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Madame Bovary and the Metaphor of Narrative-Healing

Neeti Singh

Associate Professor (English),
Department of English, MSUB, Vadodara.

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Abstract:

The very Narrative that traps in its word-web can become a means to opening it—a means to self reckoning and thereby to self healing. I shall examine in this paper, Gustave Flaubert's character Emma as the shadow-self of Gustave himself. Madame Bovary can be read as a reflection, an imagining of the author himself who traced through Emma's excesses and misadventures in provincial northern France, the map of his own fears, desires and dreams.

Did the writing of the novel, also provide Flaubert the opportunity to express his darkest fantasies as it reaffirmed, at the same time, a tragic conviction that there is no place for romance in the context of reality? Did the telling of Emma's tale purge him and balance somewhat the burden of his repressed anxiety? The present paper strives to read Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary from the context of writing as therapy. Narrative that traps is also a means--a medicine--to holistic healing of the mind and body. The act of narrating/narration itself has medicinal properties it can be accessed as a complimentary purgative tool to surgery and to psychosomatic healing.

Keywords: Narrative medicine, emplotment, narratization, narrative healing, identity and externalization.

When she was thirteen, her father himself took her to town to place her in the convent. On way to the convent, they stopped at an inn where supper was served in painted plates embossed with paintings that told the story of Mademoiselle de la Valliere¹.
(43)

According to French history Mademoiselle de la Valliere was a mistress to King Louis XIV of 17th century France, between 1661 to 1667. It is worth considering here the symbolism and implications of the embellished motif of romantic excesses and tragic adulterous alliances, innocuously placed upon painted dinner plates in a wayside inn, by Flaubert the author, right at the beginning of just another such telling of a stormy tale of love, lust and injustice.

In the early part of the novel we meet Emma Rouault (Bovary) as she enters the orthodox precincts of the convent and soon finds herself reading amorous novels and luxuriating in flights of fantasy that prompt her to aspire and cultivate a taste for the grand, refined and epic proportioned aspects of life. Fashioned by an education designed to inculcate elegance, piety and, in young girls, a sense of the ceremonial domestic, Emma Bovary (nee Emma Rouault) bends every opportunity to feed her hunger for opulence and drama in commonplace living. Her readings of romance have also furnished in her this huge lust for the grand narrative of history; she has a cult for Mary Stuart the seventeenth century queen of Scots, and in general, an enthusiastic veneration for illustrious unhappy and beautiful women. “Joan of Arc, Heloise, Agnes Sorel, the beautiful Ferronniere, and Clemence Isaure stood out to her like comets in the dark immensity of heaven, where also were seen lost in shadow, and all unconnected, St. Louis with his oak, the dying Bayard, some cruelties of Louis XI, a little of St. Bartholomew’s Day, the plume of the Bearnais, and always the remembrance of the plates painted in the honour of Louis XI” (45). News of her own mother’s death eventually becomes an occasion to practice to artistic perfection, the ritual of mourning which Emma not only relishes but even stretches to dramatic proportions for all round effect.

The point I’m trying to make here is that the narrative of extravagance, romance and adultery in *Madame Bovary* has in its recent background the horrors and excesses of life in Bourbon French courts, the consequent French Revolution (1789-92), followed by ten years of Napoleon’s ascension to power and then again the restoration of King Louise XVIII on the French throne as a constitutional monarchy. The narrative of romance, grandeur, gothic drama and a romantic--chaotic engagement with the general dynamic of living was a characteristic feature passed down by the French nobility who also inspired the production of pulp fiction-gothic romances consumed *en masse* by educated young women of the new middle classes.² *Madame Bovary* with her great love for drama and Romance can therefore be located at the crossroads of a France that was turning away from the Romance of the 18th to the Realism of a new 19th century France.

In the context of *Madame Bovary*, one can say, therefore, that in Emma Bovary we find the lingering meta-narrative of grand ceremonial France with its cartload of moral chaos and romance, while in the foreground one has Emma’s unequal marriage to Charles; the frustrations of such an arrangement create an emotional surplus and the plot emerges. From the middle-class provincial neighbourhoods of Tostes and Rouen in northern France, Emma falls into a disastrous affair with the rich Rodolph and once that chapter is over, she finds herself on the road to Paris, spinning a web of subterfuge to be with Leon, her second and last lover.

