

## Reading *Madame Bovary* through Ranciere

**Manpreet Singh**

**Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Punjabi University,  
Patiala (PB), India.**

---

*Madame Bovary* (1856) a masterpiece by Gustave Flaubert has always been a cause of conflicting interpretations and various controversies. The novel is widely recognized for its aesthetic beauty in depicting realistically the epoch in which it was written and is hailed for the writer's most accurate use of language. The style of the novel dominated its theme which was perhaps Flaubert's intention too. The beauty of this work of art has been its never-ending interpretations that have a lot to give to its readers even though at an apparent level it claims nothing.

As the title of this paper is 'Reading of *Madame Bovary* through Ranciere,' it is important to discuss how Ranciere's theory developed by going through his short biographical sketch, his linking of politics and literature, and development of certain concepts that would further help in reading and interpreting *Madame Bovary*.

Jacques Ranciere is a major French political philosopher born in 1940 in Algiers. He is a Professor of Philosophy at European Graduate School and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at University Of Paris (St. Denis). He was a student at Ecole Normale superieure in 1960's and was highly influenced by the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser with whom he wrote *Reading Capital*. However, the revolt of 1968 left a deep impact on Ranciere and he parted ways with Althusser, as Althusser and other major philosophers of communist party failed to support the ideas presented in the revolt. After the revolt of 1968, Ranciere embraced radical egalitarianism. He rejected the idea of having any kind of inequality and hierarchy among human beings and between human beings and the non living objects too.

Ranciere's major work is on political philosophy and it was much later in his career that he started to write about poetics, and then aesthetics. One major concept of Ranciere with which he connects politics and literature is his idea of the "partition of the sensible." Partition of the sensible is a term that he uses to describe how whatever we perceive through our senses is "framed," and when we frame we make a choice to select certain things and neglect certain other things. This is what he calls Politics:

Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of information. It is a partition of the sensible, the visible and the sayable, which allows or does not allow some specific data to appear; which allows (or does not allow) some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking. (Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 152)

Ranciere argues that literature also does politics. It is also a partition of the sensible as it shows certain things and does not show certain other things, and this partition is historically determined. Therefore, he talks about three regimes of art in three different historical periods namely: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of art, and the aesthetic regime of art.

*Madame Bovary*, according to Ranciere, falls under the aesthetic regime of art. This new regime of art abolishes all kinds of hierarchies and also blurs the distinction between the writing of prose and writing of poetry. This new regime is democratic in its impulse as it gives equal importance to differing subject matters. Hence, the reason for Flaubert to choose a story of a common girl's multiple

affairs is apparent from this. In this novel, Flaubert has disregarded the earlier ways of writing or the earlier regimes of art. This is the reason the novel excited so much controversy. In a way, it was a revolutionary work of art.

Ranciere is strictly against any kind of class distinction or hierarchy among human beings. This is what he finds in *Madame Bovary*. If we go back to ancient definition of tragedy then according to Aristotle, tragedy can only be of a man belonging to a noble class. Such tragedies were a reflection of the class society of that period. However, what Flaubert and his contemporaries were doing in their times was something very different and controversial according to the social morality of their age. In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert does not portray a woman of noble birth as his heroine but a very common girl with no greatness of any kind. He creates a great work of art out of that story of a common woman and her multiple extra-marital affairs.

Flaubert is able to weave a whole socio-political scenario around this story showing hypocrisies of the bourgeoisie as well as of the government, and the not so apparent boundaries of class distinction in his time. This is the greatness of Flaubert. His style marks a break from the earlier regimes of art.

Ranciere not only rejects hierarchy among humans but also between human beings and inanimate objects. He regards a non-living object as equal to a living being. This equality is seen in *Madame Bovary* a lot. This can be noticed in the very beginning of the novel when Flaubert describes Charles' clothes and later his cap. He devotes almost an entire paragraph in describing Charles' cap. Flaubert writes:

It was one of those headgears of composite order, in which we can find traces of the bearskin, shako, billycock hat, sealskin cap and cotton nightcap; one of those poor things, in fine whose dumb ugliness has depths of expression, like an imbecile's face. Oval, stiffened with whalebone, it began with three round knobs; then came in succession lozenges of velvet and rabbit-skin separated by a red band; after that a sort of bag that ended in a cardboard polygon covered with complicated braiding, from which hung, at the end of a long thin cord, small twisted gold threads in the manner of a tassel. The cap was new; its peak shone. (3-4)

This quote from the novel makes it quite clear that even the cap of a character is not in any way less important than the one who wears it and the beauty with which this cap is described is worth noticing. This is just one example but there are many other such examples to be found in the novel.

Flaubert never gives a vague description of a scene. While introducing his female protagonist, Emma, he not only describes the girl but also the fire that was blazing, the food being cooked for the servants, wet clothes dyeing inside chimney and "shovel, tongs, and the nozzle of the bellows, all of colossal size," shining "like polished steel, while along the walls hung many pots and pans in which the clear flame of the hearth, mingling with the first rays of the sun coming in through the window, was mirrored fitfully" (12).

