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“Bovarique” bodies from 19th century France to 20st century London

by Andisheh Ghaderi & Anoosheh Ghaderi

Madam Bovary the masterpiece of the French author, Gustave Flaubert, has been subject to different adaptations in different forms and media such as film and Graphic novel. The graphic novel as a medium offers a juxtaposition of sequenced panels with images that contribute to a narrative pacing enriched with the double language of the verbal and the visual. Posy Simmonds in her comic graphic novel *Gemma Bovary* depicts her Emma Bovary of 20th century. For Simmonds, adaptation becomes the means of transferring a feminist critique of the objectification of women’s bodies as an ongoing condition across centuries. Simmonds’ adaptation of *Madame Bovary* provides an insight into the social conditions revolving around womanhood since 19th century, which has only changed forms. Slightly changing the protagonist’s name to Gemma or “je-Emma” claims Emma Bovary’s existential crisis as relevant to 20th-century London. Bovaryism, which is a mental condition that ravels the person with displacement and leads him/her to a tragic ending is not exclusive to the 19th-century middle-class French woman. It is a condition imposed upon women in societies wherein their bodies are objectified, and the objects identify women. Therefore, through a comparison of the two books, the novel and the comic adaptation of it, this paper aims to explain the condition that makes Bovaryism a relevant reality in the societies of two distinct centuries and creates “bovariique” bodies.

Gemma Boverly, a reincarnated Emma Bovary?

Madam Bovary is a female character of 19th century and Gemma is a derivation of her name to represent a 20th-century female character. These women's frustrations with their social as well as private lives make them dream of another place which considerably contrasts their current situation. As a result, they engage in courtship and develop an interest in collecting objects.

Despite their similar names, these women's lives drastically differ from each other; Gemma is an unhappy city dweller trying to escape her London life, while Emma suffocated by the rural life, aspires for a Parisian life with "les soirées Parisiennes". Gemma has a great appetite and takes pleasure in eating province bread, whereas, in *Madame Bovary* food is an element of grotesque for Emma. Moreover, literature is the foremost consumption and a central element of Emma's life and it is the means of connection to her dream land of big cities, from which she is deprived due to her social class. While Gemma is the content producer and not a consumer of literature as a magazine designer. However, what relates these women is a patriarchal society, which intends to define and control through women bodies as moral objects.

The setting of the two books is different in the sense that in the graphic novel events are merely tragic but rather ironic. In *Gemma Boverly*, Charlie's wife does not die, they just divorce, and Gemma has to deal with her husband's intolerable children. In contrast, Emma gives birth to Charlie's baby and her daughter, Berthes, is an innocent creature that makes Emma's decisions look more immoral and selfish. One mistake in Flaubertian world has a domino effect and leads to a tragic destruction. But in the world of *Gemma Boverly*, there is no static "this" and "that" and one has a choice to interpret things differently, make changes, and come back to make up a mistake. An example is when Gemma realizes that Charlie is the right person for her life, she becomes apologetic of her past mistakes and Charlie comes back to her.

Gemma is free to choose and make changes in her own life, she has several affairs similar to Emma; but adultery liberates Gemma while it becomes a scandal in Emma's life. The latter does not enjoy the freedom of body choice, she has to fulfill the social expectation of reproduction. Gemma freely decides to not get pregnant. Another difference between Gemma and Emma is the access to fulfill personal desires. Any caprice is a pastime for Gemma. Her extravagant expenditures do not cause her social scandals. She does not view her adultery as an immoral action deserving of severe punishment such as suicide. It is the patriarchal society represented by a character named Joubert that wishes to see her suicidal and apologetic to her opposite counterpart.

