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SELF - IMMOLATION IN GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'S *MADAME BOVARY* AND THOMAS  
HARDY'S *JUDE THE OBSCURE* : A STUDY OF EMMA BOVARY AND SUE BRIDEHEAD

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to analyze Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) in terms of self-immolation of Emma Bovary and Sue Bridehead - two mesmerising and enchanting heroines created by Flaubert and Hardy respectively. Both of them are passionate and romantic beings who suffer a great deal at the hands of Fate and society of which they are a product. Throughout her life Emma tries in vain to have a life full of glory, prestige and extraordinary love, love that would sweep her off her feet. Utterly dejected and disheartened at not being able to attain any of it, she commits suicide and sets herself free from the horrid darkness of her dull, mediocre life. Sue is a woman who lives her life on her own terms and even loves on her own terms. She is a self-dependent woman whose thoughts and actions are not motivated by society's judgement, but she somehow wrongly comes to believe that her advanced ideas have made her a sinner, chooses a path of self-punishment and self-immolation and ends up becoming a mere shadow of her earlier lively and exuberant self.

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Emma, *Madame Bovary's* heroine is beautiful and charming, elegant and graceful and makes Charles's heart flutter with desire at the very first sight and his heart kindles with the eager wish of getting married to her. In the beginning of the novel itself, one comes to know that Emma is filled with romantic notions from the very outset and wants to lead a life of sophistication. Art, literature, romantic novels capture her imagination. She agrees to marry Charles Bovary in the hope that this alliance would bring her to the threshold of a new, exciting, rich existence full of music, dance and balls filling in the vacuum of her previous life. She imagines Charles as her saviour, her hero, her gallant who would usher her into her world of dreams and romance. But reality is too far away from dreams. Charles turns out to be a mediocre, non-ambitious person who had no taste or hunger for the finer things in life. Emma craves to touch the pinnacle of passion and hence is chronically dissatisfied with her husband who is very happy and mired in his ordinary daily existence.

Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken. And Emma tried to find out what one

meant exactly in life by the words *felicity, passion, rapture*, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books(*Madame Bovary* Part One27).

His complacency and self-satisfaction is a source of much agony and frustration for Emma. Charles is unable to fathom Emma's pathetic condition and is too immersed in his own happiness to look inside her aching heart. She resents him more for not even having a slightest knowledge of her pain. He is ecstatic and presumes Emma to be throned at the same level of contentment. Emma gets a small, temporary whiff of happiness when she attends the ball at La Vaubyessard. She is transformed and feels at home instantly. The fact that she refuses to make Charles her dance partner at the ball is clearly indicative of the fact that she considers him beneath her station. She wants to capture time so that she could relive that beautiful moment again and again.

The music of the ball was still murmuring in her ears, and she tried to keep herself awake in order to prolong the illusion of this luxurious life that she would soon have to give up... She looked long at the windows of the chateau, trying to guess which were the rooms of all those she had noticed the evening before. She would fain have known their lives, have penetrated, blended with them(*Madame Bovary* Part One41).

After coming back to Rouen, the void in her life deepens. Life appears to her even duller, more unsatisfying and burdensome and her mental balance has already began to collapse. Even becoming a mother doesn't make her feel complete and whole as she views this girl child as an impediment in her freedom- whatever little freedom society allows women. She had hoped to bear a male child as it would have helped her experience freedom, control and self-dependence:

She hoped for a son; he would be strong and dark; she would call him George; and this idea of having a male child was like an unexpected revenge for all her impotence in the past. A man, at least, is free; he may travel over passions and over countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most far-away pleasures. But a woman is always hampered. At once inert and flexible, she has against her the weakness of the flesh and legal dependence. Her will, like the veil of her bonnet, held by a string, flutters in every wind; there is always some desire that draws her, some conventionality that restrains(*Madame Bovary* Part Two67).

But destiny refuses to grant her this happiness. She looks for passionate fulfillment outside her wedlock. It is first with Leon that she first feels the flame of passion. But she is unable to gather the strength to enter into an extra-marital relationship. Leon soon gets tired of this undefined and unproductive relationship as he sees no hope of having Emma ever and decides with a heavy heart to leave her and Yonville and departs for Paris. After Leon, it is Boulanger who arouses passion in Emma. He understands the psychology of women well and is able to comprehend very easily that Madame Bovary is utterly bored and unhappy with her married life. With planned and calculated moves, he makes Emma pine for him and Emma succumbs to this temptation but they both expect different things from this relationship. She wants emotional security, romance and he is in it more for physical and sensual pleasure. Rodolphe soon gets tired of Emma's over sentimental and possessive nature and finds her behaviour wearisome.

Emma was like all his mistresses; and the charm of novelty, gradually falling away like a garment, laid bare the eternal monotony of passion, that has always the same forms and the same language. He did not distinguish, this man of so much experience, the difference of sentiment beneath the sameness of expression. Because libertine and venal lips had murmured such words to him, he believed but little in the candour of hers...( *Madame Bovary* Part Two146).

He decides to forsake Emma in search of new amorous adventures completely breaking her heart and pushing her still further in the depths of excruciating emotional and mental anxiety. It is at this juncture that Leon comes back in her life again but to shatter her trust once again. She breaks the shackles of societal mores to enter into extra-marital affairs to escape from the stifling and ennui-ridden existence but fails miserably as these escapades only give her fleeting happiness. Amidst all this boredom and destructive relationships, she also becomes a typical victim of Lhereux's money lending schemes. That both Boulanger and Leon do not love her sincerely is validated by the fact that they both leave her mercilessly in her time of dire need. Immersed in mediocrity, boredom, deceit and debt, she finds it almost impossible to breathe and commits suicide.

