Reading *Madame Bovary*: Reading the Feminine

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Abstract

Patriarchy identified differences in terms of Man making women marginal and subaltern. Scholars like Judith Butler question the hegemonic knowledge system that refuses to acknowledge women, but only as constitutive Others. Biological essentialism has relegated women to the status of 'lack'. Gendered as feminine, women ought to display feminine traits whereas men, by the virtue of phallic power, repress women. Both sex and gender are political categories designed to dominate women. The creation of patriarchy presupposes domination. Butler challenges such repressive theory arguing that gender is a performance and that sex *is* always already gender. The internalisation of the gendered stereotypes has its repercussions even in literature. The portrait of repressed, submissive women is ubiquitous. The list is too long to mention. Interestingly, a woman who claims her subjectivity is either a transgressor or a witch. A woman who denies the marriage, understood as sacramental, has to either choose to become a nun or perish in cruelty. Such has been their ordeal. Gustave Flaubert's novel Madame Bovary is exceptional in its choice of subject – the life and fate of an ordinary provincial woman whose trajectory of life with its undulations render it to be extraordinary. She enjoys her femininity without being truly feminine. This paper, therefore, shall engage into reading the life of Madame Bovary, fictitious though, while initially putting forth a theoretical discussion on how objectification of woman is permeated through discourses and standardized as convention and how Emma, i.e. Madame Bovary, in her relentless quest for fulfilment has posed challenges to the norms, how her life and death have created a new narrative of resistance and resilience.

Keywords: gender, resistance, power, patriarchy, heteronormativity

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Introduction

Identities are not entities with fixed structures or unmediated grounds but defined contingently in terms of differences from shifting arrays of other entities and also differentiated internally. Yet, certain identities – like the male, the white—are taken to be fixed and dominant and they set the terms of definition of purportedly subordinated identities (Das, 2009).[i] Feminist studies have

constantly interrogated the fixity that the male is the standard and the enforced flexibility on female as merely a referent, as a formless entity, as the masculine *other*. A deluge of articles and a wide range of critique, scholars and philosophers, have appeared in the past decades and have occupied notable place towards speaking the 'body'. Notable among them are Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Elisabeth Grosz et al. They have engaged themselves in discerning the body, contesting the gradual gender-isation of the 'body' and subsequently 'desire' which have been enforced upon the psyche of the individual, be it male or female. In fact, the question of the body was implicated in feminist concern – how to mark a space beyond that of the heterosexualism of man. The discussion on sexual difference would point out that there is no simple answer to the question, as the positions of sexual two-ness and sexual multiplicity remain implicated in a non-resolution[ii]. Judith Butler's theoretical understanding and analyses of enforced heterosexuality as the patriarchal norm and the attempt to penetrate deeper into bodies that matter are worth noting. By the virtue of eclecticism, working through texts by a host of major figures - Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Simone De Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida – Butler rigorously interrogated the necessity of fixed, immutable gender identities.

While questioning the power dynamics working in framing the 'body', Butler unveiled that the body politics working within a hegemonic power structure only consolidated the one particular notion of the body as 'normal' consequently objecting to any other form as 'abnormal' or 'deviant', a 'constitutive constraint'. Butler argued that 'sex' is an ideal construct, which is forcibly materialised through time (Butler, 1993).[iii] That sex is a construct presupposes an agent: How can there be an activity, a constructing, without presupposing an agent who precedes and performs that activity . . . (Butler, 1993).[iv] Therefore, power, precisely patriarchal power, works out this construction through the 'principle of selectivity' or rather the 'politics of exclusion'. In an interview in 1992, Judith Butler retorted that she started writing her seminal book, *Gender Trouble,* as an interrogation of the deep heterosexism of most feminist theory . . ..(*Artforum*,1992) [v] This observation is corroborated even by Elizabeth Grosz's argument that marks how for certain constructionists, the sex/gender opposition, which is a recasting of the distinction between the body (biological and natural) and the mind (social and ideological) is still operative (Grosz, 1994).[vi]

