

RESEARCH ARTICLE***Madame Bovary: A Desperate Attempt to Escape from Reality***

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Abstract: The present paper is a humble attempt to probe into the psyche of the central character Madame Bovary of Flaubert's masterpiece *Madame Bovary*. Hailed as a realistic novel by some and as a satire on excessive romanticism by others, the novel depicts a woman following her naïve dreams. After a frantic journey to find and live a life of romance, she finally reaches the tragic realization that her dream is actually unattainable. Her love relationships with three different men have been studied to depict how the frustrating difference between her reality and her imaginative world culminates in her final disillusionment. But even at this point she is not able to be at peace with reality, and in her last desperate attempt to escape the same, she commits suicide.

Keywords: romanticism, extravagance, frustration, ennui, disillusionment

Madam Bovary published in 1857 was the debut novel of Gustave Flaubert. Set in mid-nineteenth century France, the novel told the story of an adulteress. At first considered immoral because of the writer's frank and honest treatment of a scandalous subject, the book is now hailed as one of the masterpieces of French Literature, "a book that invites superlatives...the most important novel of the century."(O' Connor, qtd. in *Madame Bovary*) It starts with Charles Bovary, a mediocre misfit in his surroundings. He marries a rich widow who is actually not so rich. After her death, he marries Emma, the protagonist of the novel. Her life is entangled with three men: first her husband Charles Bovary and then her lovers Leon Dupuis and Rodolphe Boulanger. Studying Emma's character using a psychological approach, we can understand the ultimate decision of Emma to end her life. At the age of thirteen, she was sent to a convent to study. There she formed her view of the world through the romantic novels that she read. On the one hand, her imagination is fuelled by these novels of romance and on the other by catholic spirituality. She imagines a world full of love, love that is loaded with passionate warm words and surrounded with a halo of elegant settings and glamorous clothes. And from here, her journey to chase this fantastical dream starts. But at every step she finds that the reality is quite different. In the beginning, she finds herself trapped in the countryside with her father. Here everything around is too common to catch her fancy. "...But the gardener they had was no good at all. Servants were so unsatisfactory! She would have liked very much to live in town, at any rate during the winter..."(Flaubert 36).She seems to be waiting for some stroke of fresh air and this comes in the form of Charles Bovary. Compared to her present condition, Charles seems to offer a new opportunity to her and she catches that instantly. Emma's dreamy romantic notions are something that her father was never able to understand; "Emma would have preferred a midnight wedding with torches, but her father couldn't understand that idea at all."(Flaubert 38) Now she pinned her hopes on her husband Charles. Charles could take her out