Gemma Boverly's story takes place in a fictional Bailleville near Rouen in Normandy reflecting on the death of Gemma Boverly, an English woman who has migrated not long ago from London to live in the village. Exhausted by the city life, exasperated by the demands of her new husband's spiteful ex-wife and her obnoxious children, Gemma distances herself from London and continues writing her diary. She seeks a real life in province where her utmost joy is the fresh bread made by Raymond Joubert, a baker that records the story of the town following his father's tradition. Once he discovers that Gemma keeps a journal, he steals them and finds out about her past life. What intrigues him about Gemma is her affair with a lover named Patrick Large. Gemma's unhappiness makes her decide to put an end to the situation. Raymond is not the only person whose curiosity targets Gemma. The constant curious eyes of the villagers, Charlie's laid-back attitude, and their smelly uncomfortable cottage introduce Gemma to ennui. This becomes the reason why, like Emma Bovary, Gemma intricates in another affair with a young student, Hervé, which does not remain unnoticed by Joubert. Being worried and disturbed by the uncanny parallels between Gemma's life and that of the heroine of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, He also learns that Gemma's household is in debt. All of this brings Raymond to drafting a series of

cautionary correspondences with Gemma. Remaining anonymous, he sends her some disparate pages from the Flaubert's novel with highlighted lines to warn her that her unethical lifestyle will result in a similar fate. Once Gemma learns about Joubert's intentions, her fury becomes a humorous conversation with Joubert. She tells him that, "if you think I'm going to top myself over a few debts, you're mad, barking mad" (88). Ashamed with guilt, Joubert sends her a peace offering of freshly baked bread. As she is eating, Patrick, shows up to visit when she chokes on the bread. Patrick's Heimlich maneuver is disturbed by Charlie, who has just returned from England. Charlie misreads the scene and attacks Patrick. As their fight becomes physical, Gemma dies.

Adaptations offer insights on human conditions that cut through barriers of time and place. Hutcheon has compared adaptation to translation and paraphrase. She believes that the genius of adaptation is the "ontological shift that can happen in adaptation of a historical event or an actual person's life into a reimagined fictional form" (17). According to her adaptation "is an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in a different way" (16). The profundities an adaptation offers on the story is because it enables the authors to narrate the same story from a different perspective. The story goes through minor or major changes, but the plot remains a common denominator. She refers to Gerard Genet who calls adaptation, "a text from a second degree" (6). This writing of second degree "desires repetition as much as the change... it is both (re)interpretation and (re)creation" (9-10). Adaptation also helps the adaptors pass their message more proficiently since the audience is familiar with the "franchise," will be attracted to the new "repurposing". Hence, new "consumers" will be created. Nevertheless, adaptation is not a simple act of repetition it advances its own idiom. Although the ironic narration of Simmonds' graphic novel makes a major shift in the adaptation from the original Flaubertian novel and depicts a world

upside down, there are still some important commonalities between the two stories all of which could be approached through a concept called “bovarysm.” The reason why this feminine figure Emma Bovary is still present is perhaps the feminine myth it encompasses.

“Bovarique” bodies:

Gemma and Emma grapple with Bovarysm in different ways, and deal with its conditions in completely dissimilar manners. The persistence of Madam Bovary indicates that a major component is missing from the definition of Bovarysm. This article aims to discuss an underlying mental condition that has not been addressed by critics. Living in a punitive social setting that requires women to establish and maintain social norms and traditions, Emma goes through a voluntary death in the 19th century whereas Gemma chokes on the little piece of some male protective manners. Pierre-Marc De Biasi believes that the tragic life of Emma is a thorough portrait of a phenomenon he terms “Bovarysm” a concept defined and approached differently by scholars. *Larousse* dictionary defines the term as a gender-specific mental condition, “Comportement d'une femme que l'insatisfaction entraîne à des rêveries ambitieuses ayant un rôle compensatoire” other sources believe that this concept could be applied to anyone regardless of their gender. Thus, *Liternaute* explains it as : “état d'ennui qui pousse une personne à rêver d'un univers imaginaire”. In the same line, Jules de Gaultier describes bovarysm as, “Faculté départie à l'homme de se concevoir autre qu'il n'est en tant que l'homme est impuissant à réaliser cette conception différente qu'il se forme de lui-même” (217). These definitions overlap in repercussions dissatisfaction and consequently detachment from oneself and one's social milieu. Lucette Czyba explains that Emma does not have a good estimation of her life conditions and that leads her to disillusionment, as a result, she takes refuge in her dreams. Czyba notes that this condition looks

like “toile d’araignée” (42) the construct of this spider is rooted in the character’s education garnered mainly through literature.

