

Marital Deadlock in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*

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Abstract

Ahdaf Soueif is the Egyptian author of the best selling *The Map of Love* which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999. She also wrote *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) which was praised by Edward Said on publication as a long and ambitious novel; it is in fact a more satisfactory work than *The Map of Love*. Although it shares the latter book's interest in love and family relationships, it makes intriguing parallels with Gustave Flaubert's masterpiece *Madame Bovary*. Although *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) were written at different times, yet they have a lot in common. This article compares and contrasts the marital deadlock that occurred in the two novels. This paper argues that there are many resemblances between Flaubert's protagonist Emma in *Madame Bovary* and Soueif's protagonist Asya in *In the Eye of the Sun* which could be considered as the modern version of Emma. This is illustrated through references to certain similarities between Emma and Asya, namely their both being under the influence of novels, the lack of talk between their husbands, their rebellion against their outward peaceful happy life, their sexual deprivation, and their misinterpretation of the word 'love'.

Keywords: marital deadlock, communication, sexual deprivation, rebellion

1. Introduction

Emma Bovary the protagonist of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a representation of a historical reality. Culler (2007) stated that she portrays the historical situation of women, for whom possibilities had been 'bruted' by the declaration of the rights of women of 1792 and various emerging feminist developments, but who, with the bourgeois reaction and the Second Empire found that nothing mainly has changed with regards to provincial women. Similarly, Asya, in Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* was written after Qasim Amin in the late 19th century, as well as other male writers, who advocated education and improvement in women's status for the overall good of society. While Asya represents another era; however, only slight changes occurred in women's status, for even though they were allowed to pursue graduate studies and to work, yet the patriarchal female image still persisted. Women were still not taken seriously, and were regarded as second class citizens that could only excel in certain domains as is clearly apparent in Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. This patriarchal female image is clearly apparent in the difference between how men and women regard love as was illustrated by De Beauvoir (1974):

[Men] still want to take possession of her; at the very heart of their lives they remain sovereign subjects; the beloved woman is only a value among others; they wish to integrate her into their existence and not to squander it entirely on her. For woman, on the contrary, to love is to relinquish everything for the benefit of a master.(as cited in Mikoltchak, 1986)

Both Asya in Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and Emma in *Madame Bovary* are under the influence of the novels that they have read and the false image of the world that these novels portray. According to Leonard (2013), Emma was a young woman 'seduced' by false portraits of love, romance and sex in women's magazines and 'pulp novels'. Her mother-in-law tried to stop her, as she believed that novels are

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“bad books-anti-religious books that quote Voltaire and ridicule the priests” (Flaubert, 1999). She therefore contacted the lending library proprietor to cancel her subscription and stop her from reading novels. This was a central topos in the French discussion around the notion of fiction in the nineteenth century, as Vinken (2007) stated that literary reading results in the loss of God and of the self through devotion to passionate love. He also added that “Madame Bovary is a story about the dangers of false reading, about a false relation to the world, which it illustrates by the example of novels, among others. The theme of the book is corrupted reading.” This novel reading addiction leads Emma to neglect her daughter who is left in the care of a cruel nurse. Bassien (1984) stated that Emma’s readings resulted in her trying to reach in life “what does not exist and in so doing made her go down to defeat ” (as cited in Mikoltchak, 2000). In other words, Emma’s corrupted by her sentimental reading which leads to her marital deadlock.

Similarly, Asya in Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* reads novels like *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* and her friend Chrissie tells her when she asks about Asya’s problem with Saif that “you’ve read enough novels to know that people never turn out exactly the way you expect?” (Soueif, 1992). It is noteworthy to compare Soueif’s reference here to proper reading of novels as a way to truly understand the world and to Flaubert’s ridicule of Emma’s false novel reading. As Perez (2014) asserted that Emma’s faulty assumption was that there ought to be some reliable correspondence between the course of events in books and in life. When Asya commits adultery she sees herself as Emma and when she asks Saif to accept to continue their marriage relationship as friends without sex, he refuses stating that “this is life, not a Gothic romance” (Soueif, 1992). When Asya suggests an alternative which is their being together after a ‘little barrier’, he becomes satirical and states that if their life was a novel we would be agreeing to meet in twenty years and the novel sequel would be titled *The Flame of Friendship*. In other words, both Asya and Emma fall into the same false assumption which is indoctrinated through the stereotype false female mass culture. This is portrayed in both novels and it is therefore no surprise that both Asya and Emma usually turn to reading novels, in an attempt to connect to the plights of other female protagonists trying to reclaim unique voices of their own. The problem with Asya and Emma is that their ideas were second hand “derived from art not life” (Soueif, 1992). Here there is an obvious similarity in both novels, despite the different times that they were written in, in the fact that they both ridicule the inferior literary company pursued by women and its leading to their laughable fantasies which results in their disillusionment with their marriage and ultimately to a marital deadlock.