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of this small restricted world of her father's farm. But as luck would have it, quite contrary to her dream of finding romance in her marriage, Charles has a dull life and career. Though he is a loving and caring husband but is too ordinary and unambitious to meet her expectations. He is mostly preoccupied with his work and has no distinctions to his credit; "He couldn't swim, or fence, or fire a pistol, and was unable to explain a riding term she came across in a novel one day." (Flaubert 54) Here, we find Emma struggling again and again to cope with the reality before her. She tries to create her ideal world in her realistic existence, but her ordinary husband has not much to offer to help her sustain this world and it soon shatters into pieces. She tries hard to make herself love him, as it should be. She recites to him poems by the moonlight but Charles fails to appreciate that because he has no refined tastes. Apart from what was needed to develop a smooth career, he had focused on nothing else. He has never read poetry or craved for a song. He has coarse habits while Emma craved for refined sophistication. He could only talk about the commonplace like farming, cows, calves and poultry while Emma's ideal lover surely should be able to "introduce you to passion in all its force, to life in all its grace, initiate you into all mysteries." Despite all her inner struggle to accept, the reality that was before her remains quite unacceptable as the man she married "had nothing to teach; knew nothing, wanted nothing."(Flaubert 54) The elder Madame Bovary is able to locate the problem in her daughter-in-law who had "ideas above her station in life." (Flaubert 55) Emma is soon disillusioned in her marriage and she gives a cry of despair; "O God, O God, why did I get married?" "The "unknown husband" (Flaubert 57) that "might have been handsome, intelligent, distinguished, attractive..."would never be like the one she married. For Emma, "life was cold as an attic facing north, and the silent spider boredom wove its web in all the shadowed corners of her heart."(Flaubert 57). The invitation from La Vaubyessard brings Emma the opportunity to live her dream for a while. She is thrilled in the surrounding of the aristocracy and has a wonderful time there. During the ball, she feels herself quite suited to the occasion, while Charles is somebody that can never fit in such glorious company. When Charles gets prepared for the dance in the ball she exclaims; "Why, you must be off your head! They'd laugh at you! You stay in your seat! It's not quite the thing for a doctor to dance anyhow,' she added."(Flaubert 62) Here, she at last catches a glimpse of the world she always felt she belonged to. After living this dreamlike life for a short period, the reality of her life turns more unbearable; "The visit to La Vaubyessard had made a gap in her life, like those great chasms that a mountain-storm will sometimes scoop out in a single night...Her heart was like that. Contact with riches had left upon it a coating that would never wear off."(Flaubert 69) The ball deepens the rift in her heart and she goes further into the state of frustration and ennui; "She gave up playing the piano. What use, with no one to hear her? Since she could never play at a concert, in a short-sleeved velvet gown, lightly caressing the keys of an Erard and feeling the murmurs of ecstasy wafting all about her like a breeze—it wasn't worth the boredom of practising. She let her drawing-folios and her needlework lie in the cupboard. What was the use? What was the use?"(Flaubert 76) Emma's utter frustration in her marriage mainly results from her wrong self-assessment. She feels herself somebody akin to the heroines from romantic novels and that her charm can move men to offer their all to her. Compared to the rich sophisticated ladies, she thinks herself worthier of the pleasures they are entitled to and this makes her even more miserable; "Would this misery last for ever? Was there an escape? Was she not quite good as all the lucky women? She had seen duchesses at La Vaubyessard with clumsier waists and commoner ways than she; she cursed the injustice of God."(Flaubert 80) Seeking a change, the couple shifts from the rural town of Tostes to Yonville, but this new setting too fails to keep Emma satisfied for long. Even her motherhood is not able to add newness to her life, and her response to her motherhood remains uncertain. All her frustration generates a kind of rage towards all those that she feels are responsible for depriving her

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of the extraordinary romance and refinement that's destined for her and that she actually deserved. The monotony in her life leads her to a feeling of repulsion towards all of them and even towards her own child. We find her self-assessment wrongly placed, but she is not able to realize the fault in her own character. The charm that Emma has been craving for comes in her life in the form of Leon Dupuis. Leon feels a certain fascination towards her and this Emma cherishes a lot; her desires keep knocking at her; "And pouting her lips as though for a kiss, she said over and over again: 'Charming, yes, charming! ... And in love? She asked herself. 'In love with whom? ...With me !' The proofs of it were there before her all in a moment. Her heart leapt." (Flaubert 115)