Also, the Industrial Revolution’s accelerated mass production of goods, made goods an important part of people’s lives. Objects defined social classes through articulating power and boundaries as well as explicating the power dynamics. As a result, they became important actors. The hegemony of objects is one of the themes that Flaubert negatively approaches in *Madame Bovary*. Emma makes purchases to find a way to enter the social class to which she does not belong, her debts puts her in distress and the responses she gets from her lovers make her suicidal. Besides, in Emma’s life these objects impose their presence and encumber the space. Even the dead nature of the objects depicted become living things reigning over the space as well as humans. They even correspond to people and define them for the reader through familiar associations such as Charles’ cap that makes him an object of derision at school and Emma’s outfits that allow her to distance herself from her social class.

Objects are so powerful in the novel that masque the characters. Objects around the character expect them to follow the status quo and act in society’s predefined ways. These products are capable of connecting to their desired space. Like in *Madame Bovary*, when Emma is reading the fashion magazines, “elle frémit” by touching the pages that represent the Parisian life. Materiality becomes the basic elements of her dreams. Eventually, these objects make the protagonist feel displaced and detached from her context. Additionally, Emma nourishes her soul by consuming images and tries to find her subjectivity in objects and outfits. Her human body and her gender are not sufficient for her to be valued and do not offer her freedom of action. People define themselves and others through material, which reveals itself when Emma and Charles are invited to “La Vaubyessard.” The luxury of Parisian life makes Emma face the bitter reality of her

social class. In that episode, Emma drinking, sees the peasants trying to peep in to get a sense of the life in the palace. Emma finds her reflection in the people on the other side of the glass window. Through this scene Flaubert illustrates that there is a fine line between Emma and the upper-class society which is the abundance of luxury objects.

Both in the comic and in the novel, objects are omnipresent and impose their presence. Cohen calls them “mono-unity panels”. These objects are signifier and signified at the same time. In the comic panels, they reflect character’s mental situation and the direction of the plot. The “inactive entity” of people as Cohen elaborates, is perfectly illustrated in Gemma. Objects carry judgment and behavior codes. For instance, in the lingerie shop, Gemma tries different lingerie, and they allow her to see herself in diverse female social types. She tries to act as the blond stereotypical woman as a popular sexual object. She imagines what her men would think of her in that attire. To this thought, Gemma hides the lingerie under her long coat. What Simmonds implies through these panels is that the female problems around sexual roles has not been resolved but is rather kept under cover. She emphasizes this view of the woman as a social object and as the establisher of moralities in another panel when, after Gemma’s death, Charlie burns her lingerie. In this sense female body becomes an object that represents male honor. Accordingly, female body is a possession of the society through which social norms are established.

Women’s bodies as moral objects:

Jacqueline Merriam Pascow believes that adultery being a common subject of the literature, has found a new narrative in Flaubert’s work. Emma does not feel guilty about her actions till the end and her suicide is not a punishment for her: “it is not a cautionary tale warning woman of the

painful consequences of domestic infidelity” (323). Harry Levin echoes this idea and writes that death is an end to Emma’s constant pain. That death has gifted Madame Bovary an everlasting existence till our time. But as we see in the graphic novel, Emma Bovary’s story has indeed become a cautionary tale although it was not meant to become one. As we see this book becomes a cautionary tale for Gemma, as Joubert, allows himself to highlight certain phrases in the copy of *Madam Bovary* he sends to her. In other words, he finds parallel lines in Emma and Gemma’s life and warns her of a tragic ending.

A woman being disloyal to a dysfunctional marriage is considered as an act of immorality and still in 20th century the social norms foster the traditional views on the matter and see it as an act worthy of consequences. Joubert being himself attracted to Gemma fails to realize his own immorality, but he considers himself as entitled to teach her morals. This leads us to the fact that women alone are establishers of morality in the society. The definition of Bovaryism is challenged in Simmonds’ graphic novel. She criticizes the fact that the society sees, judges, and establishes morality through women’s body. That explains why lingerie is an important object in the comic book. Gemma’s red bra forms the sub-heading of that comic and equals Flaubert’s novel’s sub-heading: “Mœurs de Province”. Charlie only burns Gemma’s lingerie at the end and not any other of her belongings since this object (bra symbol of sexuality) is representative of Gemma’s being for him. In the panel, that she is wearing a coat on top of her lingerie to masque it, Simmonds explains that Gemma appeared in a costume “trying to play the most banal characters –la blonde— which is merely a tired arrangement of characteristics” (59) according to her, that image is insolvent, and it is time to realize it. Therefore, the burden of the societal morals is on women. The society of both novels monitors women with meticulous eyes. The role of the public in deciding what is immoral and needs to be subject to severe punishment is a current theme in Flaubert’s

