

# MADAME BOVARY, FEMINISM AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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## ABSTRACT

Madame Bovary with its pro-feminist main character Emma Rouault explores the theme of powerlessness of women in nineteenth-century France. This paper will first discuss Emma as a pro-feminist character and then continue to explore the different types of women in the novel: how they are introduced and why they are important. The abusive actions of men towards women will be demonstrated through the novel Madame Bovary. In addition, Emma's duties as a woman in society and other roles that she gained after marriage will be analyzed. How she either fulfills or fails to fulfill conventional female roles are the main questions to be answered in this paper. Secondly, why Emma chooses to be unfaithful to her husband and cheats on not only him but also the other people around her will be explored. She is sexually, emotionally and financially abused. Men in her life use her as they wish because, as a stereotypical image of women, she is emotionally weak. At least, she is seen weak in that field in the novel. Finally, Emma's choices and thoughts about being male and female, choosing to be like a male and rejecting her female side through her actions will be analyzed. Why she cares about the beauty of a woman, or why she adopts male behaviors after having affairs and being left will be answered. Thus, it will become clear which reasons led Emma to do these things even though they are unacceptable in every society and religion. She does not have autonomy because she is bound to a man and, although she does not aim to rebel against the doctrines and dogmas of nineteenth-century French society, she somehow achieves being a pro-feminist with her actions.

Key Words: Womanhood, Autonomy, Subjugation, Male-Centered Social Structure, Post-Feminism

## ÖZET

Madame Bovary, feminizm yanlısı ana karakteri Emma Rouault üzerinden on dokuzuncu yüzyıl Fransa'sında kadınların güçsüzlüğü konusunu ele almaktadır. Bu çalışmada, öncelikle feminizm yanlısı bir karakter olan Emma masaya yatırılacak ve daha sonra romandaki farklı tarzdaki kadınların, nasıl tanımlandıklarının ve neden önemli olduklarının irdelenmesi yapılacaktır. Erkeklerin kadınlara yönelik istismarcı eylemleri Madame Bovary romanı aracılığıyla ortaya konulacaktır. Ayrıca, Emma'nın toplum içinde bir kadın olarak görevleri ve evlilikten sonra edindiği diğer roller incelenecektir. Geleneksel kadın rollerini nasıl yerine getirdiği ya da getiremediği bu çalışmada cevaplanacak temel sorular arasındadır. İkinci olarak, Emma'nın neden kocasına sadakatsiz olmayı tercihi ettiğini ve yalnızca onu değil çevresindeki başka insanları da nasıl aldattığı konusuna da değinilecektir. Kendisi, cinsel, duygusal ve maddi anlamda istismara uğramıştır. Hayatındaki erkekler onu istedikleri gibi kullanır, çünkü kadınların basmakalıp imgesiyle örtüşen biçimde duygusal anlamda zayıftır. En azından romanda, bu anlamda zayıf görünmektedir. Son olarak Emma'nın erkek ve kadın olmaya, bir erkek gibi olmayı seçmeye ve eylemleriyle dışı yanını reddetmeye ilişkin seçim ve fikirleri analiz edilecektir. Neden bir kadının güzelliğiyle ilgilendiği ya da neden ilişkileri olduktan ve terk edildikten sonra erkek davranışları sergilediği yönündeki sorular cevaplanacaktır. Dolayısıyla yaptıkları hiçbir toplum ve dinde kabul edilebilir olmasa da Emma'yı bunları yapmaya iten nedenlerin ne olduğu netleşecektir. Özerkliği yoktur çünkü bir erkeğe bağımlıdır ve on dokuzuncu yüzyıl Fransız toplumunun doktrin ve dogmalarına isyan etmek istemese de bir şekilde eylemleriyle feminizm yanlısı olmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kadınlık, Özerklik, Tabi Kılma, Erkek Odaklı Toplumsal Yapı, Post-Feminizm

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the unbalanced political situation of the times, feminism in the nineteenth century did not improve quickly enough. Clair Goldberg Moses indicates that feminism subsisted "in the shadow of repression" (1941, p. 1). She continues this argument by saying "Governments, driven by their memory of the Revolution and Terror, were slow to guarantee the right to free expression of new ideas. A continual shift from liberal to repressive to liberal to repressive government slowed the development of feminism; and it was often truly dangerous to espouse feminist views" (Moses, 1941, p. ix). Since the government cared about paternity and male domination over females, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was exposed to censorship. The novel was not published in

its entirety. Some pages were excluded from the book because it was thought that the novel's language and content was a danger to society:

“Government censors cited the novel for offending public morality and religion, though prosecution and defense both acknowledge the artist's achievement. Flaubert was tried and acquitted for a compelling portrait of his heroine's unhappy marriage, adulterous love affairs, financial ruin, and suicide. The creation of a powerful and profoundly conflicted male imagination, Emma Rouault Bovary is polarizing figure. She embodies yet challenges archetypal images of women (virgin/mother, Madonna/whore, angel/siren) arising from male experience. She calls into question education, marriage, and motherhood, institutions that inculcate these dichotomous views of women” (Burchell, 1957, p.181).