She tries her best to resist the temptation. She forces herself to recall that she is a married woman and is also a mother. Projecting herself a completely faithful wife, she maintains a formal distance from Leon. To Leon, she seems "so virtuous and inaccessible" (Flaubert 119) Frustrated in his advances Leon leaves Vyonville and goes to Paris to excel in his career as a lawyer. Leon's departure pushes Emma back into her dark world of depression. She blames herself for her misery as she couldn't step forward to hold what she has desperately wanted. She feels that she has incurred herself an irreparable loss as her only hope was gone, perhaps forever. Outwardly she maintains the pose of perfectness, which everyone around recognizes and appreciates; "The housewives were won by her thrift, the patients by her courtesy, the poor by her charity."(Flaubert 120) But nobody is able to peep into the blazing heart which was ' all desire and rage and hatred.' The inner self is torn between the desire for Leon and the pride and joy in saying 'I am a virtuous woman.' Charles is all oblivious to the misery that she is being subjected to. And this further makes all of her sacrifice and suffering meaningless; "To make it harder' Charles had apparently no notion of what she suffered. His unquestioning belief that he made her happy seemed to her a stupid insult; his complacency to the point of ingratitude. For whose sake, then, this goodness of hers?"(Flaubert 121) At this point, enters Rodolphe in her life. He is a veteran in the matters of women 'hard of heart and shrewd of head, with much experience and understanding of women.'(Flaubert 142). With his keen eye, he is able to see through her calm appearance. Ready to feed on her hidden passions, Rodolphe analyses her dissatisfaction with her stupid husband and the resultant vulnerability of the Madame Bovary during his visit to the Bovary household and calculates the risk beforehand; "A stupid creature, he looks. Of course she's sick of him...Poor little thing! Gasping for love, as a carp on a kitchen table for water. Three pretty words, and she'd adore you, I'll be bound. Tender, charming it'd be...Yes, but how to shake it off afterwards?" (Flaubert 143) The regret left in her heart in the case of Leon turned Emma more vulnerable to the advances of Rodolphe. Emma is innocent as her vision is limited to the outer appearances of things and she cannot see beyond that. She is dissatisfied with the satisfaction in her husband which she herself has bestowed upon him. She cannot perceive his sincerity in the relationship, rather she wants extravagance of appearances, which Rodolphe offers. When her attempt to run away with Rodolphe fails, she tries to find solace in religion and charity. But it's only for a brief period. Her desire to experience the ideal passion again asserts itself as soon as she meets Leon again. This time she doesn't reject his advances and involves herself in a passionate affair with him. Soon she starts getting disappointed and finds him, 'incapable of heroism, weak, commonplace and effeminate, as well as parsimonious and chicken-hearted.'(Flaubert 293) Emma's imagination is all full of the figure of a passionate, true lover who will deserve her pure passion, who will reciprocate her passionate devotion. With every affair she tries to create that reality but it proves to be a bubble only. Every attempt of hers inserts a mental pressure on her partner and soon he feels suffocated. Except her too common, simple husband, no one is lasting in his love. In the real world around her, her ideal lover does not exist but she is bent upon chasing the ideal and hence the tragedy befalls

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her; "... Oh, if somewhere there were a being strong and handsome, a valiant heart, passionate and sensitive at once...then why should she not find that being? Vain dream!" (Flaubert 295) What she has been seeking for years is nothing but a mirage. Persons around her admire her for her taste, culture and refinement and imagination but try to manipulate her sometimes even to the level of cruelty. Rodolphe cannot tolerate her possessiveness. Leon is uneasy with her aggressiveness, "What had charmed him once now frightened him a little. Moreover he resented her progressive absorption of his personality."(Flaubert 294) Leureaux, the merchant in Yonville, represents the idea of modern commerce. Feeding on her bourgeois fantasies, he provides Emma means to create a world other than her own. He locates her aspirations and tempts her by new elegant items on credit to reap the benefit of steeper rates of interest. She is trapped in her debts. Both her lovers, Rodolphe and Leon rejected her request for help. Her wait for great love is finally dashed to the ground as she has been abandoned by both of her so-called romantic lovers. During her affairs with Rodolphe and Leon, Emma intermittently experiences guilt and restlessness. Like her marriage with Charles, these affairs too turn mundane after a certain time and cannot satiate her desires. Because of moral concepts imbibed in her character, she lives a kind of double life and that tortures her very core. Frustrated in her marriage first, and then her attempts to have passionate love affairs; finally she is left with no hopes to escape from her dreary reality. Throughout her life she has been chasing something that is absent in the world of reality. So her desperation takes her to beyond and she decides to end her life. Ironically, after her death Charles turns quite a romantic; "I want her to be buried in her wedding dress, with white shoes and a wreath, and her hair spread out over her shoulders...On top of everything lay a large piece of velvet." (Flaubert 339)

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