Feminist scholars like Butler, Grosz are concerned with *lived* bodies. The body remained a site to understand a woman's psychical and social existence. The major systems of knowledge, philosophy and psychoanalysis, have been heterosexist in their respective discourses and have marginalised the feminine (woman) as either formless or a silent (lack) entity whose presence is relevant only in relation to the masculine (man). While engaging with Foucault's idea of body, Butler found that the body achieves signification through cultural inscription where the **soul** is

valued as 'the prison of the body'. The soul remains the normative and normalising principle, a historically specific imaginary ideal (*ideal speculatif)* under which the body is effectively materialised. The soul (Foucault) becomes the power-laden schema (Aristotle) which actualises and produces the body. This schema, as Aristotle stated, is the form in actuality, which means shape, gesture, appearance, dress, figure of syllogism and grammatical form while matter is potentiality (*dynameos)*. With the reference to Irigaray, Butler finds the feminine to be treated as the subordinated other of the binary i.e. *specular* feminine and the one excluded through an erasure as the *excessive* feminine. However, this excessive, non-thematised, formless feminine was necessary to the foundation of the thematised symbolic. This master/slave dialectic of masculine/feminine becomes significant. The Other validates the Self, while the Self authorises the Other.

Psychoanalysis: a system of knowledge

Is psychoanalysis a 'new orthodoxy' for feminism? Or does it represent the surfacing of something difficult and exceptional but important for feminism, which is on the verge (once again) of being lost.

The questions raised by Jacqueline Rose in her essay 'Femininity and its Discontents' provide two apparently separate but co-terminus logic. The heterosexist assumption of psychoanalysis, its reliance on Freud's theory of penis envy, have surmised that femininity is a riddle. As Freud retorted, psychoanalysis does not try to describe what a woman is; rather, it sets about enquiring how she comes into being (Freud, 1993).[vii]

Juliet Mitchell in her Introduction I to the book *Feminine Sexuality* co-authored by Jacqueline Rose, writes that the great debate in the mid-twenties by the post-Freudian psychoanalysts like Karen Horney, Melanie Klein, Ernest Jones, have shifted the focus from sexual difference to the problem of female sexuality. The psychoanalytic concept of sexuality (psychosexuality), as pointed out by Juliet Mitchell in her introduction delineates it as a system of conscious and unconscious fantasies that involves a range of excitations and activities which produce pleasure beyond the satisfaction of any basic physiological need" (Mitchell and Rose, 1985). [viii]

Freud, while solving the riddle of femininity, had tried to place woman as the 'lack' tracing her psychosexual development from phallic phase to the castration complex and her final growth into 'normal' feminine. In doing so, he found that in this developmental process a woman's desire is channelized such that she desires a man (as husband) and then a boy child to fulfil her lack while the man grows with the phallic power. For a post-Freudian like Lacan, femininity is a position constructed through language, which can be taken up by men as well as women (Moi, 2004).[ix] Mitchell argued that Lacan dedicated himself to reorient psychoanalysis to the task of deciding the ways in which the human subject is constructed. In doing so, as Moi has shown, that in the

Lacanian project of linguistic interpretation of the formation of human subject the *phallus* has become the transcendental signifier, the signifier of signification (Moi, 2004).[x] Although Lacan found the relation of phallus to physiology to be arbitrary, yet in a nuanced argument he explained how the signifier is chosen as the one that stands out (*le plus saillant*) as the most easily seized upon in the sexual copulation. Also, as the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term because it is the equivalent in that relation of the (logical) copula. Moreover, by virtue of its turgidity, the signifier becomes the image of the vital flow (*flux vital*) as it is transmitted in generation (Lacan, 1958). [xi]

Madame Bovary: The Ordinary Yet Extraordinaire

After a dense yet indispensable discussion of feminist debates and systems of knowledge, my attempt is to look at the fictional character of Madame Bovary, the eponymous heroine of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. Condemned as subversive and even obscene when published in 1856, *Madame Bovary* continues to fascinate critics, many of whom regard it as an adumbration of the bourgeois world and its mores. *Madame Bovary* is a novel about a woman who has read too many novels and seeks the dramas of fiction amid the banality of everyday life (Cohen, 2005). [xii] Emma Bovary is fascinated by the fantastic, fictitious world of literary characters and tries to embellish her life with its thrills but in vain. Baudelaire's observation on Emma's strange predicament is thought-provoking as he comments that the heroine still pursues the ideal in the country bars and taverns, no matter how ordinary the latter are but Emma indeed, as Baudelaire retorts, is in pursuit of the 'ideal' (Dantec, 1951).[xiii] Emma's attempts to maintain an aesthetic distance with her surroundings becomes futile. A woman must compromise; such has been the convention. However, Madame Bovary remains exceptional. She shoots out from the tight surroundings into something madly personal much like Hardy's Eustacia Vye. Emma champions the cause of romanticism amid strict bourgeois morality. Truly, Flaubert produces a counter-discourse through his novel where the woman manipulates and manoeuvres the narrative, influencing characters (all men). She becomes the manifestation of both a transgressor and a victim. Nevertheless, Baudelaire visualises her as only a dignified and poetic figure in her small world. She transcends the mediocrity of her existence and reaffirms the powers of imagination.