Another major cause of conflict in their marriage is the lack of communication that exists between their spouses that is clearly apparent in both novels. In *Madame Bovary* Charles’ ‘conversation was ‘flat as a sidewalk’ (Flaubert, 1999). He also did not know the answers to her questions which was quite strange in Emma’s point of view, as the patriarchal image of a man is that he should know about everything as she mentioned “wasn’t it a man’s role, though, to know everything? Shouldn’t he be expert at all kinds of things?” (Flaubert, 1999). However, Flaubert in more than one occasion mentions that Charles did his best in not remaining silent when he returned from work as he used to tell Emma about everything that he encountered each day, and Emma would just listen to what seemed to her as boring talk. Emma, later on as Flaubert narrates “no longer hid her scorn for anything or anyone; and she was beginning now and then to express peculiar opinions, condemning what everyone else approved and approving things that were perverse or immoral” which made Charles just stare at her in astonishment. When Emma starts her adultery with Rodolph she is thrilled to at last have found a lover and this as Perez (2014) pointed out is “Emma’s giddy pronouncement [that] highlights the degree to which she believes ... will mean the beginning of her real life, a life in which she will have a proper voice because she will finally have someone to speak to.” (Flaubert, 1999). On the other hand, Asya in *In the Eye of the Sun* complained that Saif did not enjoy talking to her, as she told her mother “He’d rather talk to Kareem or to Daddy than to me any time and it’s been like this since we got engaged” and she also relates to her friend Chrissie “He won’t listen. He won’t permit a conversation about anything that matters” (Soueif, 1992). In addition she added that they get along well when she behaves as he wants her to. In other words, she believes that Saif wants to shape her character the way he believes is right which reveals the patriarchal man superiority inherent in society and spoon-fed to most males. When Asya lists the things that Saif dislikes about her, one of these is her ‘tendency towards abstract discussion’

and arguments. She believes that he does not want to listen to her views and that she always should see things his way. Whenever she started talking to him, he would ask her to state her talk 'in a nutshell'. When Saif confronts Asya and asks about reasons of her adultery she replied "You didn't- you wouldn't talk to me" (Soueif, 1992) and whenever he phoned her, he used to switch on the television first while he was talking to her. On another occasion, when he asked her why she resorted to adultery, she mentioned that she would have waited twenty years, if he had talked with her. In other words, she could clearly understand that talking to her was like a duty that he must complete and the fact that this implied that her words to him were not important. Moreover, Asya accused Saif of "closing the world to [her]" while he believed that he "showed her the world", but in her view she was to him like a magazine that you would take with you not to read, but to "flick through it and look at the pictures" (Soueif, 1992). It is noteworthy to state that the patriarchal image of the man who has all knowledge is not one of Charles' characteristics in *Madame Bovary* as he taught nothing, knew nothing, and desired nothing, while the belief that a female should accept her husband's opinion and should not argue or discuss abstracts, as this is a male domain, is Saif's macho perspective in *In the Eye of the Sun*. The difference between Emma and Asya is that the former believed that a man should be the source of knowledge, but the latter felt that she and her husband had equal knowledge, as she relates to her friend "He knows everything I know and he wants it left alone. So it's not like we'd be having a conversation" (Flaubert, 1999). However, when Asya first sees Saif, she tells her friend Chrissie "I absolutely know he read just about everything" (Soueif, 1992). It is interesting to note that this lack of communication is basically related to the deeply rooted gender discrimination that has existed in society and is one of the reasons of marital deadlock. It is clearly seen in Emma's wish to have born a son as "A man is free ... to range the passions and the world, to surmount obstacles, to taste the rarest pleasures, whereas a woman is continually thwarted. Inert, compliant, she has to struggle against her physical weakness and legal subjection. There is always ... a convention that restrains" (Flaubert, 1999). In short, the lack of conversation between spouses in both novels was a major cause of their marital deadlock as was portrayed by Flaubert and Soueif.

