

## MADAME BOVARY - AN IDENTITY CRISIS

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### Abstract

*The paper aims to explore various instances and perspectives in Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary that proves that the main protagonist of the novel, Emma Bovary is missing the crucial element of being a character- A True Identity. The paper intends to bring this to light by, addressing this absence of identity, on the basis of three main divisions – character and roles; language; and, psychology and sins. The character foils of the three Madame Bovary to each other, the various roles that Emma plays in her short life, and the absence of a real voice or any dialogue given to her will be crucial elements that would be explained further in the paper. Moreover, Emma's choices, her needs and also her behaviour towards things and other characters of the story will be taken into account to strengthen the claim. The paper will also talk about her psychological sense of self and then ultimately losing that sense, her need for constant approval and praise, and so on. The paper concludes on the point that taking away Emma's voice in the narration and showing us her story from two blocks away takes away any sense of identity that we might have used to recognize or describe her as the female protagonist that she is. A book that carries her name as its title fails to provide her an identity of her own.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Female Voice, Feminism, Female Presence*

Madame Bovary: moeurs de province (Madame Bovary: Provincial Customs) is a novel written by the French writer Gustave Flaubert in 1856-57. Flaubert altered a straightforward story of adultery into a work of profound humanity. His protagonist is Emma Bovary, a beautiful young girl who deeply desires romantic love, wealth, and social status that she is unable to acquire due to her marriage to the poor doctor, both metaphorically and literally, Charles Bovary.

Her discontent leads her to several extramarital affairs, ugly heartbreaks, illnesses and ultimately to a painful death from them. The climax occurs when Emma's creditor, Lheureux, obtains a court order to seize her property because she had been unable to pay her debts. Emma unable to acquire financial help from anywhere eats a handful of poison to escape the situation that she had created for herself. After Emma's death, Charles becomes very poor, discovers her infidelity and dies leaving their daughter Berthe, now an orphan, to work in the cotton mill.

The themes that are constantly explored in this masterpiece of Flaubert are desire, boredom, love, lies, fidelity, women and femininity. Emma is obsessed with romantic novels and is probably in love with the 'idea of love' as portrayed in these novels rather than being in love with her husband or lovers. Her idea of 'true love' is attached to the materialistic world and has a superficial characteristic to it. She truly believes that love is about getting flowers and poetry rather than having a deep emotional connection with another person. She feels betrayed and depressed when her lovers are unable to fulfil her materialistic

desires and she has no hope for Charles who in fact loves her very much and tries to fulfil all her wishes without a second question but lacks the charm she has idealised.

The beauty of Madame Bovary as a book lies in the fact that all these themes work as a translucent veil to a more important theme that flows like a constant river under the text- the theme of identity.

Identity defines a person as who and what they are. Emma, the protagonist, of the story lacks a properly defined identity. She lives a blurred life juggling between several roles and perceptions and ultimately loses herself without gaining a true identity or true love for that matter. The paper aims to address this theme of 'a true identity' from the lens of - character and roles; language; and psychology and sins.

To start with, in the novel we are introduced to not one but three Madame Bovary(s). The first Madame Bovary that we are introduced to is Charles' mother, Madame Bovary Senior. She is an overly protective mother, and an unhappy wife, who is jealous of Charles' affection for his wife and wants to control her son's life to make up for the fact that her married life was in shambles. At a time in his life, Madame Bovary senior was the pivot around which his life had revolved around. Then we are introduced to the second Madame Bovary, a widowed Madame Heliose Dubuc, who is married off with Charles under his mother's pressure as she had a lot of property. She "...was ugly, as dry as a bone...had no lack of suitors." She was dominating, possessive, strict, capricious, attention-seeking, and suspicious. She died of a heart attack when she found out that her lawyer had stolen away all her property.

