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Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: The United States of the Untied Tastes of Reality and Imagination

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> Everything seemed to her enveloped in a black atmosphere floating confusedly over the exterior of things, and sorrow was engulfed within her soul with soft shrieks such as the winter wind makes in ruined castles. (*Madame Bovary*, 94)

A proper beginning for a study on Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* should be inclusive of the writer's stance in the literary arena, especially, in the development of the genre of novel. Where does Flaubert stand? Is he a realist, a naturalist, or a romantic? These questions and arguments about the style of Flaubert's writing and his attitude particularly in his composition of *Madame Bovary* vary considerably.

Flaubert is often considered a realist writer. Realists by writing books that focused on the details of everyday life without disregarding the most unwelcome aspects of it challenged their romantic predecessors who rather decorated their writings with sentimentalism, subjectivity and gothicism. Flaubert participates in the realistic representation by describing his characters' emotions, actions, and settings vividly and without much romantic or fantastic embellishments. On the other hand, he also seems to be devaluing the realistic representation as his constant use of the words like "stupid, fetid, foulness" in describing the world of his novel *Madame Bovary* shows (Heath, 30). Thus, it might be claimed that Flaubert rejects to be a writer of the realist school while he also distances his

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writing from the romantic strain. However, he incorporates elements from both realism and romanticism, the united forces of which, enhancing his prose, creates a paradox as well. He both uses and distances these modes from his writing and his viewpoint on his art. Stephen Heath observes this situation with the following remarks:

> The paradoxical force of Flaubert's writing is then that realism, development and critique of romanticism, is itself equally subject to critique; the movement of disillusionment from romanticism to realism is also for him just as much a refusal of any of the illusions of *the latter*, of any of realism's social, progressive purpose: realism is as execrable as the reality it knows and depicts, is caught in the surrounding stupidity, the general fetidness. (30)

Considering his literary style in *Madame Bovary*, in terms of the relation between the realistic and the romantic, it can be claimed that Flaubert makes use of a mosaic of both of the traditions as David Roe writes that "[Flaubert] sought to fuse the gut creativity and philosophical aspirations of Romanticism, the craftsman-like priorities of Art for Art, and the documentary and scientific approach of the new Realists" (33). However, Flaubert can never be completely labeled as a realist or a romantic writer. Although he writes at an age in which romantic writing was already out of fashion and realism was a highly popular movement, he could almost declare that he wrote *Madame Bovary* "in hatred of realism" (qtd. in Clark, xiii). On the other hand, unlike his contemporaries, Flaubert recognized a personal impulse for romanticism and reflected it in *Madame Bovary*, although in an ironic manner of recognizing its deficiencies.

An explanation for the above-mentioned confusion in Flaubert's style should be looked for in his goal he tried to reach while writing *Madame Bovary* whose completion took five years between 1851-1856: Flaubert sought after a mode of writing which injects the writer out of the text he produces, in other words, impersonal writing. He states his positive attitude towards an impersonal

text many times especially in his letters to Louise Colet (then his sweetheart), which are compiled by George Becker in his *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*. Some parts of his notes from the work read as:

> In my book I do not want there to be *a single* movement, or *a single* reflection of the author. (91)
>
> Let us always bear in mind that impersonality is a sign of strength. Let us absorb the objective; let it circulate in us, until it is externalized in such a way that no one can understand this marvelous chemistry. Our hearts should serve only to understand the hearts of others. Let us be magnifying mirrors of external truth. (93-94)
>
> I expressed myself badly when I said that 'one must not write with the heart.' I meant to say: one ought not to let his personality intrude. I believe that Great Art is scientific and impersonal. (95)

Flaubert manages to apply what he said in terms of impersonal approach in *Madame Bovary*. This impersonal touch can be seen in *Madame Bovary* in the narration which immediately follows his most lively character's death:

> A continual barking was heard in the distance. "Do you hear that dog howling?" said the chemist.
>
> "They smell the dead," replied the priest. "It's like bees; they leave their hives on the decease of any person."
>
> Homais made no remark upon these prejudices, for he had again dropped asleep. Monsieur Bournisien, stronger than he, went on moving his lips gently for some time, then insensibly his chin sank down, he let fall his big black boot, and began to snore. They sat opposite one another, with protruding stomachs, puffed-up faces, and frowning looks, after so much disagreement uniting at last in the same human weakness, and they moved no more than the corpse by their side, that seemed to be sleeping. (256)

It is in this impersonalisation that he rejects romanticism and comes closer to realism, which he also finds limited due to sole objectivity it presents. These points lead this study to understand now better Flaubert's characterization of his most developed character, Emma Bovary, with a predicament of confusion between the reality, with its problems presented against her, and the romantic, with imagination being the liveliest faculty granted to her.

The dichotomy between the real and the imagined in the case of the characterization of Emma Bovary is basically hidden in the context of a world of opposites she is put in: the plain country life, the stifling convent education, and later an unsatisfying marriage clash with her nature open for novelty, romanticism, and imaginative thinking. Therefore, Emma's plight is basically born out of her endeavor to reconcile these opposites, namely the realities presented in life and the life she imagines. How does Emma directly indulge in this confusion? The basic motive which creates the confusion between reality and her imagination is her quixotic character: her reading of books which are considered by the society to be dangerous for a woman to read. She reads books – sources of her romantic aspirations with which she pictures a new identity for herself.

The reason why Flaubert chooses to have a reader-protagonist might lie under the fact that, through reading, Flaubert has the chance of creating a proper dilemma for his *woman* character. The society Emma lives in is hostile to a woman's reading activity, which makes her feel more detached from her environment. Her reading is considered to be dangerous and even evil. Charles' mother, Madame Bovary, blames Emma's capricious manners on her reading. Likewise, Homais warns Justin thinking that he corrupts his children through some harmful texts:

> "Have you every vice, then, little wretch? Take care! you are on a downward path. Did not you reflect that this infamous book might fall in the hands of my children, kindle a spark in their minds, tarnish the purity of

> Athalie, corrupt Napoleon. He is already formed like a man. Are you quite sure, anyhow, that they have not read it? Can you certify to me--" (191)

However, such hostility towards reading creates in Emma's rebellious soul a sense of superiority. Already bored with the life, first in Tostes then in Yonville, she sets herself apart from the society claiming for herself superiority in intelligence, emotions, and imagination. In this way, she tries to break the narrow domestic sphere she has been confined to. (Peterson, 163)

Emma's first encounter with the books occurs in her convent education but the books she is advised to read there are full of prescribed doctrines which do not enhance her imaginative faculty. Charles and Emma actually share a similar past in that they both had a forced education. Charles could not help falling into daydreaming during his schooldays which he had to pass due to his mother's wishes. Similarly, Emma, abandoning the rule books of the convent, would turn to imaginative literature, novels, and romances. The subject matters of these books, which she read in her puberty, covered erotic presentations of adventures and intrigues. Later, in her affairs, Emma expects to find the same kind of sexual experiences mingled with adventure, which is a way of explanation for her adulterous nature. She reads basically to find out about sexual satisfaction as "she read Balzac and George Sand, seeking in them imaginary satisfaction for her own desires" (45).

Carla Peterson argues that through reading Emma perceives abstractions and generalizations as concrete and specific images which she takes literally, trying to transport them to the real life by her imagination which is incapable of synthesizing to unite these ideal images of the world of books as a coherent whole (168). Therefore, Emma's imagination lacks the quality of an artist's imagination, as Coleridge names it, which can dissolve the objects it perceives to represent and recreate them into a coherent whole. Thus, it can be claimed that while Emma has the ambition and energy to fancy a world built upon her interior, she lacks the true judgment (artistic imagination) of the formation of such a

world in the exterior, which totally paves the way for her confusion between the worlds of reality and her imagination. Peterson gives a similar clarification for her confusion between the real world and the imaginative world in her following words:

> Objects and figures seem to be imprisoned at a great distance from her, frozen like the forms on the decorated plates that have become permanently engraved in her imagination…This detached pose of a viewer of pictures, coupled with the distanced perspective from which Emma reads her romances, clearly testifies her inability to maintain an active relationship with her texts or pictures. What eventually happens, then, is that Emma draws the romantic plots and characters she reads about out of the real of fiction into the real world…Emma's reading process is so flawed – disintegrative rather than synthetic, literal rather than metaphorical, distanced rather than involved, passively accepting rather than critical – she is unable to sustain any imaginative activity around her books for very long. So instead of immersing herself in situations portrayed in her novels, Emma draws these situations out of the fictional realm and seeks them in real life. (169-170)

On the other hand, Mario Vargas Llosa in his book *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary* puts forth another perspective for Emma's reading claiming that *writing* in the novel is as crucial as reading in Emma's confusion: writing makes the object written about less real. In this sense, in *Madame Bovary* letter writing, journalism, and books are what make reality less reliable because writing is the agent of fantasy. Therefore, Emma's reading the written texts contribute to her inability to adapt to the real life because the books falsify reality. This is why unimaginative people, like Charles' mother, are anxious about Emma's reading habit. (150) In her affair with Rodolphe, Emma falls into the trap of distorted reality as she thinks that she is becoming one of the heroines of the books she read:

> Then she recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric legion of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of sisters that charmed her. She became herself, as it were, an actual part of these imaginings, and realized the love-dream of her youth as she saw herself in this type of amorous women whom she had so envied. (124)

Furthermore, Rodolphe's letter for Emma to break off their relationship is an example of turning reality into unreality as the expressions written hide the true feelings of the writer, and Emma through reading it believes a belied version of reality, thus once more participating in the confusion of a distorted reality. In addition, her continuing of writing romantic letters to Leon although she is aware of the fact that their relationship is almost dead also demonstrates to what extent writing (and reading the written) in *Madame Bovary* falsifies reality for Emma.

The glamorous life narrated in those books lead her to internalize the active role of a heroine first in her marriage to Charles, in which she takes all the responsibility of the household matters, then in her passionate relationship with Rodolphe, in which she plays the role of a lady to be rescued from her prison castle, and lastly in her affair with Leon, in which she makes Leon her *mistress*. Since the affairs presented by the real world do not introduce romantic gallants, she becomes the energetic party of her dreams, forcing her relationships to accord her imagination. Thus, in her expression of her energy and sexuality Emma becomes the representative figure for the Dionysian artist getting rid of all the Apollonian measures (Peterson, 161-162). It is obvious that Emma's character embodies a desire to be or act like a male, attributing an androgynous air to her character. This complexity in her mind about gender roles she has to play also contributes to her confusion between the real and her imaginative worlds. One of the most obvious demonstrations for her tendency to be manly is her wish to give birth to a son instead of a daughter. Being a woman within the diegesis of the novel she is presented in means to live with restrictions, which is a

great reason for her wish not to give birth to a female child who will be oppressed and eliminated under the freer male sex "and this idea of having a male child was like an expected revenge for all her impotence in the past" (67). She might have the idea that acting as a man defeats the interior inferior woman, thus giving her the possibility of identification and recognition in the society. Sometimes, she pretends to be a man through acting:

> Then she examined the apartment, opened the drawers of the tables, combed her hair with his comb, and looked at herself in his shaving-glass. Often she even put between her teeth the big pipe that lay on the table by the bed, amongst lemons and pieces of sugar near a bottle of water. (125)

In other occasions, she is dressed like a man. For example, when Charles sees her for the first time, she is wearing clothes "like a man['s], thrust in between two buttons of her bodice a tortoise-shell eyeglass" (13). On the day of her ride on horseback with Rodolphe, she is wearing a "man's hat" (121). She becomes manlier as her relation with Rodolphe develops as if she is asserting her freedom: "By the mere effect of her love Madame Bovary's manners changed. Her looks grew bolder, her speech more free; she even committed the impropriety of walking out with Monsieur Rodolphe, a cigarette in her mouth, 'as if to defy the people' (146).