Georg Lukacs commented that Flaubert refused to participate in the social life of France of the 1860s and 1870s. This renunciation of social activity, he believed, was only a manifestation of their hatred and contempt for the political and social order of the time. Hence, Flaubert had to face the harsh reality of trial where his novel was renamed by the imperial counsel as "History of the Adulteries of a Provincial Woman" (Cohen, 2005, p.318).[xiv] Such was the ordeal of a woman who fell in love. There is a commonality in the description of characters like Emma and

Eustacia only because they refused to submit to the convention of becoming the 'chaste' woman. What has always intrigued me is the question of being unchaste. Emma, in her own capacity, is able to challenge the hegemonic binaries of man/woman, mind/body, reason/emotion. Although driven by emotion, she found reason in all her rendezvous. She *lived* her life and her body. She was, as Baudelaire wrote, a bizarre and androgynous creature who nurtured the seductiveness of a virile soul within the body of a beautiful woman (Cohen, 2005). [xv] Flaubert, as a matter of fact, appreciated this observation.

Emma: The Feminine

As Henry James writes in his seminal essay, 'The Art of Fiction' that Madame Bovary is all Emma and it is a vessel of experience.[xvi] The (un)convention in the novel continuously fluctuates in the narrative space. Even heterosexuality is challenged by the promiscuity of the heroine. Emma Bovary is a sublime character whose thirst for ecstasy ends in a tragic death. She is that *specular feminine* whose "excess" transpires not into the formless feminine but into the crucial *excessive* one. Within the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality, she is able to return the scopophilic gaze of the male; indeed, her gaze comes with a candid boldness. This is remarkable. Lacan's argument on gaze points to the fact the subject partially loses the autonomy upon realising that he or she is a visible object. Again, Sartre's observation on gaze problematizes the argument as he believes gaze to be the battleground for the Self to define and redefine itself. Foucault extended the notion of gaze into social surveillance, arguing that gaze becomes a medium of spreading domination. However, power is manifest in the disembodied gaze spreading itself over minute aspects of life. Emma's gaze is intimidating and so is her very disposition: "the poses are voluptuous; the beauty of Madame Bovary is a beauty of provocation (Flaubert, 2005, p.375)." [xvii] To add to the description, "The greedy vision, these all-encompassing eyes, that covetous gaze of the adulteress, is precisely what the critics, the censors . . . alike imagine as characterizing its protagonist (Cohen, 2005, p.523)"[xviii]

Emma is candid even in her expression of love to Charles, Leon and Rodolphe, the three men in her life. To her, Charles is a man as no-man; he is a gibberish of his own name: *Charbovari.* To Charles, Emma is the anaclitic choice of object who could be a mother or her substitute whereas Leon both idealizes and desires Emma. Leon's sense of rationality leads him to choose his career over his love only to return to his ladylove later in the novel. However, both Charles and Leon are passive lovers. Rodolphe is an exception. He is a social rake, utterly deceptive. His captivating magnetic charm lures Emma. She becomes his mistress but gradually the charm of newness is replaced by the monotony of passion. She bathes herself in the Dionysian spirit of ecstasy. Even Leon's love is unable to quench her indomitable thirst for the 'inexplicable'. Therefore, Emma's choice of love-object, her vehement reaction and at times timid submission,

her 'masculine' rejection of Leon, all place her at a distance from the rest of the characters in the novel. She is corrupted yet uncorrupting. It is perhaps Emma's reactions to Charles and Leon and her power to influence and her fashion of accepting and refusing love that to Baudelaire she seemed rather masculine. On the contrary, Emma's feminine self is evoked through certain gendered roles that she performs like she sews, she desires to become the object of love, she becomes the mother, she becomes the mistress (all gender stereotypes). Emma performs the household chores. But as the narratives progresses, she eschews herself from the mundane surroundings and meniality of her roles to transpire into the New Woman with a new subjective persona. Driven by Eros (life-instinct), she goes into a wild-goose-chase for a better future or a future beyond the bounds of normative restrictions. She loves her solitude; a self-absorbed woman as she is, her desires and aspirations become her obsession. She never succumbs to the conventions of holy marriage but indulges in the *ideal*. She is both the surveyor and the surveyed. Emma wants to experience the pleasure of looking and to be looked at. Both the phantasmatic world of joyous love and its materiality lures her. In fact, materiality produces and reproduces the phantasmagoria. Interestingly, there is a subtle link between the carnality and the ideal aspirations, which is aesthetically expressed in the death scene. At last Emma experiences the ecstasy of mystical transportation as the priest anoints her eyes (that coveted so much), her nostrils that had been so avid for her amorous scents, her mouth that had so often cried out in moments of physical pleasure (Flaubert, 1993).[xix] Emma's demise, as the description subtly points to, has been the death of the corporeal but the rejuvenation of her fantasy, a new beginning, her stepping into the world of the imaginary, her own Paradise.

