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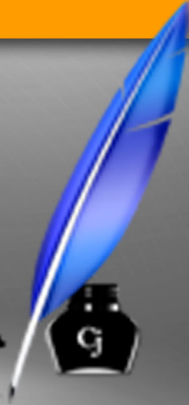
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Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: A Paradigm of Lacanian Desire**Ravinder Kaur**

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Abstract:

In this research paper an attempt has been made to critically analyze Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in the light of Lacanian theory of lack and desire. Lacan's concepts like lack, desire, mirror stage, and the Other has been discussed at length in the paper. Through the character of Emma Bovary, the researcher has tried to analyze the working of Lacanian desire in the novel. Her efforts to reach at the stage of complete serenity and plenitude are focussed with the motive of showing her desperation for fulfilling her vague desires. Three major relationships of her life are analyzed in order to depict the transient nature of her objects of desire.

Keywords: Desire, Lack, the Mirror Stage, Lacan, Bovary, the Other, Flaubert.

Introduction

Madame Bovary is Gustave Flaubert's first novel and is considered his masterpiece. It has been studied from various angles by the critics. Some study it as a realistic novel of the nineteenth century rooted in its social milieu. There are other critics who have studied it as a satire of romantic sensibility. It is simply assumed that Emma Bovary, the protagonist, embodied naive dreams and empty cliché that author wishes to ridicule, as excesses and mannerisms of romanticism. She is seen as a romantic idealist trapped in a mundane mercantile world. Innumerable theorists have discovered and analysed extensively a variety of questions raised by its style, themes, and aesthetic innovations. In this research paper an attempt has been made to analyse life of Emma Bovary as a paradigm of Lacanian desire.

According to Jacques Lacan, desire arises from lack and one lacks what one desires. Thus it seems to be a paradoxical situation at the outset. Lacan has explained the concept of desire and lack by taking an infant as his subject. He describes the transition from infancy to childhood in different stages i.e. the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. Imaginary is the state of infant's oneness with the mother. Here the concept of "the mirror stage" is introduced by Lacan. The mirror stage is a bridge between imaginary and symbolic order. When the infant sees his image in the mirror, he identifies himself with that ideal image which is unified as compared to his own fragmentary experience. So, there comes a split in the infant which is further aggravated through his entrance into the symbolic order i.e. social structures and laws embodied in language. The subject gets divided. The subject feels alienated because he is lacking that unity with the mother and this lack gives birth to desire.

According to Lacan "desire is the essence of man; desire is simultaneously heart of human existence" (Evans 37). He says that desire is always unconscious. It is not the case that Lacan sees conscious desire as unimportant but the unconscious desire forms the central concern of psychoanalysis. Secondly, unconscious desire is entirely sexual in

nature as he says, “the motives of unconscious desire are limited...to sexual desire...the other great generic desire that of hunger, is not represented” (Lacan 156).

It is possible to recognize one's desire only when it is articulated in speech i.e. in the presence of the other. But because of the ‘fundamental incompatibility’ between the desire and the speech there is a limit to its articulation in speech. Whenever speech attempts to articulate desire there is ‘always a leftover, surplus, which exceeds speech (Evans 37). To put it in simple words, the desire cannot be put into words; it cannot be expressed and thus is always left unexpressed.

Lacan distinguishes desire from need and demand in his article “The Signification of the Phallus”. According to Lacan, need is purely biological in nature which can be satisfied. The infant depends upon the other in order to satisfy his needs because of his ‘motor incapability’. Demand on the other hand, can never be fulfilled. Demand is always demand for love. The “craving for love remains unsatisfied and this leftover is desire” (38). Lacan posits it thus, “Desire is neither appetite for satisfaction, nor demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second” (Lacan 318). Unlike need, desire is “constant in its pressure and eternal” and the realization of desire does not consist in being fulfilled but in the production of desire as such (Evans 38). Lacan also puts it like this, desire desires itself.

Lacan is of the view that the desire of man is the desire of the other. It is essentially desire for others’ desire which means that one wants to be the object of another’s desire and it can also be called desire for recognition. As Kojève’s statement recorded in *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* refers, “...he (the subject) wants to be desired or loved or rather recognized in his human value” (38).