It is noteworthy here to discuss marriage as seen through Emma and Charles in *Madame Bovary* on the one hand, and Asya and Saif in *In the Eye of the Sun* on the other. De Beauvoir (1974) stated that marriage in the nineteenth century robbed women of their freedom. He also added that sexual intercourse between spouses eventually becomes a duty which does not necessarily provide the wife with any satisfaction, as marriage was seen as an institution for procreation. Therefore, as De Beauvoir (1974) believes that is why some wives search for "sexual gratification and love out of wedlock" (as cited in Mikoltchak, 1986). The lack of sexual intimacy pervaded the lives of both couples. In *Madame Bovary* Flaubert referred to this indirectly when he mentioned that Charles would always after supper go to bed and start snoring. Their relationship was described as being conventional and regular "Charles's desire for her was nothing very extraordinary" (Flaubert, 1999). At the beginning, she used to try and stir him by reciting love versus in the moonlight, but he did not show any reaction or affection. She fantasized marrying a different person and living in the bustling city, going to theatres and balls which would have given her "unlimited opportunities for deep emotions and exciting sensations." In other words, she felt that her life in the countryside was what was depriving her of the true joy of life. She was as Harrison (2010) pointed out routinely described as a 'desperate housewife.' When Emma started showing signs of depression, Charles's love for her made him move to another town in an attempt to help her recover. However, Emma was convinced that Charles was the obstacle that stood in the way of her happiness, as she questions herself "for whose sake, after all, was she being virtuous?" (Flaubert, 1999). She dreamt of his beating her to have a reason to commit adultery. Friedan (1963) stated that Emma is a representation of "those who remain unhappy despite having acquired the accoutrements of the American dream: marriage, family, and home ownership" (as cited in Leonard, 2013), yet she suffered from sexual frustration which eventually led to a marital deadlock. Vinken (2007) stated that Emma's having a husband and child does not provide her with satisfaction, as she is consumed by another desire which she tries to find fulfilment in, namely, adultery. This still does not make her reach satisfaction, as she is drawn further after her desire is satiated to the point of revulsion.

Moving on to Asia and Saif's marriage in Soueif's novel, we perceive that Asia is also agonized by sexual deprivation, in spite of the fact that the word love was always repeated between the spouses, but it was a platonic type of love where sex was absent. It is interesting to note that Soueif in more than one occasion changes the narrator from Asia to Saif to alert the reader that Asia was the cause of this problem and not the opposite. Saif had resisted having a sexual relationship with Asia before marriage because of his conservative nature which Asia was reluctant to follow. She was seen as keen on starting sex before marriage during her engagement, yet this was unacceptable to Saif. However, they were not able to do so after marriage, and after separating from her husband, Asia believed that their spiritual love could continue, as she only wanted to remain with him as a friend which he did not accept. Saif's love was expressed in his generosity and his buying her presents. He also took care of her when she was sick. Al-Daraiseh (2003) asserted that when Asia suffered from an unfulfilling, unconsummated marriage, she blamed her parents, who insisted that the marriage be postponed for three years, long after the start of their romantic relationship. Asia also believed that the religious traditional culture in Egypt that demands that romantic relationship not be consummated until marriage was mainly the cause of her sexual problem with Saif. Thus like Emma, Asia's sexual frustration led to marriage deterioration and deadlock. She tried to find fulfilment in having an affair, but like Emma, after a while, realised that having an affair does not offer her satisfaction nor fulfilment, as she recognizes the western white patriarchy in her lover who wishes to change people, thinking that as she told him "the way you think I should be is better for you than the way I am" (Soueif, 1992). This brings to mind Danahy's (1994) words about *Madame Bovary* which I argue could be applied to Soueif's *In The Eye of the Sun*:

LaCapra (1982) would limit the conflict in values to one of marriage, family, and property versus adultery and shows how the defense, the prosecution, and even modern critics of the novel[s] hold the same fundamental values in common. What I am arguing, on the other hand, is that the scope of the ideological crime is even wider, an indictment not just of class but of gender as patriarchy had culturally constructed and articulated it. (as cited in Mikoltchak, 1986)

