

## **The Creative Launcher**

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

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### ***Madame Bovary* and its Cinematic Adaptation in English**

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#### **Abstract**

Madame Bovary, a classic novel by Gustave Flaubert in 1856 already created a stir in the society so its Film Adaptation whether in Hindi or English. Already filmed by Jean Renoir, Claude Chabrol and Vincente Minnelli, Gustave Flaubert's 1856 classic *Madame Bovary* does another neurotic tango through the villages of Normandy in this latest adaptation of the seminal French classic about the ambitious wife of a simple country doctor whose adulterous affairs and mounting debts to escape the boredom of a dead-end life destroy her husband's career, her reputation and eventually her life. The results are realistic and refined, but uneven and disappointing. When Gustave Flaubert's first novel came out, there was a very French reaction they put the language of the book on trial. The ostensible charge was obscenity, but the trial went much deeper. The prosecutor argued that the novel's realism was itself immoral: an offence against art. Flaubert was acquitted but they were dead right about his aims. *Madame Bovary* was a bomb thrown at romanticism.

**Key Words-** *Adaptation, Adulterous, Immoral, Romanticism.*

#### **Various Adaptation of *Madame Bovary***

The plain language of the book was intended to be the star turn; the events of her life merely the vehicle. That's always been one of the big problems in trying to adapt it to the screen, because movies work the other way around. Filmmakers see in Emma Bovary one of the first modern heroines, a woman destroyed by her desire not to be bored, a woman who is loved and coddled by her kind but simple husband Charles, then rewards him by having affairs with the first two men who make eyes at her. A woman who destroys herself, in fact,

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because of her need for passion. Language as such often disappears in adaptations of this novel, of which there have been a lot. Any filmmaker who dares to tread where Jean Renoir (1934, starring Valentine Tessier), Vincente Minneilli (1949, with Jennifer Jones) and Claude Chabrol (1991, Isabelle Huppert) have gone before deserves credit for bravery.

## **Latest Adaptation by Sophie Barthes**

This latest adaptation was written by: Sophie Barthes and Felipe Marino and Directed by: Sophie Barthes , Starring: Ezra Miller, Mia Wasikowska and Paul Giamatti released on June 12, 2015 In fact, Sophie Barthes is the first woman to make a direct adaptation of the novel – hard to believe but true. Her version is both surprising and disappointing. It looks gorgeous, in the cinematography of her partner, Andrij Parekh. Barthes is French-born, but grew up in Latin America and the Middle East, before attending Columbia University. That internationalism may be what allowed her to make a film in English with French touches, starring an Australian actress, Mia Wasikowska, rather than try for a fully French version.

## **The Narrative in Film**

First surprise is that Emma dies in the first scene, dragging her sodden dress of expensive silk through the autumn leaves, mud caked around the metres of imprisoning cloth. It is an appropriate way for her to go – although it is a long way from the novel's beginning. There are other omissions too, biggest of which is that she bears no child in this version. Starting at the end gives the film a sense of mystery – how did she come to this? – if not suspense. So the film has some narrative energy, just not enough. For the first 10 minutes, there's almost no dialogue, as young Emma leaves the convent where she was educated, and marries the country doctor Charles Bovary (Henry Lloyd-Hughes). Beneath lowering skies that persist throughout the film, Charles takes her to his home village, where he has a modest medical practice befitting his modest medical degree. She is bored after a few days, but dutiful. RhysIfans appears, as the conniving merchant of fine fashions, to tempt her with silks and pearls. Ezra Miller dazzles her eyes, as the young lawyer in training, Leon Dupuis, who shares her love of art. Paul Giamatti is the scheming and silver-tongued Homais, her

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husband's chemist, who has a way with words, now that dialogue has been admitted. Logan Marshall-Green as The Marquis makes her weak at the knees, so handsome, rich and decadent is he. Her undoing is all at the hands of men, which gives the film a touch of feminist cred, but not so much that she seems a victim of anyone but herself.

In terms of setting, performance and design, the film is well constructed, with a sense of poise. Wasikowska has the fragile beauty to play tragic heroines, and she has visited the 19th century impressively before in Jane Eyre. Still, I was underwhelmed by this adaptation. Her performance is strong, but the movie doesn't accumulate enough emotion. Barthes doesn't build it. It's as if we are kept slightly outside Emma, observing her destruction, without feeling it. Emma Bovary can be construed as a sort of brat, if the director doesn't open her up. She is never happy, often cruel, always wanting what she hasn't got. That's part of what makes her a modern heroine, but we have to love her as well as pity her, or her downfall just becomes banal.