Moreover, her affinity for being a man is also revealed in her relationship with Leon. She becomes the dominant power in their affair, having the masculine possessiveness. She becomes the active party in her visits to Rouen to see him unlike the expected vice-versa roles. It is also she who urges him to write love poems for her. More, it is she who wants him to dress as she wants to please herself. Therefore, Leon as the younger, less experienced, against the older, mature Emma becomes the inferior force, giving Emma the chance to play the masculine force for which she has been practicing for so long in her life. The transformation of the roles is narrated as "[Leon] did not question her ideas; he

accepted all her tastes; he was rather becoming her mistress than she his. She had tender words and kisses that thrilled his soul" (212). Because of this role-playing Mario Vargas Llosa calls Emma a pathetic character in the following observation:

> Emma is forever doomed to frustration: as a woman, because the woman in the fictional reality is a subjugated being to whom the world of dreams and passion is forbidden; as a man, because she can reach that world only by turning her lover into a non-entity, incapable of arousing in her an admiration and a respect for the so-called *virile* virtues, which she has failed to find in her husband and seeks in vain in her lovers. This is one of the insoluble contradictions that make Emma a pathetic character. Heroism, daring, prodigality, freedom are, apparently, masculine prerogatives; yet Emma discovers the males in her life – Charles, Leon, Rodolphe – become weaklings, cowards, mediocrities, and slaves the moment she assumes a "masculine" attitude (the only way that allows her to break the bonds of slavery to which those of her sex are condemned in the fictional reality). (143-144)

Louise Kaplan introduces a social viewpoint to Emma's roles between genders saying that with her "feminine frivolities she masks her dominating spirit, her desire to penetrate the veil of illusion…Emma masqueraded as a sexually submissive femme évaporée to conceal from the world, and from herself, her active sexual strivings and intellectual ambitions, which in her world were the prerogatives of males" (236).

Another noteworthy point in the confusion of the real and the imagined in Emma Bovary's plight is hidden in Flaubert's presentation of subjective reality and objective reality side by side. From a Coleridgean perspective, this would fall under and be studied in the issue of the union of subject and object. The sensed, perceived, and the objective world of reality and the agency, subjectivity of Emma who perceives and imagines these objects clash in Emma's case, creating a confusion and a complexity rather than a harmonious life for her.

Georges Poulet in his essay called "The Circle and the Center: Reality and *Madame Bovary*" comes with the idea that Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* presents "a subjective being which…has for its own object of contemplation the surrounding reality of things", which means to combine the subjectivity (feelings, aspirations, longings, imagination) of Emma with the objective world (the walls, Yonville, Rouen, the house, etc.). Poulet argues that the novel in presenting both the objective and the subjective world of Emma equally enhances itself as a more unified whole, which also saves the novel from fragmenting into two separate realities. (392-393) This constant indispensable relationship between the objective reality and the subjective reality is all the time prevalent in the novel as Emma by being effected by the materials around her turns herself materialized. The following passage from the novel illustrates Poulet's ideas:

> But it was above all at mealtimes that she could bear it no longer, in that little room on the ground floor, with the smoking stove, the creaking door, the oozing walls, the damp floor-tiles; all the bitterness of life seemed to be served to her on her plate, and, with the steam from the boiled beef, there rose from the depths of her soul other exhalations as it were of disgust. Charles was a slow eater; she would nibble a few hazel-nuts, or else, leaning on her elbow, would amuse herself making marks on the oilcloth with the point of her table-knife. (50)

This passage illustrates Flaubert's combination of realistic presentation and emotional subjectivity. It exemplifies realist presentation because it pays attention to tiny details, no matter how unpleasant. On the other hand, the writing maintains a subjective tone in that it leads us to feel Emma's disgust and frustration. The importance of the objective world to Emma's thoughts is emphasized by the connections of her soul's exhalations to the steam from the beef. Throughout the book, Flaubert links emotions to objects in this way. By making emotions inseparable from objects, Flaubert denies Emma her one desire:

to escape from the physical world she inhabits and live the life she imagines, which lies at the core of her plight.

