic life with the inevitable disintegration at the end.

The greatness of Gustave Flaubert's French novel, *Madame Bovary*, is in its ability to uphold the life of a provincial girl, who lives beyond her means, through highly selective and contemplative narration. The poetic quality of the novel creates visual impressions in the minds of its readers. In the imageries there are subtle signs and elements that pronounce the inner details of Emma's mind. Therefore, the realistic novel abounds in literary and artistic value despite of portraying the sinful, shameful and guilty life of Emma. It proves to be a real form of artistic literary piece by exalting in its poetic appeal, universal compatibility and natural (real) romantic downfall of maiden with unresolved complexities.

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