When this novel of Flaubert first appeared in print, Monsieur Flaubert was arrested and tried for obscenity, and acquitted in 1857 to international acclaim. But the fascinating character most widely smeared as the literary turning point in the history of women crushed by the stifling morality of their time never really came to life until Jennifer Jones played Emma Bovary in Vincente Minnelli's lush, passionate MGM version in 1949. Audience might not have liked the ruthless woman who sacrificed everything for materialism and romantic fantasy, but It could be understood that every desperate desire of a modern woman in emotional agony, trapped in the confines of 19th century provincialism as similarly portrayed in Maya Memsaab.

### ***Emma vs Mia:***

The new Madame Bovary is Mia Wasikowska, a talented girl who lacks the maturity, neurotic self-destructiveness or throbbing sexual force of Jennifer Jones. Her Emma is little more than a self-contained 21st century teenager unpersuasively acting out a self-deluded 19th century tragedienne. Of course, she is not helped by writer-director Sophie Barthes,

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whose adaptation opens with Emma swallowing the arsenic before she even gets a chance to tell her story. The rest is all flashbacks, but more than a century and a half after it first scandalized the world, *Madame Bovary* is still a devastating story indeed. Respectful, quasi-faithful and somber, if somewhat less than invigorating, the story quickly glosses over Emma's emergence from a strict convent education with no life experience, forced by her farmer father into an arranged marriage to dull Charles Bovary, a handsome but poor village doctor with no ambition (played by the excellent English actor Henry Lloyd-Hughes). Emma tries to be a wife, but she is left alone in a sexless marriage from which needlepoint and hot baths are meaningless substitutes. Searching for a happiness she can't define, her desire to defy convention through social climbing leads to mounting debts and extra-marital affairs. With an impressive attention to details, Ms. Barthes and her co-writer, Felipe Marino, provide an arduous sense of the hard times—hounds eating the entrails of a slain deer after a hunt, the doctor's description of bleeding and lancing his patients, the smells of livestock, an actual surgery on a club foot without anaesthesia. Vincente Minnelli explored poetic license with the novel but edited the complex literary trajectory into a coherent and riveting narrative. Ms. Barthes takes the same liberties, but the gaps are glaring. The lavishly staged ballroom sequence that made movie history is nowhere to be found.

Mia Wasikowska never really develops into a full-bodied personality. The movie differs so much from the Flaubert original that the Emma character remains a cipher. As the brash merchant who drains her of her money on credit, threatens to send her husband to jail, and then offers the ultimate insult by scoffing at her ultimate offer to pay her bills with sex, Rhys Ifans is creepily reptilian. A bland Logan Marshall-Green does nothing to enhance the role of the seductive marquis who deserts her after promising to take her to Paris. And Ezra Miller is a yawn as the student who lacks the maturity to assume responsibility for a married woman as a lover.

In Gustave Flaubert's novel, Emma Bovary dies in a crowded bedroom, a scene worthy of social historian Philippe Ariès's description of such final moments as they changed

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over time.[1] Besides her husband Charles, the distraught and disheveled Emma is surrounded by Yonville's parish priest Boursinien, Emma's devoted domestic servant Félicité, the ambitious pharmacist Homais and his two sons, and the physician Canivet from Neufchâtel. The renowned Doctor Larivière has just departed, unable to help the dying patient. Emma's little girl, Berthe, also makes a brief appearance, mistaking the extra candles and the crowd for a New Year's or mi-carême celebration. Finally, after Bournisien's ministrations of the last rites, the town's blind beggar sings a scandalous ditty on the sidewalk below the bedroom window. "Then Emma began to laugh, a dreadful, frantic, desperate laugh, convinced she saw the wretch's hideous face rising before her in the eternal darkness like a terrifying warning." [2]

How different is Emma's death scene in Sophie Barthes's cinematic version! We witness a young woman (Mia Wasikowska), impeccably dressed in a smartly stitched silk jacket and matching skirt, faltering at a slow trot along a desolate wooded path. There is no one else in sight. The autumn forest has changed its colors to a soft reddish brown. Besides Emma's labored panting, the only living sounds are the birds twittering in the background as the bouncing camera captures Emma's disordered mental state. She pauses a couple of times until at last she can no longer withstand the pain in her midriff; she sinks to her knees and falls gently on her side, a medicinal vial visible in her open hand. With a few last breaths, she dies, her clothes neatly arrayed around her in a textured complement to the fallen leaves that serve as her penultimate resting place. Not a single word – or laugh – is offered in her last moments. So starts and ends the movie.