In one of his letters written during the composition of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert wrote that "[the] whole value of my book, if it has any, will be in my having been able to walk straight ahead on a hair hung between the double abysses of lyricism and vulgarity (which I want to fuse in an analytical narrative)" (qtd. in Becker 91). The lyric quality Flaubert mentions is presented with Emma's subjectivity, her idealization of her own world through her imagination, and the goal of vulgarity is shown through the gross realities of the objective world that surrounds Emma.

Settings in *Madame Bovary* also underline the theme of the reality versus Emma's imagination. In this sense, the general opposition is between the countryside and the city. Tostes and Yonville are both small rural towns resembling each other considerably "each with its one long street lined with houses, its typical local characters, its monotonous life, both surrounded by exactly the same sort of countryside with scattered farmhouses and a network of roads up and down…" (Llosa 152). Rouen, on the other hand, is a city which provides different opportunities as "it is from there that the periodicals and novels that set [Emma's] dreaming come true; from there that Lheureux brings the luxury items and the clothes with which she tries to fill the emptiness of her life and cloak her anguish; there that the balls and theatrical performances are held…" (152-153). Therefore, for Emma, life in Tostes and Yonville is associated with boredom, dullness, stifling atmosphere, labor, and marriage whereas life in Rouen opens its gates for excitement, novelty, freshness, entertainment, and adventurous love affairs. In this sense, Paris, as a city to live in, although not objectively put in the narration, is, subjectively, the summit of Emma's wishes which harbors the elements of Emma's dreams. To what extent Emma dreams a life in Paris is expressed in her following action at the beginning of her marriage:

> She bought a plan of Paris, and with the tip of her finger on the map she walked about the capital. She went up the boulevards, stopping at every turning, between the lines of the streets, in front of the white squares that represented the houses. At last she would close the lids of her weary eyes, and see in the darkness the gas jets flaring in the wind and the steps of carriages lowered with much noise before the peristyles of theatres. (44)

Therefore, for Emma, Paris is the magical city of illusions in her imagination while the provincials display realities of her life.

Furthermore, David Gervais, in relation to Emma's yearning for a life in Paris, highlights the importance of chance and Emma's realization of her bad luck which gives her a life of imagination in a world of realities. Gervais shows the following part from the novel as his reference to the issue:

> She asked herself if by some other chance combination it would have not been possible to meet another man; and she tried to imagine what would have been these unrealized events, this different life, this unknown husband. (34)

Thus, her condemnation of her bad luck becomes a fuel for her actions which lead to her confusion between reality and her imagination. Gervais concludes saying that "[her] refreshingly green belief in her own bad luck becomes a refusal to face life as it is. Would life have been any different if chance had placed her in Paris?" (85).

In addition, Emma's inconsistent behavior and manners each time differently also help to understand to what extent she breaks the line between reality and imagination. In terms of her behaviors, there is not one single Emma Bovary in the novel; there are Emmas. Emma takes up roles or new behavioral attitudes each time she begins an affair. In her marriage to Charles, she becomes a housewife, although for a very short time; in her relationship with Rodolphe she becomes a love-blinded heroine like those in her novels; then, in Yonville when

she discovers that she is in love with Leon she pretends to be a loyal housewife before the eyes of the public and Leon at first (Llosa, 161), and soon taking up a dominant character in her adultery. Enid Starkie relates her duplicate personalities to her readings when he writes that "[she] has no positive character herself, but sees herself in various parts, at different times – as the great lover, the devoted mother, the mystic – and all these parts are built up artificially and are inspired by her reading of romantic novels, so that she is incapable of living life directly, but only through some fanciful idea" (318). Hence, questions like "how many Emmas does she play, which one is real and which one suits her imagined self best" can easily be raised because of Emma's volatile existence in the dichotomous line between the real and the imagined.