This is an example of what Ranciere calls 'Democracy.' In "The Politics of Literature," he writes, "Democracy is more than a social state. It is a specific partition of the sensible, a specific regime of speaking whose effect is to upset any steady relationship between manners of speaking, manners of doing and manners of being" (14). It is in this sense that Flaubert's writing upsets the well-entrenched expectation that we as readers have from a literary work. Flaubert rejects the conventional hierarchies between the human and the non-human.

Another revolutionary stand that was taken by Flaubert was the use of, what Ranciere calls, the "mute letter" ("The Politics of Literature" 14). Mute letter is the letter which was uttered by Plato in opposition to the 'living logos.' It is the 'orphan letter' which went its own way and talked to anyone

without any partiality. The aim of a mute letter is not to dictate but to show what is there as it is and leave it to the readers to decide what is right or wrong.

On reading *Madame Bovary*, we do not find any teachings or directions or writer's own judgment on any event or character. The novel is not didactic because Flaubert eschews moral judgments. Even though Emma has extra-marital relationships yet nowhere in the text she is painted as a woman of loose moral character. It just provides us with the background of her mental state and leaves to readers to decide what to think of her as a woman. The same is the case with Charles. It rests solely upon the readers what to make of him as a husband and as a doctor.

Not only the characters but the socio-political situations are shown as they are, without any subjective commentary by the writer. The novel is full of instances in which it shows the political and social situation of France. The Ball which Emma and Charles attend shows the invisible glass boundary between the privileged class and the poor working class. The event at the fair, in which a politician makes a speech and the poor old woman is rewarded, shows the hypocrisy of the government. The novel lays bare the entire social dynamic and readers have the complete freedom to draw their own inferences and make judgments.

Another characteristic of the mute letter is that it can speak to anybody and hence can be a reason for destruction, as not everybody has the reasoning or the intelligence to understand the depths of this mute letter. Ranciere gives the example of Balzac's novel *Le Cure De Village* in his essay "The Politics of Literature," in which a poor girl Veronique, after reading a novel, that she should not have read, commits evil. The same can be seen in *Madame Bovary*, and the reading of the mute letter can be the cause of Emma's downfall. We see in the novel that she reads a lot of romantic novels because of which she also, just like Veronique, fantasizes about meeting someone ideal. Her imagination and desires begin to blossom when she reads romantic novels. When she meets Charles, she falls in love with not the man as he is but the ideal picture of a man of her imagination. She imagines an ideal marriage with him as she had read in the novels. But when she realizes the blunder that she had committed she curses herself for marrying him. She is not able to differentiate between the fiction and the real life.

This search for an ideal man and ideal life leads her to the infamous extra-marital affairs, first with Leon Dupuis, a clerk, and then with Rodolphe Boulanger, a wealthy nobleman. Unfortunately both of these lovers leave Emma broken and dying. Her whole life can be seen affected by the mute letter. The mute letter has planted within her the desire to transcend her social condition and to rise above in the social hierarchy.

The primary reason for her hatred towards her husband Charles is that he is completely satisfied with the way he lives. He neither has a desire to be successful in his profession nor does he desire anything bigger in his life. On the contrary, Emma is always dissatisfied with her life. She wants to rise, to get noticed, to go to Paris and live a life of luxury there. She is enchanted by the atmosphere in the Ball, the well dressed and well mannered people there. She turns her face away from the poor outside looking through the glass in such a way as if she wants to forget her own past.

All these desires of her are crushed when she realizes that the real world is totally different than the world of fiction, the world of her imagination. This becomes the cause of her death and she, unlike Veronique, is not given any chance to mend her life. This is the reason why Leo Bersani says about *Madame Bovary* that "*Madame Bovary* is obviously a novel about the dangers of reading novels" (xiii). This is the power of mute letter. For Ranciere, presence of mute letter is the 'literariness' of a work of art.

Apart from focusing on the characters, if we read *Madame Bovary* from the point of view of its representation of the age in which it was written, then we can clearly discern a kind of sharp contrast between two classes and the rise of the bourgeoisie.

In his article “Why Madame Bovary Had to be Killed,” Ranciere investigates the causes behind her death. He goes into the political history of France at that time which was characterized by a kind of “excitement.” Ranciere says that at that time a new kind of democracy prevailed in France. Due to abolishment of monarchy the whole social order was disturbed. He writes,

Unfortunately that order had been shattered, first by the French Revolution, second by the rise of industrialism, third by the new media – the newspapers, lithographs, and so on, which made words and images, dreams and aspirations, available everywhere to anybody. (235)

This new freedom, equality was not handled by the common people and they indulged in material pleasures. Emma Bovary, as Ranciere says, is the frightening incarnation of that desire, the desire to enjoy the material pleasures.