Barthes follows in a long line of cinematic attempts to make over Flaubert's account of a deluded woman who, deeply disappointed in love and unable to pay off huge debts, commits suicide. The uninspiring men in her life include an unimaginative dolt of a husband, Charles, a small-town doctor with whom she has an annoying daughter; they are hardly the making of the connubial bliss that Emma read about in the romantic novels she devoured: "It was all above love, lovers, and persecuted ladies fainting in isolated garden pavilions." Swept

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away from ethereal dreams to the drab reality of provincial life during the July Monarchy, Emma seems to find amorous promise in a young law clerk, Léon Dupuis; he leaves to study in Paris before much comes of it. After an elaborate ball at Vaubyessard (the neighboring marquis's château), she meets a prosperous local squire, Rodolphe Boulanger, who dallies with her for four years. Rather than run away together as planned, Rodolphe breaks off their affair, leaving Emma deeply shaken. She is relieved to rediscover Léon at the opera in Rouen; they carry on an affair of their own until Emma's bills with a merchant, supplying her credit to buy whatever she wanted, come due. Without resources other than Léon who ends their relations and Rodolphe who refuses her pitiful appeal for money, Emma solves her dilemma in a melodramatic turn: she swallows arsenic. True to form, her forgiving husband dies of grief.

Historians have made much of the world depicted by the novel; cineastes regarded it as an invitation to film. There have been no fewer than 18 adaptations of this work, beginning as long ago as Albert Ray's imaginative variation, *Unholy Love* (1932), set in Rye, New York, with an entire cast of renamed characters. In 1934, at his distributor's insistence, Jean Renoir trimmed nearly half the length of a rendition truer to the novel. The release, a theatrical homage to his father, the painter Auguste Renoir, is a better-known if not more successful refashioning of the novel. Two other productions – one directed by Vincente Minnelli in 1949, starring the radiant Jennifer Jones; the other directed by Claude Chabrol in 1991, featuring the imposing Isabelle Huppert – are the versions most used in the college classrooms studying Flaubert's work.

Flaubert becomes the narrator in a departure from the author's actual ironic distance – while Chabrol is much more faithful to the text – voicing-over select passages from the work – even as Huppert's curious stepping in and out of her role introduces a striking inconsistency lamented by numerous critics. Besides productions in seven languages other than French and English, television directors have ventured adaptations, including Jean Sherrard's National Public Radio Playhouse production in 1986 and Tim Fywell's Masterpiece Theatre's in 2000.

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None of these non-cinematic efforts, however, is altogether suitable for comparison with Barthes's work. Like linguistic differences between French and English, much is lost in translation.

Similar discrepancies between novel and film are easy to identify. Perhaps the most remarkable is the substitution of the Marquis d'Andervilliers's hunt for the Vaubyessard ball. It is almost as if Barthes is acknowledging that she could not improve upon Minnelli's dizzying dance scene set to Maurice Ravel's demonic "La Valse," much less Chabrol's shift of view from the dancers' faces to their feet, and so she invents a visually daring and symbolic quest on the Marquis's part to slay a stag with a single thrust of his sword in the very woods where Emma would later die, a vanquished prey of another sort. Moreover, Barthes conflates the Marquis d'Andervilliers (Logan Marshall-Green) and Rodolphe Boulanger. In the film Emma bears no child, though towards the end, as her life falls apart, she smiles regretfully at a mother nursing her infant. The opera scene in Rouen is replaced by a chamber concert. Charles is a less stolid, unthinking character than his counterpart in the novel. Barthes's Homais (Paul Giametti) hardly utters an anticlerical word in the presence of the priest Bournisien (Richard Cordery). The fatuous speeches at the agricultural fair, a celebrated instance of Flaubert's corrosive irony—cannot be heard through the closed, upper-story windows overlooking the dais where an old, deaf servant is publicly honoured: "Fifty-four years of service! A silver medal! Twenty-five francs!" One could go on.

The differences between literature and film underlie these omissions, and require some analysis of why Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is so very hard to transpose to the screen. After making reference to Chabrol's film, Barthes stated in an interview, "I wanted to make a film that would be as aesthetic as possible and to capture the atmosphere of Normandy the most authentically that we could. Some of the greatest French painters came from Normandy – the light is extraordinary." So the novel was not the only medium Barthes had in mind as she framed her screenplay and filmed on location. In sharp contrast to Flaubert's commitment to language, Barthes is focused on the visual, the scenic, the artistic, the "aesthetic" as she