Both Emma and Asia rebelled against the placid outwardly peaceful happy married life that only gives the semblance of happiness. Emma's deadlock started from the beginning of her marriage with her lust for enjoyment of city life believing that this is where people could be happy thinking that certain "portions of the earth must produce happiness." (Flaubert, 1999). When reflecting about her honeymoon, she had hoped to spend it in a 'Swiss Chalet' or a 'cottage in Scotland' and her husband would be wearing "a long black velvet coat ...soft leather shoes, a high-crowned hat and fancy cuffs"(Flaubert, 1999). He was not interested in going to the theatre or enjoying the city life. Emma hated the fact that Charles took her contentment for granted "his serene dullness, the very happiness she herself brought him" (Flaubert, 1999). This one sided happiness had grounds, as Flaubert presents Emma in the early stage of her marriage as the perfect housewife who was able to run her house, cook delicious meals, draw pencil sketches and play the piano. Moreover, she prepared supper for her husband when he came late from work and the servant was asleep. What more would a husband want especially if he had the illusion that his wife was happy with their placid serene life. As for Asia, her rebellious nature appeared after her first quarrel with her husband and her leaving the house. When her mother asked her to return to her husband Saif, she confronted her pointing out that she will not take similar action to stay with her husband to keep the picture of a happy peaceful marriage. Saif's always addressing her as 'Princess' and showering her with fatherly love does not solve their marital problem. She told her mother "I saw you crying in the kitchen while he sat around inside thinking everything was just fine – and that's how it's always been, and I'm not going to be like that for me"(Soueif, 1992). In Asia's situation Saif, like Charles, misread his wife thinking that to care for her like a sister or daughter is enough to provide her with happiness, as when he told her boldly "I love you well enough to live with you like a sister"(Flaubert, 1999). Saif whenever Asia rejected his sexual approaches thought it was due to the fact that she was young and fragile. He had hoped that their relationship may become normal after she finished her PhD which was to be completed five years after their marriage. So Asia shares with Emma what Rosowski (1983) contended about the latter that she was a protagonist trying to find "value in a world defined by love and marriage"(as cited in Leonard, 2013), but eventually realizing that such a world does not exist. The

dream of getting married and living happily ever after is only a fairy tale, and in real married life, is a wish that not always comes true.

An important comparison that could not be missed is Charles and Saif's reaction after their discovery of their wives' adultery as they both assumed that the affair was only romantic platonic love. Their surprise was mainly based on their illusion that their wives were happy and satisfied with their lives. Flaubert and Soueif both intentionally portrayed the husbands in a ridiculous light. If we first look at Charles, we find that he did not ever surmise that Emma's depression could be due to her unhappiness with him. When she becomes pale and physically and mentally ill, he gives her Valerian oil and camphor baths and finally decides to move. Similarly, when problems in the form of arguments surface in Saif's marriage, Asya leaves him to pursue her PhD study and he leaves to start his own business, meeting occasionally on holidays. Saif mistakenly thought that his relationship with his wife Asya will become normal when she fulfils her objective which is obtaining her PhD which was later found out to be the path that she was forced into by her parents. Here, we find the tendency to solve marital problems by relocating to another place where the change may have its positive effect on the spouses and the marriage as a whole. Throughout their marriages both Saif and Charles were blind to their wives' feelings and needs. When Asya tells Saif about her affair, he asks her a question which to any reader would sound absurd as to thinking that Asya just had a platonic romantic affair with another man, as he believes this was the case and that he had expected that she would be loyal to him. Asya cries "I am twenty-six not twelve ... What do you expect and I've been waiting for nine years" (Soueif, 1992). Here she is referring to their five years of marriage and their four year engagement. Turning on to Charles when he first noticed his wife's unhappiness, he sat in his office and wept and wrote a letter to his mother to get her consultation. After Emma's death, when he discovered Rodolphe's letter, his first assumption was similar to Saif's, as he thought "Perhaps they loved each other platonically" (Flaubert, 1999). When he found the rest of the letters to her other lover Leon, he realized the truth and was struck with grief. However, when he saw Rodolphe, he did not fight with him, but told him "I don't hold it against you... No one is to blame. It was decreed by fate" (Flaubert, 1999). Flaubert mentions here that Charles when looking at Rodolphe had wished that he were him so that Emma would have loved him. So, it is clear that though Charles realised that he was to blame for their marital deadlock, he would not expose this weakness to his rival blaming it on fate. On the other hand, when Saif recognised that he was partly to blame for their marital deadlock, he denied having been the cause of this and expressed his anger through physically beating Asya and would have beaten her lover too.

