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Feminism and Social Constructivism in Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary

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Abstract

The rise of modern society let men to obtain power in various ways. The objectification of moral values considered man as a social product, besides men over minded the physical challenges of women when they were suffering mental challenges from being judged and objectified by their sex. That made the society to have women as always an advantage for men. Therefore, "Madame Bovary" the novel written by French novelist Gustave Flaubert, published in 1856, which gives as a wide idea of the male dominated society. The protagonist of the novel Emma, the perfect representation of a woman, who wishes a big fashion modern lifestyle, turns out to be a sick filled woman and commits suicide at the end. The level of anxiety that she consumed was immense and it was also portrayed in a gritty way, those made her character to be the talk of the town so far. Thus, "Madame Bovary" brings out the visualization of a modern patriarchal society. Analyzing the novel with feminism and social constructivism may help us to understand the struggles and sufferings of women on any social platform.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Other, Object, Bourgeoisie.

What is feminism? It cannot just be called a political ideology but a mixture of social and economical equality for women. It's really hard to put the definition of feminism as 'the movement against the patriarchal society' because the level of suppression and anxiety which were faced by women was immense. Initially, the feminist movement was started in the West despite the ideology went globalised. As the Western traditions were the core objectives of letting them unleash the idea of feminism, so there are plenty of women writers who regulated the movement with deep-rooted thoughts and statements. Writers such as Marry Wollstonecraft, Marry McLane, Simone De Beauvoir, Lena Dunham had a significant

influence on feminist movement. In this Marry Wollstonecraft was a prominent one to raise the first voice towards women in her book "A Vindication of the Rights of the Women" a prominent piece of work which discussed the subject of feminism, and it's the foremost inspiration for the latter women writers. In her book, she specifically talked about the denial of rights for women and men's prejudices towards women, without her work it wouldn't be a possible task for a counterattack to Western ideology and tradition. Till the end of the late 19th century, women were compelled to cover their heads in public, not allowed to vote and denied other social participations. Since the modernism evolved, feminism started to root in different branches and led feminism to categorize into three types which traditionally called "the Big Three" which are the liberal feminism or the mainstream feminism, radical feminism and Marxist feminism. These types regulated the movement into three waves, the first wave was between the late 19th and early 20th century which talked about women's rights and their social participation, the second was during 1970s which was about the gender equality and the third was about revising the last waves in a feminine perspective. As there are several works and novels which discuss feminism, among them, Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" was an exceptional one, she's also best known for her metaphysical novels such as "She Came to Stay" and "The Mandarins".

Her book "The Second Sex" was written in 1949 and published in 1953 in English. This work helps one to analyze any text of literature which talks about women so as "Madame Bovary" be a best example of that. "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" the very quote which clearly conveys the core of "The Second Sex". It mainly focuses on the social construction on women as the 'other'; this is the very label which fits for the character Emma, the "Madame Bovary". At every level, men suppress women with the label as 'Other' especially in opposition to men. Beauvoir pens the notion as men take the role of 'self or subject' whereas women were placed on

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the role of 'Object'. Beauvoir draws her feminist ideology with an ultimate question, that how 'female humans' come to occupy the subordinate position in the society? And she also answers the question with three disciplines, as she refers with biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism. The way Beauvoir used to expose her idea was very similar and reliable to the way that how Flaubert portrayed the character Emma. Beauvoir traces the female development through the stages of childhood, youth and sexual initiation, with these stages Beauvoir, comes to prove that "the woman" was not born a woman was made by thousands of external processes, as "Madame Bovary" depicts the character of Emma with these stages. Emma during her childhood days she was institutionalized within the four walls, as she was born to an upper-middle-class family she was tending to follow certain etiquette, where they were happened to be curious of becoming 'a lady', once they became a lady they will be pushed to become a doll for men's attraction where their dresses, words, manners etc, were counted by men. In a way, Flaubert holds the credit for portraying a typical French woman in the modern era. In every force of the society women's subjectivity has been deprived and flattened to be an 'object'. These external factors push women to only cope with childbearing, housework and sexual slavishness, so as Emma recounts her realization to break the conventions of this situation. Beauvoir also insists the impossibility of comparing the character of men and women without considering in their situation as she strengthens the topic in her Book II as "Women's Life Today". On the other hand, Flaubert handles a softest method for examining the differences of situations among men and women. In the novel "Madame Bovary" all the male characters take up a unique quality which differs from one another throughout the novel but at the same time those qualities were not their real personality. For example, the character Leon (the law clerk) who shows himself a romantic fellow in front of Emma but he's not whereas in the latter half of the novel he gives up his love for Emma for the sake of complaints and gossips that he gets from his workplace. The character Radophle, who is actually rich and royal for what Emma gone admired by but when she seeks him for helping her to cure the debts shockingly he refuses. With these characterizations Flaubert imposes the truth of men in the modern era, where men invest their act subsequently women suffer with their unprofitable love and by later they realize that they were objectified. This is how Flaubert proves the statement of Beauvoir on women an object. Therefore, the modern society gives men the plurality or