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emphasized in the interview. Every frame is carefully, deliberately composed as if it were a painting whose color, line, form, and depth, and are intended more for an exhibition than for a movie whose other elements – the plot, the characters, the dialogue, the soundtrack are generally of principal interest. If Emma is the chief protagonist in the film, it is in large measure her pictorial qualities – her clothes, her furnishings, her gestures, her face and body – that captivate the viewer. Barthes seems to have selected Wasikowska because of her embodiment of this sensory specificity: Wasikowska’s Emma Bovary stands out for more than the brightly colored, stylish clothes she wears in the film. This actress’s interpretation is less emphatic, more nuanced. Here Emma’s mysterious inner self contrasts sharply with her striking poses and appearances among the decidedly drabber figures around her. She is driven less by the reader’s fantasies alluded to in the novel – Wasikowska’s Emma merely looks at the illustrations in the fashion journals that the merchant draper Lheureux (Rhys Ifans) sells her – than she is by the illusions made possible by consumer culture. Bored and offended by the limitations, pettiness, and banalities of bourgeois life, this Emma grabs what distinction she can in her possessions – on her body, in her home, with her lovers. Only toward the end of the film, as the consequences of her fashionable infatuations close in on her, is it apparent that Emma’s fine clothes have become virtual prison jump suits restraining her vain efforts to rise above the ugly mediocrity of provincial life. Bearing the same well-tailored attire that she wore to confront her creditors and her first lover, she dies condemned by their betrayals. This Emma is ultimately the victim of exquisite Parisian taste. As a result, the film replicates well the delicate balance of Flaubert’s concurrent realist and romantic tendencies. If Barthes is unmindful of the language that distinguishes the novel—only Chabrol’s version acknowledges this prominent feature of Flaubert’s work – she attends instead to the visual interplay of the concrete and the imaginary, the array of detail and its artistic possibilities beyond the everyday. Barthes realizes Flaubert’s instinctive understanding of the artistic implications of the mid-nineteenth-century transition to new discursive practices. In lieu of the idealism that drove so many of the novelist’s predecessors—“the great endeavor to overcome the split

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between subject and object, the self and the world, the conscious and the unconscious,” as René Wellek put it – Flaubert favored the Cartesian classical precision that also informed French literature and art.[14]

For these reasons Barthes’s work merits the historian’s respect. It is not for the film’s adherence to Flaubert’s text or to previous cinematic adaptations. Far from it. Rather, this version of *Madame Bovary* captures, in part at least, the aesthetic ambivalence of the period in which it is set. Vestiges of romanticism lingered in transmuted form, well beyond Flaubert’s writings, in the work of the modernist avant-garde. The rest of the film, however, speaks to the period in which it was made, the present. It is an historical artifact better suited to an international Francophile audience in 2014 than it is to a privileged French readership in 1856.[15] As with most artists, Barthes appeals to her own time, and we historians ignore that fact at our peril. Or to put it another way, we can appreciate her work for our own pleasure, not necessarily that of the past. My preference remains for Minnelli’s *Emma* – like an American mid western farm girl who comes sadly of age – and for Chabrol’s dialogue and voiceovers – whose rich literary quality, in the French version, is woven into the cinematic mode. But, in my mind’s eye, I will return to Barthes’s *FILM* for its quest to capture images of a desperate, unattainable beauty. For Flaubert, it lay in *le mot juste*; for Barthes – to coin a phrase – it lies in *l’imagejuste*.

In order to adapt the novel, Barthes slimmed it down, omitting the rather life-changing detail of Emma’s child, as well as details of Charles Bovary’s first marriage and his life after Emma.

Understandable, given such a rich novel, but she didn’t compensate this with increased character development, and one is left wondering not just about Emma Bovary’s motivations but also about those so keen to embark on an affair with her. This is due not just to a lack of dialogue, but in such a quiet and slow-moving film, is also due to a lack of things actually happening (such as the birth of a child which would have given the otherwise brilliant Wasikowska something to work with). There are some highpoints. Rhys Ifans

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(bizarrely the only actor to put on an accent) camps up his portrayal of Monsieur Lheureux whose temptation of Emma's material desires begins comically but becomes increasingly sinister as the debts pile up.

The production design is excellent and one can almost smell the rotting leaves and muddy streets of rural Yonville, while the drab interiors convey how the marital home becomes a prison of dreariness and boredom. Also very striking are Wasikowska's specially-designed and hand-made period costumes. But this is not enough to justify a two hour film. Far better would have been a three hour epic that did the novel full justice, or a much shorter experimental piece that depicted one key event in Emma Bovary's life. Instead, Barthes' film succeeds in depicting a woman in 19th century France for whom "life is a disappointment", but fails to explore why she might behave differently from countless other people with the same lament

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4. See William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 190-91.
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