The last Madame Bovary that we are introduced to is the novel's protagonist Emma Bovary. She is at first overshadowed by the pseudo presence of the first wife, in instances where she sees the first wife's bridal bouquet still hanging in Charles's bedroom. Even though she is a complete contrast to the old, grumbling first wife, for a certain time period in the novel she is a victim of heavy comparison. She is also fighting to establish her singular presence and identity in Charles's life and has to fight with her mother-in-law, the senior Madame Bovary to gain that identity. The title 'Madame Bovary' is shared by three different ladies in the novel and it's hard for Emma to take that as an identity of her own. So, even though she is the protagonist in whose favour the novel of the title is drawn, it is still attributed to three different characters' foils.

Emma Bovary's identity is again foggy for the reason that several roles are ascribed to her character. She plays the role of a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, the mistress of the house, a lover and a mother. She is in great debt and has to, on one occasion; almost sell herself like a prostitute to gain monetary favours that would save her and her household. When she is a daughter, her life is dark. When she first meets Charles, she is sitting in the shadowed corner of the kitchen, with empty glasses on the table signifying the absence of love in her life. As a wife, she tries to not get bored with the mediocrity of the life that Charles lives. She tries to uphold the image of a dutiful wife in all aspects.

As the mistress of the house, she does a lot. Even though they don't have enough to spend, she buys golden candle holders, and other new upholstery to bring light to the dull house of Charles Bovary. She is charming to all the visitors and patients that Charles gets. She gets along well with the house maid, Felicite.

As a lover, Emma who was extremely fond of romantic novels that she read while in the convent, expected love letters and poetry from her lovers. She was not happy in her marriage with Charles because she did not feel the connection with him that she thought true love would bring. She was obsessed with the ideas of love portrayed in the novels that she read as a young girl and she wanted to feel the same way. She wanted to be a princess, wear jewels and fashionable dresses, attend to balls and be the life of the room. But her marriage to Charles never provided her with such opportunities. So, when Leon came around with his appreciation of Emma's beauty and his poetry, she thought she had found true love. A conflict ensues in her already fragmented identity - she in her head wanted to feel like a dutiful wife and so she 'sacrifices' her love to remain true to Charles or so she likes to believe.

When Emma meets Rodolphe, a Casanova, she can't help but fall into the trap of his charm and ends up being his lover without realizing that he was just using her for her beauty and sexual favours. She falls in love with him and with his wealth too. She dreams of running away with him and living in luxury at some country estate of his. This dream is shattered when Rodolphe breaks all ties with Emma and goes away, leaving her physically sick. In some weird twisted way, Emma even romanticises the idea of meeting her lover secretly and falling sick when they break up. She kind of enjoys all these, as it brings a change into her dull life.

When once again she meets Leon she thinks its fate that has bought them together and she gets involved with him and this time expects him to save her from her debt and when he refuses to do so, she leaves him saying that all men are the same. Emma as a lover is both, highly romantic and highly insecure. She needs constant praises and fire in the relationship or she gets bored of them.

As a mother, Emma is barely affectionate towards her daughter. In an instance of a strange reversal of Oedipus complex, Emma wanted a beautiful son and when a daughter is born to her, she gets disappointed and refuses to take care of her child properly. She shuns away her daughter when she is heartbroken, once even pushing her child away with such force that Berthe hits a wooden edge and starts bleeding and then Emma acts as if it was an accident. The absence of the motherly love and affection from her identity is also highlighted by the fact that she is selfish in taking her own life, not even thinking about her daughter's future. All that matters to her is her pain and her problems, and in keeping them as a priority she ignores the fact that another living soul needs her utmost affection and care.

In all these roles, whether a wife, a lover or a daughter. In All These Roles, whether wife, a lover or a daughter. Emma Nerve Emerges as True character. She is always overshadowed by her selfish behaviours in the projection of her affection towards anyone and anything else.