This desire for material gains can be seen in Monsieur Charles Denise Bartolome Bovary, Charles’ father. He, like Emma, was also never satisfied with whatever he had in his life. He was a spendthrift and married for the sake of dowry. About him Flaubert writes, “Once married, he lived for three or four years on his wife’s fortune, dining well, rising late smoking long porcelain pipes, not coming in at night till after the theatre, and haunting cafes” (5).

The class hierarchy, the pettiness of bourgeoisie, and hypocrisy of the government is seen everywhere in the novel. This aspect of the novel can never be ignored keeping in mind the leftist and Marxist inclination of Ranciere. Ranciere can never ignore these factors. So, it is necessary to talk about the classes in the novel and how Flaubert depicts both the classes in the novel.

The first strong contrast that Flaubert foregrounds in the novel between the rich and the poor is in the Ball room scene. On one hand we are shown beautifully dressed red-faced rich class dancing, eating, and indulging in frivolous activities, and on the other the poor are shown looking through a glass wall at them. Flaubert writes:

They had the complexion of wealth . . . In their unconcerned looks was the calm of passions daily satisfied, and through all their gentleness of manner pierced that peculiar brutality, the result of a command of half-easy things, in which force is exercised and vanity amused – the management of thoroughbred horses and the society of loose women.

Another major instance of this contrast as well as the hypocrisy of the government or the ruling class is the scene of Agricultural fair. In the fair, an event was organized in which farmers were rewarded for their accomplishments. Rudolphe and Emma are also present there and we see the intercutting of two scenes. In one scene, there is a politician making a speech, and in the other Rudolphe is seducing Emma. Then there is an old woman who can barely walk, who spent her whole life working in the fields and is too shy to get the prize. The old woman gets a silver medal and twenty five Francs for fifty four years of service.

Through this scene, Flaubert shows us how the poor are exploited by the government and how they are consoled with petty rewards for their lifelong services. On one hand, we see the hypocrisy of the politician and on the other that of Rudolphe.

At the end of the novel, we see that Emma is in debt and she is not able to pay for that. She goes to both of her lovers but no one gives her any money and ultimately she had to commit suicide by consuming a chemical from Homais’ shop.

Homais is a character who is the true representation of bourgeois values. He represents the pettiness and the materialistic approach of the people of his age. He was always with Charles in order to get some profit for himself. However, at the end of the novel when Emma is dead and Charles has almost gone mad, it is he who sells all the goods belonging to Charles and does not care about either Charles or the small daughter of his. He had always been a corrupt man, but at the end Flaubert writes, "He has an enormous practice; the authorities treat him with consideration, and public opinion protects him. He has just received the cross of the Legion of Honour" (269). This was the situation of later nineteenth century France in Flaubert's time.

In his article on *Madame Bovary* ("Why Madame Bovary Had to be Killed"), Ranciere talks about the contradiction between Flaubert and Emma. He talks about how the creation and the creator are opposite. Ranciere says that Flaubert is so democratic a writer that all his characters are equal for him. He does not have any personal opinion about their deeds: "The democratic excitement of the character and the democratic impassibility of the writer are the two sides of the same coin, or two strains of the same disease" (Ranciere, "Why Madame" 237).

Ranciere writes in the same article that Flaubert stands for equal distribution of artistic pleasures for everyone. He blurs the boundaries between art and non-art but it also poses a threat for art. This threat is that if distinction between art and non-art is blurred then what remains specific to art? To fight it, Ranciere says, Flaubert had to create a character which is non-artistic and follows a wrong way of dealing with art. So, Emma is that character. "Art means distinction to her, it means a certain lifestyle. Art has to permeate all the aspects of existence" (Ranciere, "Why Madame" 238). She fuses art into life. She does not mistake literature for reality rather she merges literature into life. Her death is the death of a bad artist. It is a literary death: "She is sentenced as a bad artist who handles in the wrong way the equivalence of art and non-art" (Ranciere, "Why Madame" 240).

This is the argument of Ranciere that no literature is free from politics. It is political by itself. No matter how indifferent a writer is from the politics of his time yet the work is not free from politics. It has its own politics. It does its own politics as a work of art. Flaubert had no political inclinations yet we find in his work a politics, a new democracy, a new partition of the sensible. But this is just an interpretation as there has been many. A text like *Madame Bovary* is always open for new interpretations, new insights.

## REFERENCES

- Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Trans. Dr. Roger Clark, Wordsworth Classics, 2001.
- Hallward, Peter. *Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview*. Trans. Morlock, Forbes, Angelaki, vol. 8, no. 2, August 2003.
- Ranciere, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetic*. Ed. and Trans. Steven Corcoran. Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2010.
- . *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. and ed. Gabriel Rockhill. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011, <http://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com>. Accessed 17 March 2017.
- . "The Politics of Literature." *SubStance#103*, vol.33, no.1, 2004, pp. 10-24, Ranciere\_Politics of Literature\_SubStance103\_33.1\_2004. Accessed 2 Feb 2017.
- . "Why Emma Bovary had to be Killed." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2008, pp. 233-48.