The desire cannot be articulated or put into words at all. ‘In the vain attempt to articulate desire, the desiring subject continually moves from one demand to another form one signifier to another. That is why, for Lacan desire is metonymy’ says Jonathan Scott Lee (59). Lacan has taken this concept of metonymy from Roman Jakobson and compares it with Freud’s displacement. The displacement of the original desire for the mother on to other objects is equally doomed to fail. In Lacanian terms, when the mother fails to fulfil the infant’s desire, the unconscious substitutes another object by a combination of terms. The logic of this combination is different for every individual’s unconscious, and perhaps even for every substitution.

Analysis

In the present novel *Madame Bovary* the protagonist experiences the trauma of unattainable desire. We find in her life metonymical shift from one object of desire to another in order to reach a state of pure plenitude and fullness. Every object of desire ultimately disappoints her. She substitutes one objects of desire with another in a futile hope of attaining that lost object.

Emma Bovary from her childhood onwards lives in an imaginary world of her own. She reads romantic novels and ballads. At the age of thirteen her father sends her to the convent. There also she indulges in reading romantic novels. She dreams of ‘the purest, most impossible forms of love and wealth’ ignoring whatever beauty is present in the world around her. In the meantime her mother dies. Her ‘desire to be buried eventually in the same grave’ can be understood in terms of splitting between self and

the mother as happens in Lacan's mirror stage and the consequent infinite desire to return to the mother.

But original splitting of her from her imaginary world happens when she marries Charles. She meets Charles, a country doctor, for the first time, when he comes to see her father. Charles is enamoured by Emma's beauty and starts harbouring feelings of marrying her which he does with her father's permission. Although Charles is quite happy with his life after marriage but Emma is very disappointed:

Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken. (Flaubert 30)

Her husband's dullness and lack of interest in more passionate life produces a desire for true love in Emma's mind. As mentioned earlier, this notion of true love she has created herself by reading romantic novels. She used to identify herself with the heroines in the romantic novels but now she faces reality which falls short of her expectations. She wonders, "What one meant exactly in life by the words felicity, passion, rapture, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books" (30). Consequently, she acquires a new identity that is of an adulterous woman as townspeople call her. She becomes split subject living with a lack and false identity. She feels a void within herself, a sense of lost originality and begins inwardly to detach herself from her husband. But she is unable to express this "intangible unease" to her husband who she thinks does not have the sensibility to understand her. His conversation, she notes, is "as flat as a street pavement". Once reality falls short of her expectations; "It seemed quite inconceivable that this calm life of hers could really be the happiness of which she used to dream" (35).

Thus Emma gets frustrated and tries to release some of her frustration. She often walks her dog to a derelict summer house in Banneville, a place where she gives vent to some of her emotions. She hates Charles for his placid immobility and contentment and continues to crave the 'exalted and passionate love' which she sadly feels has been denied to her. She starts dreaming of 'another husband' and another life. She pictures to herself a fabulous life with another person and begins to detach herself from Charles. It becomes unbearable for her that she cannot share her emotional life with him. In fact, she begins to ask herself, "O God, O God, why did I get married?" It is obvious that Emma finds her marriage life unpleasant and dull. She tries to escape the reality by turning to her imagination as an outlet for relief. She changes the object of her desire in the doomed hopes of finding 'eternal bliss'.

In the meantime, Emma and Charles receive an invitation from La Vanbyssard, a stately sprawling mansion, located on a scenic stretch of land. The ball is attended by all the aristocracy and gentry of the surrounding area. Emma is taken by the grandeur of the place and the people who have gathered there. She is overjoyed at the opportunity to move freely in such a noble company. After the ball she is in her romantic dream and eagerly drinks in all the glamour and conversation the night has to offer. When a viscount asks to dance with him she is thrilled. In fact, the entire evening is wonderful to her. Emma is intrigued by the new world which further acts as a mirror that reflects distorted image of her; she misidentifies herself as a heroine of any romantic novel she has read. For her this new world seems to have endless possibilities. But when she comes back and faces the reality of her life, she realizes that the new world is an illusion or misrecognition.

Emma again delves into her imaginations in order to get away from her destiny. She reads romantic novels especially those written by Balzac and George Sand. It can be seen that the moment she gets disappointed with the object of her desire she buries herself into imagination, fantasies, and longs for something else:

Deep down in her heart she was waiting and waiting for something to happen...she gazed out wistfully over the wide solitude of her life...every morning when she awoke she hoped it would come that day. (56)

Emma's frustrations and longings cause her to give up her piano, her needle work, drawing, care for her house and all other useful activity. Instead, she fritters away her time in day-dreaming. She feels totally isolated and longs for conversation and attention. Charles, she thinks, is not suited to the task.