'Ah! it is but a little thing, death!,' she thought. 'I shall fall asleep and all will be over (*Madame Bovary* 242)... She soon began vomiting blood. Her lips became drawn. Her limbs were convulsed, her whole body covered with brown spots, and her pulse slipped beneath the fingers like a stretched thread, like a harp-string on the point of breaking (*Madame Bovary* 245).

Her adulterous behaviour and her effort of fulfillment of passion is not hers but the society's sin of which she is undeniably a product. Any woman with passion would meet a similar fate as Emma's because the society does not provide any constructive or productive outlet for its satiation. If Emma Bovary is grace and elegance personified, Hardy's Sue Bridehead is an epitome of beauty that exudes childlike innocence, boldness and a spirit of independence. Emma seems sad and is of a serious disposition. Sue is lively, charismatic and unburdened by others' expectations. Although it is Jude who is the title character of the novel, Sue is the one who is more captivating, charming, complex and draws more attention throughout the novel. She lives on her own in Christminster and Jude is mesmerised by her:

He felt very shy of looking at the girl in the desk; she was so pretty that he could not believe it possible that she should belong to him...The consciousness of her living presence stimulated him. But she remained more or less an ideal character, about whose form he began to weave curious and fantastic day-dreams (*Jude the Obscure* Part Second 77-78).

Sue loves Jude from the outset but is somehow unable to recognise her true feelings. Amidst this confusion, she reluctantly agrees to marry Mr. Phillotson, the schoolmaster not thinking of the consequent tragedy. While still engaged to him, she discovers her emotions for Jude but marries Phillotson nevertheless in order to keep her promise. Like Charles in *Madame Bovary*, Phillotson too is devoted to his wife and keeps her happiness above everything else. And unfortunately like Emma, Sue is never able to reciprocate her husband's feelings who out of his unending love for Sue permits her to stay with Jude as is evident from his reply to his friend Gillingham:

"What--you'll let her go? And with her lover?"

"Whom with is her matter. I shall let her go; with him certainly, if she wishes. I know I may be wrong-- I know I can't logically, or religiously, defend my concession to such a wish of hers, or harmonize it with the doctrines I was brought up in. Only I know one thing: something within me tells me I am doing wrong in refusing her...I don't profess to decide. I simply am going to act by instinct, and let principles take care of themselves. If a person who has blindly walked into a quagmire cries for help, I am inclined to give it, if possible" (*Jude the Obscure* Part Fourth 215).

Emma Bovary is unable to find any passionate fulfillment even outside her marriage. But Sue's relationship with Jude is fulfilling in every manner possible- physically, romantically and sentimentally. Sue is a woman who is much ahead of her times and embodies all that stands up against the Victorian concept of ideal femininity. She is natural, spontaneous, a free thinker who is miles away from any artifice. She decides to live with Jude as his lover and his wife without performing the marriage ceremony as she believes that their love and willingness is the only sanction required to stay together. They love each other deeply and have children together. But Fate has something else in store for them. Sue finds her soul mate in Jude breaking the shackles of Victorian concept of chastity and marriage to fall eventually in that dismal abyss. Jude and Sue would have found eternal bliss but for Sue's getting entrapped in the worldly definitions of morality. After the gruesome incident of the murder-suicide of their children, Sue somehow comes to believe that she has been punished for breaking the religious, moral and societal boundaries of marriage:

"Don't criticize me, Jude--I can't bear it!--I have often told you so. You must take me as I am. I am a wretch--broken by my distractions! I couldn't BEAR it when Arabella came--I felt so utterly miserable I had to come away. She seems to be your wife still, and Richard to be my husband!"

But they are nothing to us!"

"Yes, dear friend, they are. I see marriage differently now. My babies have been taken from me to show me this! Arabella's child killing mine was a judgment--the right slaying the wrong. What, WHAT shall I do! I am such a vile creature-- too worthless to mix with ordinary human beings!" (*Jude the Obscure* Part Sixth 333-334)

Jude is enraged and tries vehemently to stop Sue from treading the destructive path of self-abnegation and remorse:

"This is terrible!" said Jude, verging on tears. "It is monstrous and unnatural for you to be so remorseful when you have done no wrong!"

"Ah--you don't know my badness!"

He returned vehemently: "I do! Every atom and dreg of it! You make me hate Christianity, or mysticism, or Sacerdotalism, or whatever it may be called, if it's that which has caused this deterioration in you. That a woman-poet, a woman-seer, a woman whose soul shone like a diamond-- whom all the wise of the world would have been proud of, if they could have known you-- should degrade herself like this! I am glad I had nothing to do with Divinity--damn glad--if it's going to ruin you in this way!"(*Jude the Obscure* Part Sixth 334)

But she does not relent and in an aggrieved state of mind, decides to be in a condition of self-penance by going back to Phillotson and by submitting herself to him:

He put his arm round her to lift her up. Sue started back.

"What's the matter?" he asked, speaking for the first time sternly. "You shrink from me again?--just as formerly!"

"No, Richard--I I--was not thinking----"

"You wish to come in here?"...

"Yes. It is my duty!"

Placing the candlestick on the chest of drawers he led her through the doorway, and lifting her bodily, kissed her. A quick look of aversion passed over her face, but clenching her teeth she uttered no cry (*Jude the Obscure Part Sixth 383*).

Emma tries to climb out of her mundane and ordinary middle class life where as Sue in a way goes back from being an independent spirit to be closeted in the suffocating societal mores. Emma commits suicide to be free from the prison of her stifling life and Sue resigns herself to a living death, and in a way becomes the architect of her own suffering and tragedy. Thus, there is immolation of the self in both the cases.

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