Lorenzo the Medici's comment on his own sonnet on why he, in singing of love, had started with a sonnet on death is interesting in this context – ". . . that the beginning of *vita amorosa* proceeds from death, because whoever lives for love, first dies to everything else. And if love has in it a certain perfection . . . it is impossible to arrive at that perfection without first dying . . .. (Wind, 1958, p. 133)."[xx] In her pursuit of happiness, Emma had journeyed from the margin to the centre, from the Other to the Self. She is an exception placed against convention. Her death is inevitable. It is a matter of deliberate choice, a voluntary submission to the sweetness of love-death dyad. Her 'sacred' love for Charles is for the good but her quest for the unknown avenues of love, transgressive as they seem, verges on 'profanity.' Emma appears as the mysterious and perplexing association between the sacred and the profane, the connection being relative in nature, yet dictated by the parameters of 'normativity.'. Indeed, it is relevant at this point to recollect the words of Marie-Antione-Jules Senard, the defense counsel, ". . . an eminently moral and religious idea that translates into these words: incitement to virtue by the horror of vice. (Cohen, 2005, p.336)" [xxi]

Conclusion

Gender, a cultural construct, has widely affected the body and the mind of individuals. The moment one enters the symbolic (Lacanian imaginary and symbolic), one internalizes the patriarchal power dynamics and becomes structured by its modalities. Judith Butler questioned this power politics and the subjugation of women in the name of 'lack' arguing that gender is a performance. By challenging the assumptions of philosophy and psychoanalysis, Butler has been able to question the phallogocentrism latent in the discourses. Interestingly, Flaubert's Emma too challenges the hegemony of patriarchy and posits her vanity. Although within the bounds of heteronormativity, she enjoys the status of being Emma. Her free will helps her direct her ways so much so that in the end Charles is affected by *Bovarysme* (a disease associated with the name of Emma). She is both object and subject of love. Her predicament is not unnatural – to fall in love, to search for ecstasy – but the social norms and conventions desperately try to confine her desire and seek to tame them within its hegemonic ideology which she detests. Even when Emma performs gender, she delimits herself by rejecting Leon or by neglecting her daughter Betty. Her story challenges the assumptions that govern the ordinary and thus she stands aberrant, either deviant or outlandish, yet firm in her ways and means. It is true that the twentieth and for that matter the twenty first century readers have been familiar with many such narratives of subordination and resistance, but to envision a woman in the nineteenth century who can posit a resistance to the discourse of the phallus is farfetched. Emma is a woman who asserts her femininity without being truly feminine.

Endnotes

[i]Das, Anirban. (March 2009). *Not For A Place of Her Own: Beyond the Topos of Man*. Occasional Paper 176, Centre For Studies in Social Sciences: Calcutta. pp 1
[ii]Ibid. pp 3
[iii] Butler, Judith. (Routledge 1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* Pp 2
[iv] Ibid pp 7
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[vii]Freud, Sigmund. (1933). "Femininity". *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*..
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[x]Moi, Toril. (2004). "From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan and Feminism Again". *Signs* No. 24 Spring ibid. pp 857
[xi]Lacan, Jacques. (1958). "The Meaning of the Phallus". p 82. The italics is taken from Moi's quoting of the same section in her article
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[xiii] Baudelaire, Charles. (2005). "Madame Bovary". Margaret Cohen Ed., *Madame Bovary*. (pp. 403). New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.
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[xx] Wind, Edgar. (1958). *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance.* (pp. 113). London: Faber and Faber Limited.
[xxi] Flaubert, Gustave. (2005). *Madame Bovary*. (pp 336). Margaret Cohen ed., *Madame Bovary*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.

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