It is important here to analyse the word 'love' and how it is used in both novels. To do so we need to look back at Aristotle's definition of love which he sees as perfect friendship and he calls it 'philia' which could be translated to a friendship-love emotion which is wishing and doing well for others for their own sake (Aristotle, 1984). This does not necessarily exclude sexual intimacy as the latter is performed in the hope of achieving pleasure, but to Aristotle this is not what makes a flourishing life (as cited in Simon, 2011). The true love-friendship emotion in Aristotle's view seeks this devotion not for the sake of gaining anything in return. We see this clearly in the relationship between Asya and Saif when he reproaches her with "I thought we were friends"(Soueif, 1992) and her insistence that inspite of her adultery, she truly loved Saif. On the other hand, the word 'love' is repeated in *Madame Bovary* as Emma believes she is in love with Leon and Rodolphe. Love to her is translated into desire that is neither consummated in marriage nor in adultery. This is due to the fact that if sex in love is an end in itself, it does not last. May (2011) stated the following:

Sexual desire can lie at the beginning of the path towards the highest love, but that it is not what the highest love is finally about or where it is really consummated. Whether in Socrates' report of love's ascent to absolute beauty or in Aristophanes' myth of finding our other half, sex is a means but not the end. Amazingly, no amount of sexual liberation has put this view to flight. Few regard love centred on sex as comparable in resilience or richness to love based on 'higher' things we share with our partners, like common values or ideals.

So although she at first loves Leo, when he travels, she falls easily in love with Rodolphe and tells him that she loves him to the extent that she cannot live without him claiming that she is his 'slave' and he is her

'king'. Her words did not touch Rodolph who felt that they have reached 'the eternal monotony of passion.' When Rodolphe rejects her idea of eloping together, she has an affair with Leo in the name of love which eventually subsides as "She was surfeited with him as he was tired of her. Adultery, Emma was discovering, could be as banal as marriage" (Flaubert, 1999). Flaubert here might be declaring that time kills the passion of love when sex is its first priority. Moreover, Soueif describes Aristotle's love-friendship relationship that existed between Asya and Saif showing also how it does not last and Asia's relationship with her lover disintegrated because it was mainly based on sex as an end. Both writers seem to be sending the same message that a lasting love relationship should neither be based on sex alone nor on mere friendship.

When Emma seeks the help of her lovers and they refuse to help her, her love is transformed into hatred as she knows that she is a female in a men-ruled world as Flaubert (1999) states:

She was transported by a spirit of belligerence. She would have liked to strike out at men, spit in their faces, beat them all to pulp; and she continued to stride rapidly ahead, pale, quivering, enraged, and searching the empty horizon with tear filled eyes and, after a fashion, revelling in the hatred that was strangling her.

Asya at the end of the novel discusses with her friend Chrissie the possibility of her meeting a man who would be able to understand her and erase patriarchal oppression she had suffered from ever since her father ordered her not to "suck ...[her] thumb any more, all the way through Saif"(Soueif, 1992). Her first priorities are family, friends and work, but "Love may for all she know be behind her"(Soueif, 1992).

2. Conclusion

To sum up, Emma in *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Asya in *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) fail both to find a meaning or substance in their married lives, so they try to find themselves in romantic erotic love outside their marriage. The two novels *Madame Bovary* and *In the Eye of the Sun* both emphasise the fact that passionate erotic love between two individuals cannot be complete and satisfactory. Moreover, they are both disappointed as they both rely on their husbands who are men whom they assumed could help them realize their dreams of self-fulfilment and happiness which they failed to provide. Furthermore, their husbands Charles and Saif did not succeed in making them achieve transcendence rather than immanence to which they are destined as women, non-beings, and the passive others. Both Charles and Saif's refusal to regard their wives on an equal basis, as human beings who need to talk, who require love, and who do not necessarily have to be content with their marital life, leads in the end to a marital deadlock. It is this refusal to shake off the patriarchal image of the female that stands as an obstacle that breaks the relationship between spouses and ultimately leads to marital deadlock as is apparent in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*.

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