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* can also be read as an anthropological account that chronicles the dynamic of the evolving structures of religion, culture, statehood and society. Emma with her fine convent education and her readings of amorous fiction, has acquired a taste for opulence, extravagance and romance. In contrast, her husband Dr Charles Bovary is extremely grounded, middle class and even boorish. A haphazard, frugal upbringing and school education followed by a leap of good fortune bring him the title of doctor and soon land him an advantageous marriage. It was on his mother's insistence that he flunked and found eventually his way through medical exams. Charles Bovary is very laidback, unambitious and peace loving but also bovine of sensibility. Emma on the other hand is an epitome of fashion, grace and elegance. If one reaches for the sky, the other kisses the earth. Emma and Charles can, therefore, be seen as symbolic representations of two conflicting and disparate narratives—Romance and Realism--the two hail from divergent temporal locations and prevail upon the socio-economic and cultural landscape of 19th century France.

Emma is disgusted, for Charles, “taught nothing, knew nothing wished nothing. He thought her happy; and she resented this easy calm, this serene heaviness, the very happiness she gave him.” (49) She on the other hand was a skilled home maker, keenly followed the theatre and arts, was excellent at the piano and a handsome horse rider. Her hatred of the middle classes and their utter lack of refinement and imagination waxes stronger with her disgust of Charles who with age only grew fatter and sloppier in his ways. Consequently, she turns towards accomplished, well-read and dynamic men such as Rodolph the Paris fop, and Leon the erudite young artist.

Another form that her loathing of Charles takes is it makes her overly aggressive and dominating, Charles's humility, his needs and dull humanity are undermined and often manipulated. In the beautiful form of a woman, Emma is more masculine—grand mistress of her home and life she sits in a space of power--beyond Charles's reprieve or reproach. Quite early in her marriage she discovers she cannot respect or love her shoddy, incompetent doctor husband. However, Charles who fails her on many fronts, loves her as one loves the moon--he humours her through her expensive lifestyle, her flights of fancy, illnesses and depressions. Conscious of his imperfections he, in contrast, is more woman-like—it is he that wears the mantle of meekness, servility and unquestioning surrender to his wife.

Like Emma, Flaubert had a huge distaste of the middle classes. Born with a silver spoon in a family that was prosperous, cultured and privileged, Flaubert had obviously had his share of fine and distinguished living. He was studying law when he had his first epileptic attack which

apparently changed the course of his life. The characters Emma and Charles can be read as motifs—symbolic representations of Flaubert’s personal trauma bludgeoned further by a life afflicted with epilepsy. If Emma is life’s impulse for romance and abundance, Charles is the epileptic reality that puts the curbs on her fanciful flights. In the writing of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert, it appears, emplots the frustrations and tragic ironies of his own life.

In the medical sciences, Narrative Medicine is an approach to healing that emphasizes the engagement of wider cultural elements in the healing dynamic. The narrative of one’s life and one’s interpretation of it, being subtler aspects that involve the psyche and emotions of the patient seeking to completely repair the wound/illness/ disease and become whole once again. The hypothesis here being medical science’s understanding of the human body as a composite system that involves also the human mind, heart and soul and even his or her connect with culture and society. Medicinal approach to treatment and cure therefore becomes a mega multi-layered project that must incorporate traditional and non-traditional methods of mainstream as well as complimentary healing.

And here it is my interpretation that Flaubert’s writing of *Madame Bovary* was not only a creative enterprise but also a kind of self therapy that helped lighten his personal trauma and the burden of epilepsy... the writing of the narrative of *Madame Bovary* became his medicine and therapy both. It was in the writing of *Madame Bovary* perhaps that Flaubert arrived at a psychic shift which enabled him to look deeper within – he discovered the humble virtues of ordinary Charles - and discovered the utter shallowness of a life lived hankering after elitist posturing and excesses in romance; it led him in real life (perhaps) to end his association with Louis Collet and in the fiction – it led him to end the narrative on a strong note of horror, almost like a warning against the foolishness of romance where the hatchet is cast not in favour of Emma or Charles (for they both must die in and of their own excesses), but in favour of sound sense and the merits of social and moral prudence. It was a huge reconciliation with reality – personal, emotional, fictional – however harsh and unsparing, the writing of *Madame Bovary* as narrative medicine we can say brought healing. It enabled Flaubert the writer and lover, to comprehend his own diseased consciousness, it helped him move past the suffering in which he had wallowed, and the insight it had brought, gave him the strength to bring about a fit closure, however harsh and unsparing.