Flaubert never uses the first-person narration in "Madame Bovary". Emma is never given her own voice and thus never has an identity of her own. She has no dialogue in the whole novel that is ironically based on her own life. Her voice is never heard and is a product of her inferiority to the other characters and their actions. She never gets an opportunity to really express herself through her own voice and thus her pain, her dilemma; her problems go unheard by the other characters of the story. This narration technique leaves Madame Bovary to only be read as a recollection of a story that may or may not has taken place.

The reader gets little chance to establish a connection with the protagonist of the novel as her thoughts are never threaded out to us. All we experience is her gloom and her static nature through a third-person narrative which distances us from her by two blocks. Her identity never emerges as her thoughts are never out there and we get no chance to form a real opinion of her or her action. We never get to hear her side of the story and it diminishes the glitter that this novel offers us by a rather large amount.

This takes us to the feministic point of view where even though the main protagonist is a woman, her voice is suppressed, her actions never get a chance to be explained and she only gets judged by male voices and their point of view. Gustave has rendered his heroine to the position of an object or an animal by taking away her voice from her, taking away her identity.

Through the psychological window, Emma loses control of her life and her mind by the end of the novel due to her various heartbreaks and boredom, her impending debt and the severity of what might come her way. She suddenly doesn't recognize herself or her near ones, she steps down to even selling herself. She has lost her own identity in her mind. There is the destruction of her own identity in her mind. This accounts for another idea that proves that *Madame Bovary* is a novel, where the protagonist fights continuously throughout the novel for a social identity but instead ends up losing her 'sense of self' by the end.

According to Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory, a person's priority needs usually ascends in the order – of physiological, safety, Belongingness, needs of Esteem and Self Actualization. In the case of Emma Bovary, her

Need for belongingness becomes her highest priority, followed by esteem needs and she never gains her full potential and thus never achieves self-actualization. Her need priorities are disrupted, she ignores her safety needs, when she goes to meet Rodolphe at his estate in broad daylight, when she meets Leon in her garden at night or when she goes to the town to get together with Leon, she keeps her need of feeling loved and sense of belongingness above everything else. She is desperate for an identity, even if it is that of a lover outside marriage.

An alternative identity that has indeed been accredited to Emma's account is that of her sins. Readers may not remember Emma for anything but her sins. The sins of lust, greed and pride, and her selfishness will be the only describing points that we might use in future to describe her personality. She is accused of all these sins, no doubt, and she never takes a chance at salvation, except perhaps at the beginning of the novel, where she tries to be a faithful wife to Charles. Her identity has been broken down to only resemble her as her mistakes and her sins and not as a woman, or even another human being. Her story isn't her own; it's merely a recollection of her actions through the eyes of a male.

In conclusion, Gustave Flaubert's masterpiece, a highly acclaimed French classic, *Madame Bovary* is a cry for real identity. The protagonist Emma Bovary spends her whole life without one, and it leads to a painful end. Emma has no social identity, other than being a mistress to someone else, or a bad wife and mother. She has no identity in her own household where her title is shared by two other equally silent yet overpowering women. She doesn't even live up to the concept of self-identity. She tries to find pieces to complete her and to feel something throughout the story. She is desperate for love and for identity. She

tries to make up for the lack of a voice by dressing herself and her house in order to gain some sort of pseudo-identity that would attract others to her, to make herself feel important and more importantly to make herself feel real attimes.

Even though she plays various roles, she is unable to stand up sincerely to even one of them. Her constant need for love and approval and praise from the people who love her shows us that she is really insecure about her self-image, especially from her lover's point of view. She has lost a sense of self because she indulges in extramarital affairs, in plain sight of the whole town, without caring about the impact on her identity, gaining love becomes more important to her by any means. Emma is robbed of her voice, her thoughts and an identity of her own.

To conclude the novel is a satire on the hypocrisy and artifice of the society that has men like Casanovas and lovers who have everything in the world but destroys the identity of their own counterparts on Grounds that they are women - voiceless and faceless.

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