## 2. FEMINISM IN MADEME BOVARY

*Madame Bovary* with its pro-feminist main character Emma Rouault Bovary explores the theme of powerlessness of women in nineteenth-century France. The subjugation of a woman makes her more powerless and a victim of male-dominated society. Clair Goldberg Moses gives the Western definition of patriarch in her book *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*: “The major characters of the patriarchal family in Western cultures are the insistence on legitimacy, since descent is through the male line and paternity must be certain; the requirement that the wife be economically dependent on the male head of the family, and the exclusion of women from civil or political participation” (Moses, 1941, p. 2). Considering this explanation and the theme of *Madame Bovary*, one can assume that Emma is living in a patriarchal society.

### 2.1. Maternal Obligations

A variety of female characters are met throughout Gustave Flaubert's novel, strengthening the reader's understanding of the theme of powerlessness of women. One is cruel, one is old, and the other is young and full of passion. However, whatever they do on their own does not change their place in society. The three main female characters in the novel are: Madame Bovary, Charles Bovary's mother; Madame Dubuc, Charles Bovary's first wife; and Emma Rouault, Charles's second wife. All three of characters are bound to Charles not because of his dominant character, but because of the power associated with his gender.

The common feature between the women in the novel is that they are all abused sexually, financially, and psychologically by men. For instance, Charles' mother and his first wife are seen as financial resources due to their dowries. McNeil identifies this financial boundary with the class distinction in society. Wealth is important to be considered a significant person in public. McNeil points out that “Charles's first wife is chosen for him by his mother on the grounds that she is a wealthy widow - she manages to outwit a grocer who has the support of the village priest in the competition for her - and Emma's father allows Charles to marry Emma because he is unlikely to try to haggle over the dowry” (1978, p. 137). In addition to her wealth, Emma is beautiful. Her beauty saves her from the peasant life. Her lovers and husband adore and like her due to her beauty. Yet, her emotions or strong passions for being loved, in love and living a wealthy life make her powerless. “Women could play no active role in public life and were excluded from adopting professional responsibilities which would give them economic independence. Woman's place was in the home as wife and mother and, although we see working women in *Madame Bovary*, their work is usually related to the domestic sphere as wet nurses, servants, laundresses and the like (McNeill, 1978, p. 138).

Madame Dubuc was “forty-five years old and had an income of twelve hundred francs” (Flaubert, 1994: p. 9). Charles consented to marry her for an easier and wealthier life. Thoughts of the ability to do whatever he desired blinded him and he married Madame Dubuc for her wealth. Even Charles's father married for money: “once married, he lived for three or four years on his wife's

fortunes” (Flaubert, 1994, p.5). However, when Charles and his parents learned that Madam Dubuc was not actually as rich as they thought, they quickly left the house in anger, causing Madame Dubuc’s eventual death.

### 3. AS AN FAILED WOMAN FIGURE, EMMA

According to the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century France, Emma was born with certain stereotypical duties to fulfill. Educated in a convent, “the Ursuline sisters try to socialize her to be an obedient daughter, faithful wife and loving mother” (Burchell, 1957, p. 182). Charles Bovary, Emma’s husband, expects her to be a perfect lover, a faithful wife, and a respectable woman as she is the wife of a doctor. As a mother, a woman has maternal obligations to her children. Emma is expected to take care of her child, but ultimately fails in this duty as she feels the child is a burden.

In addition, these duties, Emma is seen as a lover in the novel, as well. She is constantly looking for some new form of excitement to relieve her boredom and depression. However, she is abused physically and emotionally by her lovers Leon and Rodolphe. Emma forgets about her child, about her husband and her responsibilities:

“With tooth and nail Emma defies the roles to which she has been assigned by a patriarchal society; she continues to read her books, take lovers, write impassioned letters, dress as a man, and spend money that she doesn’t have. Unfortunately, Emma is doomed to fail due to her poor education, her romantic, book-fueled dreams, and because she happens to have a weak spot for the male of the species. This last point brings the reader to consider whether Emma Bovary might be only partially innocent in her subjugation” (Martino, 2006).

Martino demonstrates here how Flaubert depicts Emma is a failed woman figure. She has failed in the eyes of the patriarchal, male-dominated society to which she belongs. The novel shows an unhappy woman’s life. Emma not only represents herself here, but also the whole unhappy female population of nineteenth-century France. One can see that Emma is a reader and is passionate about new adventures, unlike her husband Charles. She wants to break the chains of male-dominated oppression, but she is unaware of her restricted life. That is why she accepts society’s patriarchal rules, hides her emotions, and acts as other people wish. As Emilia from *Othello* by William Shakespeare pleads, “Let husbands know their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell, and have their palates both for sweet and sour as husbands have” (Flaubert, 1994, p.295). Women are also human beings and have the same needs as men. This is one of the reasons that Emma becomes unfaithful to her husband. She desires the same things they do. She wants the same opportunities that men have. She wants to travel the world or flirt with others or have an education like men. Despite being educated well enough “for a woman”, Emma desires to continue her education.