“To diverge a little into Flaubert’s personal narrative of which *Madame Bovary* appears to be a complex representation, a surface glance at Flaubert’s biography, provides scant evidence to the truth of his statement, “*Madame Bovary C’est moi*”, (meaning, *Madame Bovary* is me.) One is

even inclined initially, to dismiss it as a sort of writerly posturing. But a closer reading opens up an altogether new vista and *Madame Bovary* the novel becomes a bleeding, bandaged narrative that holds in its folds, a gaping wound, an anguish that was intensely personal to Flaubert and is expressed through Emma the central character who by his own admission was fashioned after Louise Colet³-- a ravishing beauty of the Paris art circles, a widow and a poet – brash and impulsive, she was at heart a romantic. To a great extent Colet who belonged to aristocratic circles, mirrored Flaubert (and Emma Bovary's) own sophistication and elitist life view. Also, it is known that she was the sole, passionate love interest of Flaubert's life. Strangely, please note that as Flaubert inched towards the completion of *Madame Bovary* his sympathies shifted from Emma Bovary towards the simplicity of Charles Bovary and he became more and more critical of the character of Emma who he himself admits later, was a reflection of himself and of his lady love, Louise Colet.

As the novel came to its end so did Flaubert's love life of eight long and memorable years with Colet. The end when it came was painful and dramatic, it was Flaubert - proud and polished but given to bouts of epilepsy, who decided to put an end to it. He had come to the realisation that Louise (like Emma) would not be able to withstand his dark epileptic side and then his fate would be no different from than that of his character Charles. In life, as a rule, Flaubert seems to have stayed away from serious love relationships and chose instead, to visit prostitutes and mistresses all his life.

To turn aside for a brief moment let us examine a fictional biography written by Julian Barnes, with Gustav Flaubert's estranged beloved Louis Colet as the speaking voice. In this mock biography titled *Flaubert's Parrot* Louis Colet reminisces on how Gustav was uncomfortable about committing himself in love. “. . . he feared me because he feared himself. He feared that he might love me completely.” (147). A page later Louis Colet (after whom the character of Emma is fashioned), confesses how Flaubert used to feel that she was “less of a woman than most women; that I was a woman in flesh but a man in spirit; that I was an hermaphrodite *nouveau*, a third sex.” (148)

Who then was Emma Bovary the antiheroic character of Flaubert's masterpiece fashioned after? Was she perhaps a combination of Flaubert's own misshapen fantasies, his attraction/love for Louise Colet and his fear of failure in the face of reality? Elsewhere in an interview, Flaubert is known to have said, “*Madame Bovary* is me.” It is obvious that the crisis that sits at the centre of

the *Bovary* narrative, is the consequence of yet another narrative – it is to use Ricoeur's term, 'an emplotment' of Flaubert's personal trauma and existential crisis.

Madame Bovary rises like a phoenix from a heap of paradox—a heap amassed from the tragic binaries of romantic desire and an epileptic body. Thus, the very narrative that traps the person at one level, can be turned around by a transforming counter-narrative (here the debut novel)—a phoenix that unfurls new spaces of surgical confrontation, reflection and new healing.

According to Paul Ricoeur the French philosopher (1913-2005) who developed the premise of 'narratization,' 'emplotment' and 'narrative identity,' we move in life through a web of narratives— self created or received. Eventually these very personal and public narratives with which we are fed and feed ourselves, determine the state of our mental health and general well being. According to Ricoeur, this is especially the case with our past which we tend to emplot in a network of minor and major narratives. We configure life-circumstances and emplot for ourselves a score of narratives which in turn become the very basis of identity formation and the basis of self image as victim/victor, sinner/saint, human/inhuman – the root of all perception is to be found in the soil of experience, narratization and its consequent emplotment. Narrative in Flaubert's context (and in Ricoeur's perception) transcends the simplistic act of telling and becomes a term that denotes how humans experience time with reference to future potentialities and with reference to organising the past experience and memory, for and within themselves. I quote from an online essay of Paul Rhodes, 'Paul Ricoeur and Narrative Identity', "As we draw together disparate past events into a meaningful whole, by establishing causal and meaningful connections between them, these attributions of causation, where other human subjects are involved, necessarily entail implications of moral responsibility, and so the narrative self is ineluctably established in a moral universe."