With the passage of time, Emma enters into a major phase of depression. One day while Emma is weeping, her maid, Felicite, comes to her. She tells Emma of how marriage cured a girl who was suffering from depression. Emma's response to her depicts her miserable condition: "But with me...it didn't come on until I was married" (102). She feels as if "All the bitterness of life seemed to be served to her on her plate. . ." (59).

As Lacan says desire outstrips need and compels the subject to seek that object which he thinks will meet his demand. Once the subject recognizes that his mother cannot do this, he goes in search of someone else, even something else, which he hopes can. Similarly, Emma's object of desire shifts to Rodolphe, Emma's first lover. Rodolphe is a wealthy landowner with an estate near Yonville. Initially, Emma feels that Rodolphe is the person, she really dreamt about and who loves her truly. She goes for a ride with him and afterwards they consummate their love. When she returns home, she is joyful; feeling that her life has at last become as she wanted it to be. Emma and Rodolphe quickly begin a full-fledged affair as Emma begins sneaking away from home to see Rodolphe almost regularly. For Emma, Rodolphe is her saviour, someone with whom to share her sorrows. She looks upon him as her "soulmate". She acts incautiously and neglects her duties at home in her obsession for her new lover. Above all this, she thinks about leaving her husband for him. But again after a period of time she gets disappointed with him, as Rob Lapsley says, "Everything that the subject imagines, might embody or produce the lost object, ultimately disappoints" (75).

With Rodolphe she has pursued her desire fervently but eventually gets the same disappointment which she had received after her marriage. She begins to think he is coarse and unattractive; "the grand passion into which she had plunged seemed to be dwindling around her like a river sinking into its bed; she saw the slime at the bottom" (Flaubert 179).

Next person that comes into her life is Leon who can also be called a renewed demand for true love and the last in a series of disappointments. She finds herself deeply in love with him. When she meets Leon she is at a prime stage to embark on a second adulterous affair, for she is hungry for 'emotional fulfilment'. She becomes completely involved in her affair with Leon. She spends recklessly for purchasing gifts for him. She cleverly takes her husbands' permission to learn music lessons so that she can go to Leon's place and meet him. She spends the remainder of the week yearning for Leon. She is irritable and tense. She lives only for her next meeting with Leon and spends the week reading romantic books and reliving her memories in order to keep her ardour at a high pitch. But as Lacan says the more fervently the subject pursues his desire, the more quickly he will

be brought to the disappointment. He further adds, "... if the object of desire is reached but then it no longer remains the object of desire; another subject will become substituted in its place" (Hill 67).

Same thing happens with Emma, she gets bored of Leon too and she judges him as 'incapable of heroism, weak, commonplace, and effeminate'. Eventually, she accepts the fact that her relationship with Leon has gone stale. She yearns for somebody who will fulfil all her desires though she herself cannot express her desire as Lacanian notion of 'the subject' who cannot express the real. When she gets totally disappointed after the end of her relationship with Leon, she reaches at the stage of total despair. The ultimate result of this despair is, of course, suicide.

Conclusion

Thus life of Emma Bovary is a paradigm of Lacan's theory of lack or unattainable desire. Lacanian concept of metonymy can be explicitly seen when Emma incessantly substitutes one object of her desire for another until she is driven to anguish and despair. Finally she decides to take her own life after never being able to attain the plenitude she relentlessly seeks. Lacan argues:

In speaking being unconscious desire emerges in place of its loss. We long to fill the gap made by the lack of access to the real with something that would reunite us directly with the world, seeking a succession of objects of desire...None of our conscious objects of desire, including sexual objects, will fully deliver the complete satisfaction they promise, since they cannot by definition replace what has been lost." (Belsey 51)

Similarly Emma indulges in adultery, makes sexual relationships with her lovers, in a futile hope of getting back that lost unity and oneness but always receives disappointment in turn. Neither Rodolphe nor Leon is able to fulfil her and make her 'whole'. Lacan believes that the subject can never be 'whole' because the subject is all about something lacking. "The subject is made up of absent objects, of things missing and lost, and often imagined by the subject to reside in others... Objects circulate around the subject and only achieve a proper resting place in death" as happens with Emma (Hill 78). In *Madame Bovary* says Vargas Llosa, "Emma's drama is the gap between illusion and reality, the distance between desire and its fulfilment. On two occasions she is persuaded that adultery can give her the splendid life that her imagination strains, and both times she is left feeling disappointed."

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