Free associations of Emma's mind blur reality for her as well. It is obvious that she experiences an unforgettable time in the ball at la Vaubyessard. She even meets a character resembling to the characters of her readings, namely the old duke de Laverdiere, who "had lived a life of noisy debauch, full of duels, bets, elopements;…had squandered his fortune and frightened all his family…had lived at court and slept in the bed of queens!" (36-37). She has several other memories from the ball which she will occasionally remember and use to give impetus to her life. The extract below is an example that shows merging of one of her memories from the ball with the present time through which she once more problemetizes the real and the imagined in her mind:

> Then a faintness came over her; she recalled the Viscount who had waltzed with her at Vaubyessard, and [Rodolphe's] beard exhaled like this air an odour of vanilla and citron, and mechanically she half-closed her eyes the better to breathe it in. But in making this movement, as she leant back in her chair, she saw in the distance, right on the line of the horizon, the old diligence, the "Hirondelle," that was slowly descending the hill of Leux, dragging after it a long trail of dust. It was in this yellow carriage that Leon had so often come back to her, and by this route down there that he had gone for ever. She fancied she saw him opposite at his

> windows; then all grew confused; clouds gathered; it seemed to her that she was again turning in the waltz under the light of the lustres on the arm of the Viscount, and that Leon was not far away, that he was coming; and yet all the time she was conscious of the scent of Rodolphe's head by her side. (112)

Her mind plays a trick to her by taking her to a travel among the men with whom she has been infatuated – the Viscount, Leon, and Rodolphe – only Rodolphe being realistically present for her. In this sense, Emma gives a futile fight of making the impossible become possible in her life.

To conclude, it can be asserted that Emma's problem about the confusion between reality and her imagination lies in her mental dichotomy between *what is* and *what should be*. She harbors idealistic romantic illusions, sensuality, and passion (agents for her *what should be*), and falls into the abyss of boredom and depression when life fails to match with her fantasies. The confusion created with this clash of the reality and her imagination paves the way for her failure in life, finally her decision to end it. She fails in her relationships with men; she seems to be too passionate, sensual and romantic as a woman for a man of her time. Charles cannot fulfill her desires. Rodolphe leaves her when he gets bored of her romantic fancies and emotional demands, and Leon is a premature partner for her desires. None of them proves to be the gallant of her novels, as they, save for her husband whom she detests the most as a man and once again committing a misjudgment in life, do not even attend to her funeral. Her confusion between reality and her imagination is hidden in Flaubert's presentation of her in unsolvable dilemmas: Flaubert makes her a reader of imaginative books (in a society which is hostile to books) which causes her to apply those improbable possibilities into the real world, and injects the feeling of superiority to her; Flaubert gives her the faculty of fancy by means of which she dreams, triggers her imagination, has reveries, but he also deprives her of an esemplastic imagination which would enable her to unite the elements of her reading and those of the real world in a coherent whole; Flaubert presents a world in which *writing* is

unreliable as much as reading of the written texts, which complicates reality one step forward for Emma; Flaubert gives Emma hermaphrodite qualities by means of which Emma, in some occasions and situations, acts and behaves like a man alongside her womanly manners, thus leading her to mix up her mind between her real gender and her imagined one; Flaubert's technique in the presentation of *objective* (real, perceivable, vulgar) and *subjective* (imagined, thought, fantasized, fancied, dreamt, lyric) viewpoints side by side also contributes to Emma's perplexity between the real and the imagined; Flaubert's juxtaposition between the countryside and the city, the former representing the dull reality life for Emma while the latter is the place of romantic satisfaction, is further conducive to her dilemma; the author's creation of his character with a bad luck which she loathes by trying to mould it into her desires; his loading duplicate characters on Emma's shoulders by means of which she takes up different roles in several varying cases; and lastly, Flaubert's giving Emma a memory strong with free associations from the good old days, and her blending of the past and the present at the same time furthers her volatile character between reality and her imagination. Alison Fairlie's observation is also noteworthy as concluding remarks:

> Emma pursues 'ideals' of excessive passion and total happiness, preconceptions which prevent her ever seeing the world or herself in perspective; she distorts each new experience to fit the mould of her dream, gradually realizes that it will not, makes a frenzied and fatal effort to force it back into the mould, then turns desperately to repeating the same sequence in another context, for surely a new place, a new lover, a new feeling will somehow give complete and lasting satisfaction. (33)

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