Thus, to sum up, we all are living narratives – we live in the sea of narrative, as narrative identities and in turn are defined by the emplotments we make. Emma's narrative of refinement, romance and melodrama, has no tolerance for Charles's bovine bliss. The mediocrity and lethargy of Charles's narrative unleashes in her a narrative of hysteria, desperation and chaos. While on one hand Flaubert scripts through Emma, his own narrative of love, despair and frustration, on the other hand, through the tragedy of Emma Bovary, which is also in some measure the story Louise Colet, Flaubert seems to chastise and forewarn himself (and his readers) of the fatal consequences that attend such waywardly and unbridled hankering after love and romance. As Flaubert points out in self defence, ".....the fact that Emma dies at the end of the novel: she had expiated her crime in death and readers (adequately horrified) had duly been warned and encouraged to be virtuous

through fear of what might happen if they themselves were to quit the straight and narrow (path). It was, in Maître Senard's summing up for the defence, "an incitement to virtue through horror of vice" (*The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, 09)

To conclude therefore, the writing of *Madame Bovary* I see as an exercise in self talk – a long drawn and exploratory introspection. Flaubert obviously had strong feelings for Louise Colet who is the inspiration behind the character of Emma Bovary, and whom he both celebrates and critiques through out the novel. By the time he finished writing *Madame Bovary* he had turned away from Louise Colet, but not before he had immortalized her and chronicled in writing the futility of their love. Gustave Flaubert seems to have explored and consequently convinced himself through the story of Emma that resistance to unrelenting circumstance is bound to bring more trauma, turmoil and self destruction.

Regardless of her gifts, her education and beauty Emma's tragedy is her inability to make peace with unreasonable desire. Her liability is her own ambition and her disappointment in her husband. Flaubert's personal challenge on the other hand, lay in the task of reconciling keen desire, intelligence, self pride and privilege with his disease-ridden epileptic body. It kept him from pursuing a career in law and rendered unpredictable his very survival and wellbeing.

Epilepsy tends to induce an element of compromise and risk in the patient's life; knowing his disability, and the implications it brought with it, Gustav Flaubert the great realist, made conscious life choices. He who was in love with Louise Colet and had walked with her a good eight years distance, might have ended up marrying her had it not been for his writing of *Madame Bovary*.

Is it possible that in the writing of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert had come to reckon with the gravity of his own epileptic condition? The nervous breakdowns, the depression, low self-esteem and inertia that must have accompanied each attack of epilepsy could have proven detrimental to his love-bond with someone as vivacious, successful and free spirited as Louise Colet. It is probable that keen awareness of his own inadequacies eventually brought him to relate with Charles's character and led him to deduce that his love story too could end up being a disaster. For as the narration of *Madame Bovary* inches towards closure, we find that suddenly Charles is being acknowledged all around for his goodness and nobility, while Emma in death by arsenic, is utterly

disgusting, Charles who has surpassed himself as devoted and debt-laden husband is blind to the fact that she is such a horror to look at and a woman damned.

It is highly probable that the narration of his own struggles through the story of Emma and Charles Bovary brought Flaubert new insights, new healings and gave him enough strength and wisdom to step back and dissolve his own love relationship – a relationship that ended with novel-writing on both sides! Louise Colet wrote a sentimental romance titled *Lui* while Flaubert debuted with *Madame Bovary* and transcended the trap of self-defeating ‘emplotment’.

End Notes:

1. Mistress Louise de La Valliere began life at court as an innocent, god fearing girl who eventually caught the eye of the King, and landed into an adulterous love affair with him—their tempestuous tale of love—the births and deaths of 3 bastard sons, and at the end of it all before the king takes another mistress- the title of duchess for Madame La Valliere and the legitimization of their fourth born-a daughter by Louise XIV.
2. France during the 1830's, was witness to the beginning of a working-class movement. The arrival of education and the middle classes gave way to the formation of three broad groups: the nobility, clergy, and third estate broadly associated with the upper, middle, and lower classes. People in towns and cities who lived in boarding houses or apartments, sought entertainment by going to the opera which symbolized wealth and prosperity. Then there was the mushrooming of Café houses which had become popular spaces for social interaction as well as for political controversy. Capitalism was on the rise, so too with education were ideas of female emancipation and a false sense of liberation and free expression. ‘Gender distinctions were seen in the way people dressed. If women wore pants it was seen as a "travesty." Women were sometimes used by their husbands to show the family’s wealth; in the way they dressed peoples clothing showed a strong distinction between wealthy and poor during this century the popular dust wig trend of the 18th century was dying off. Interesting Clothing Related Inventions transpired during the 19th Century: Safety pins were invented in 1849. The electric iron was invented in 1882, Clasps, then zippers were invented in 1851 and 1893. [Taken from - Gear, Kelly. "Nineteenth Century French Working Women: Love, Marriage and Children," 2002. Web. 31 Oct. 2015.]
3. Heartbroken and angered by her breakup with Gustave Flaubert, Louise Colet who was essentially a poet, wrote a novel titled *Lui*.

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