the variety to shape their subjects whereas women stuck in a black hole of 'objectivity'. This is how the conditions and the practices followed in modern society push women into the four walls.

Flaubert again nails the way in shaping the character, Emma, the perfectly round character in the history of modern novels. Though, "Madame Bovary" over figures the male chauvinism, it holds a subtle way of portraying characters in different perspectives. Beauvoir draws the feminist ideology in disciplines of biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism so, as Flaubert had also shaped Emma with the touch of those disciplines. Flaubert infuses the feminist ideology with the help of his own way of structuring the setting of Madame Bovary, for many instances, Flaubert projects the social constructivism of the period to criticize the modern human psyche. As biology is concerned, Flaubert imposes the notion by Emma's motherhood, as Emma's daughter was the first break of her hope, when the entire male characters possess power and social position to change Emma's life, whereas she lacks that. Despite of this condition, she strengthens to sustain herself with the responsibility of being a mother, so she hopes to give birth for a boy but unfortunately it was a boy and that becomes the very initiation of her disparity. Here, Flaubert implies the references of psychoanalysis, by reasoning why Emma expected a boy? Throughout the novel, Charles was the only male character who lacks external powers among other dominant male characters in spite of being a doctor. Charles was also the main cause for Emma's powerlessness. His incompetence was a major part for dissatisfying Emma's desires to get rid of the bourgeoisie lifestyle, his reluctance to occupy power in the society of a doctor and his mistaken surgery to a club footed man leaves Emma to say "don't touch me Charles" and that's the moment she completely hated him. As she was already suffering with her baby, her husband's incompetence makes her to break her morality and leads her to have intimate affair with other men. While men have access with their wealth, personality, power etc, the only access she had was her love with the trade of sex but at last she ended up with the loss of shame. Flaubert projects the patriarchal society with his subtle character sketch. He tries to imply the nature and the sufferings of 'bourgeoisie' under the perception of Emma. The word 'bourgeoisie' referred to the middle class, people who lack their ancestry wealth and they allow themselves to be indulged within the level of expenses, sometimes their tastes were characterized as gaudy. At this part Flaubert

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introduces a ruthless character Monsieur Lheureux who is a versatile merchant who has the skill to sync women and greed at the same point. As he was introduced in the initial part of the novel, Emma's very first meeting with him pushes her in the greed for the sophisticated royal life. He never shows the bills and the costs of the products that he sells to Emma and once she wore the clothes and ornaments she completely becomes a doll for Radolphe. She did not just buy the out wears but the attitude of the rich life because Monsieur Lheureux was skilled to sink people in that dream spell where Emma was also got stuck. In that journey Flaubert proves the failures of the bourgeoisie in the modern society. Ultimately, there's only one thing in common with Emma and other characters which is to break the moral structure but this is where Flaubert proves himself a genius of placing the characters in a 'walk on the line' situation. In Emma's case, the two choices she had was to take lovers or to remain faithful in her dull marriage where other characters had no choices to ruin her life without her knowledge. Thus, Emma's life strongly portrays that deterioration is not a matter of fact but a progress.

Thus, "Madame Bovary" carried out the subject matters of a woman and also the characteristics of the bourgeoisie society. In a way "Madame Bovary" has explicitly shown the dramatic happenings of a woman when she is up to break the boundaries of her society. Till the very end of the novel, Emma never realizes that she was trapped by the desires of men.

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