work. Pascow points out that the rumors exist in abundance around Emma, “Women are worried about her reputation in young men’s circle” (325). In the graphic novel, Raymond Joubert’s judgmental eye observes and registers the untold stories of people as a paternal tradition. Him being the provider of the village’s vital consumption, bread, is another ironic innovation of Simmonds’.

Women as moral objects are exposed to desires, they should not satisfy. For example, Gemma goes to the lingerie shop but hides the underwear underneath her coat. That object is capable of marking her as moral or immoral. Thus, her body is a passive host of the object invasion. Julia Shaw alludes to the fact that in Western literature women are presented, “as either passive or ultimately unhappy heroines. Their relationships with men tend to range from deficient to hopeless, as interaction with the other often produces endless struggle and sacrifice, against the possibility of self-determination and personal fulfilment” (29). True though, this is not just a fact about literature in the past, as we see the theme still present in *Gemma Boverly*. But what makes Gemma different is her resistance toward the traditional beliefs. Shaw admits that, “Religious doctrine is also replete with images of heroic women dogged by an unhappy fate or the passive obedient woman condemned to a life of servitude” (29). Gemma rejects this life of servitude and dependence to men. She does not want to be the moral object of the society. But this is still not a choice for her to make. She is destined to be that moral object since the social context is still not much different in this sense from that of Flaubert’s time.

So as to maintain its moral object, the society does multiple acts of control and would even reach out for violence to establish morality. Liz Constable explains Gemma’s death as, “a satire that discloses ideology insidious violences, unevenly gendered violences”(66); this shift in the culinary taste in Simmonds’ work reveals “violence gagging” “being silenced, being consumed

and being ghettoized- implicit in contemporary attempts to retrieve security through appeals to “real life” (Ibid.). Gemma, Emma and all other women are just moral objects, and they are good examples of the whole society in a small scale. As Edward James Gallagher explains, “Emma and Charles’s experience is other people’s experience as well and they are all a minor version of their life. The odd pair Justine-Madame Homais, underscores for the reader the commonality of the feelings of both Charles and Emma” (65). He explains that when Leon leaves, Emma and Madame Homais are in the same sorrow. Wherever they go, rural or urban area, this society is the same. Gemma, as Liz Constable notes, moves to rural areas because, “urban fears, and an environment of insecurity prompted her distaste for Hackney, a lack of safety she lists as what she sought to escape... the invisible social class division is what she sought to escape from.” (77) and what she finds is the invisibility that Emma suffered from; only her actions become visible and are judged based on moral norms.

Conclusion:

Both novels highlight the message that women do not have right over their bodies or desires as the female body is a social belonging, or a possessed object. What is introducing these women—Gemma and Emma—to death is not their daydreaming about elsewhere, or objects or other aspects of bovarysm. What is destructing them is their gender, its roles as the objects of morality and means of establishing social norms. The western society has gone through many changes since the industrial revolution, but one reality has remained untouched in the lives of women: a body through which morals are passed.

Gemma Boverý's fate offers an insight of Flaubert famous sentence when he says, "Madame Bovary c'est moi!". He was accused of propagating immorality by imagining an adulterous life for a married woman. He, as an author, was also responsible for the establishment of this morality in the patriarchal society of his time. The society has altered to a large extent and has even become its opposite, but the social norms and the society have remained punitive for certain social subjects such as women and authors. "Being the moral object" makes these social subjects "bovarique" and the aspiration toward finding the real life chokes them and deprives them of their existence. This erasure of the social subject through a biological death is the outcome of not serving societal morality.

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