

Adultery in madame bovary vs story of zahra

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Adultery committed by women in many societies is considered a sin as well as an act of betrayal towards their families and towards their husbands. In Flaubert's 'Madame Bovary' and al-Shaykh's 'The Story of Zahra' both the protagonists, Emma and Zahra, commit adultery in order to run away from harsh realities of their lives. Emma commits adultery in order to escape the boredom of married life with her husband Charles as well as to seek true love which can only be found in the fantasy novels she has read.

Zahra, on the other hand, commits adultery in order to forget her turbulent years of childhood, to deal with the ongoing inertia of her life and to flee the harsh realities of the ongoing civil war. However the impact it has on both the protagonist and the people around them are quite different which reveals their contrasting personalities as well as the distinctive societies they live in. One of the most important aspects of adultery committed by Emma and Zahra is what impact it has on themselves. Mesmerized by her lover Rodolphe, even though she is married to Charles, Emma decides to have an affair with him.

Her thoughts during their intimacy were "she reveled in it without remorse, without disquiet, without anxiety". This shows that her act of betrayal has not affected her one bit. In fact, she believes that her adulterous ways has made her lifelong dream come true; not to mention that it has also made her distorted vision of love and happiness come true. She never spoke of marriage to her lover and we see no sign of Rodolphe taking care of her. Emma received bliss from her adulteries with Rodolphe which shows her selfishness as well as her inability to care for her husband.

Furthermore, once Emma started an affair with Rodolphe, the relationship between these two becomes stronger than ever and which results in them becoming inseparable lovers. However, she fails to realize that she has been manipulated for her lover's personal gains and this leads her to a path of self-destructiveness. Although found in a similar situation, the impact it has on Zahra differs entirely. Dealing with a very turbulent childhood, where she witnessed as well as experienced her father's brutality, she falls in love with a married man, Malek.

As time progresses, the relationship between them grows stronger. Their relationship comes to a stage where the thought of marriage arises. As Zahra says very little during their relationship, his refusal to marry her had little effect on it. Her thoughts after having committed infidelities with him were " I thought I could influence him; that was my delusion. He would lift my skirt casually, not even bothering to undress me completely before making love to me. All at once I would be filled with disgust and contempt. " Unlike Emma, Zahra actually loved her aficionado and even asked him to marry her.

This shows her attachment towards him and how much she cared for him even though he married to another woman. However, once Zahra started committing adultery with him, her attitude towards him changes radically. She realizes that he does not love her at all and deceives her into having sex with her by explaining how women should be treated equally to men whilst penetrating her virginity. The adulteries committed by the protagonists of

these two novels not only have an impact on them, but it has also impacted their husbands with whom they vowed to cherish the rest of their lives with.

Emma kept her adulteries with other men so secretive that it was not until her death when her husband, Charles, would find out about her infidelities. He would one day stumble across the letters from Rodolphe. After reading them, he would reflect on what was written to himself " He endeavored, however, to bring himself into a devotional frame of mind, to buoy himself up with hope of a future life, in which he would see her again". This demonstrates that even though Emma had deceived him during their marriage, he still loved her and even wanted to spend another lifetime with her.

The letters do have a big impact on him as he lives and dies in seclusion during the latter years of his life, but the fact that during his last days he lives his life the way Emma did shows his emotional attachment towards her as well as how she was mortifying him even though she was dead. On the other hand, Majed, Zahra's husband, finds about her past affairs while she was alive. As Majed and Zahra are married, he believes that he must now make love to her in order to make himself happy. When he does make love to her, he sees that while he is penetrating her there is not one drop of blood from Zahra.

This vindicates the fact that Zahra is not a virgin. " Not one drop of blood. I did not ask for a sea of blood, I would have settled for one drop, but could only cry out as if in trance, " Curse Woman! Daughter of a Cursed Woman". Unlike Charles, Majed is livid about Zahra's illicit affairs. He abuses her and

even threatens to blackmail her family about the sins she has committed. He believed that since Zahra came from a good family, marrying her will earn him and his family some much needed respect.

Instead, the situation has become worse as now people in his community will remember him as the man being married to a woman who was not a virgin at the time of her marriage. We get this impression that Zahra has no value to him. This is because in Muslim culture, a virgin woman is a sign of purity and hence if a man marries such a woman, he is deemed a life of prosperity and happiness. In this case, Malek married a girl who is not free of abstinence before marriage which means that nobody will give him or his wife or their families the same amount of respect had Zahra been a virgin.

The contrasting societies in which these two protagonists live are also very important as the adulteries committed have a lasting impression on their respective societies. When Emma is having her affair with Rodolphe, one day he insists that they go horse riding together for her well-being. Emma is not too keen; however due to Charles' lack of awareness about the situation, he urges her to go with Rodolphe for the sake of her health. " I really don't care how it looks! Said Charles, turning on his heel. Health comes first!

You're making a real mistake. " As women were victims of a male dominated society in nineteenth century France, the role they played in society was minimal (being confined to their houses and playing the role of honorable wife and mother). Emma clearly rebelled against these customs and did engage in deeds which were deemed scandalous in those times. However,

her adulterous ways had little impact as far as society is concerned. This is because the Bourgeois society was deemed as sham, with little or no morals.

It vindicates the fact that no-one in this particular society neither cares what other people do and hence brings a question over their self-dignity as well as the values imposed by society on its people. On the other hand, the society in which Zahra lives is a very conservative one and the impact the adulteries have is a strong one. When having their affair, Zahra and Malek meet in cafe where no one can see them in order to escape glances from people in their society. " He pays for coffee in that cafe frequented by only those afraid to be seen together in public".

Unlike in Madame Bovary, reputation and dignity in the community plays a very important role in The Story of Zahra. Here, we can see that society considers these people as outcasts, thus making life extremely difficult for them. To conclude, the reactions Emma and Zahra they receive from committing adultery are different and hence those reactions have very different impacts on them and on their respective societies as well. Thus, our attitudes and perception towards adultery vary according to protagonists.

Zahra, who sees life in reality, is devastated and shattered once the impact of adultery, strikes her. This is what most people will be able to relate to and thus we have sympathy for her. On the other hand, Emma, who lives her life in fantasy, is unscathed by the impact of adultery and this gives an impression on the readers that she is too self-absorbed to care about others which makes her a very difficult character to like for the readers. Ironically, it

is Emma Bovary who is represented as the modern woman, seeking happiness in a male-dominated society through whatever means possible.