Emma wants the same freedom for her soul that Charles or her father or Monsieur Homais have. The more Charles idealizes her, the more she regrets marrying him as evidenced by her repeated question “Why did I marry?” throughout the novel. She longs for the nights that she spends out of the room in which she is accustomed to sleeping. It is her only way of experiencing life because she is so limited. She has no autonomy or power to speak for herself. “It is the men throughout Emma’s life who mirror societal norms. She sees herself in the eyes of father, husband and lovers, internalizing their values and judging her worth accordingly” (Burchell, 1957, p. 181).

As Emma is limited in expressing her feelings freely, raised to fulfill her duties as a female, “money becomes a material metaphor of forbidden sexual desire seen later in Emma’s consumerism” (Bruchell, 1957, p. 182). Women were like property. They had no right to do anything freely as men did. A woman could not divorce or travel the world alone since she did not have financial independence and of course did not have the right to talk for herself.

“Emma's downfall can be viewed as mainly due to her being a woman in a society in which women's roles were both limited and clearly circumscribed and in which any transgression was severely punished. One might argue that the central conflict in *Madame Bovary* is that of a woman who tries to shrug off the reductive definitions of woman conceived by patriarchy” (McNeill, 1978, p. 140).

Emma love to read and as she reads, her desire for love increases. Charles cannot satisfy her soul and becomes insufficient for her needs. Yet, she cannot leave him and instead chooses adultery. As ever, Emma has no choice available in her life. She is unaware of the limitations she has, but she feels as though she is a captive of her life, which is another reason she chooses to express herself through her emotions and body. In fact, Emma Rouault Bovary does not want to gain economic independence as she even cannot imagine it. Society does not allow such equality between man and woman.

Although Flaubert was not a known feminist and did not intend to write a feminist novel, he specifically emphasized the place of women in society and how they should behave. Emma refuses her identity as a woman, because womanhood is seen as inferior or second-class in the novel, and adopts men's behavior. “When Emma asserts her need for the authentic self-fulfillment, she is labelled selfish, hysterical, and extravagant. (...) Charles Baudelaire, poet and contemporary of Flaubert, thought that Emma was ‘almost masculine and that, perhaps, unconsciously, the author had bestowed on her all the qualities of manliness” (Burchell, 1957, p. 183). Emma want to rid herself of Charles but does not know how to go about it. Society and her religion prevent her from divorcing her husband.

Emma believes that having a son will make her feel freer. She likens being a woman to being a prisoner. Flaubert describes her longing for a son and why she believes that a son would be the key to a free life. “This idea of having a male child was like an expected revenge for all her impotence in the past. A man, at least, is free; he may travel over passions and over countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most far-away pleasures. But a woman is always hampered” (Flaubert, 1994, 67). The cold relationship with her father and her husband created a hollow in Emma. She is a woman who is searching for the warmth of love, passion, and compassion. Without passion and love, compassion is useless to her. She flirts with men to attract them. A son might fill that emptiness within her. However, the birth of her daughter Berthe disappoints Emma as she knows that now there is another dependent female in the world.

Emma categorizes women as either beautiful enough or not beautiful enough to attract a wealthy husband. Berthe is never beautiful enough in Emma eyes. In the twentieth century, the third wave of feminists celebrated sexuality and used their bodies how they wished. In the beginning of the feminism, Emma becomes an example for third-wave feminism. She is aware of her sexuality and cares about beauty. Even though she herself is dependent on a man, her body and inner feelings are dependent on no one.

Emma becomes something beyond female after being emotionally abused by her affairs. “When she is most corrupted by Rodolphe, she even adopts a certain masculinity in her style of dress and begins to smoke cigars. She assumes that only men are free, and that her sole release from both the prison of habit and the prison of womanhood can come by means of living vicariously through a son” (Sabiston, 1974, p. 345). She creates a different identity. From the beginning of the novel to its end, she wants to be an “individual”. Moses says that “the first name ‘Emma’ signifies an individual woman with a distinct history, while the word ‘Madame’ signifies the married name bestowed upon all women who entered into the institution of marriage at that time” (1941, p.2). Contrary to the desire for individuality Flaubert shows Emma to have, he titled his novel *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert signifies to the reader through the title *Madame Bovary* that individuality is not important in society. Emma is isolated from society with her own existence. Being born a female doom one to be “a woman” with specific responsibilities and duties.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

Emma commits suicide at the end of the novel. It is assumed that committing this act shows that that person is not strong enough to ensure life. However, it also brings to mind another question: why not commit suicide? When Emma finally understands that she has control over her life, she decides to take ultimate control and end it. She has no autonomy because she is bound to her husband, thus she attempts to gain control of her womanhood by committing adultery. In a way, Emma achieves this control but cannot escape the abuses she faces at the hands of the male characters of the novel. So, she kills herself. This decision might be interpreted as a punishment to her husband: "Adultery – if committed by the wife – was seen as a threat to the male-centered social structure, as evidenced by harsh punishments meted out for female adultery" (Moses, 1941, p. 2). After all, Emma knew adultery was wrong, but was unaware of herself in the figure of post-feminist.

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