

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Index in NepJOL
- Permanantly Archived in Portico



Research Article

Negotiation between Aesthetics and Social Issues in Reading *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*

Niran Khanal, PhD

Asst. Prof. of English

Padmakanya Multiple Campus

Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Doi: 10.3126/mjecs.v4i1.89982

Corresponding Author: Niran Khanal, Email: nirananda22@gmail.com

Copyright 2025 © The Author(S). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s).

Abstract

This paper explores an approach to read travel literature in order to balance between the pleasure of reading with aesthetic sensibility and social awareness for constructive criticism. The paper argues that excessive importance given to the social issues undermines the aesthetics of reading travel narratives. By the same token, overindulgence in aesthetics compromises with socially important agendas that need attention for the social well-being. Therefore, the challenge is how to balance between aestheticism and sociologism. To address these two extremes, the present study proposes an approach of negotiation between the two. For the purpose of examining how this approach works, I analyze Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour by Gustave Flaubert. The outcome of this study is that Flaubert's expression of aesthetics that he experienced during his travel to Egypt is interwoven with the social fabrics of Egyptian societies of 19th century and his personal interaction with them. It uncovers the contesting relations between the narrator's wishes and the social expectations. The significance of this study lies in its approach to make reading of travel narrative aesthetically pleasing and socially meaningful.

Keywords: Aesthetics, balanced approach, negotiation, sociologism and travel narratives

Introduction

People may inquire for the reason to negotiate between aesthetics and social issues while interpreting a travel narrative since they have a choice either to be aesthetically sensitive or go for social agendas. It seems restrictive to offer an approach to interpret a travel narrative since it curtails the flexibility of employing any approach that a reader prefers. In this respect, this study

does not deny the possibilities of multiple positions in reading a narrative as per the interest. However, it offers an alternative, broad enough, to uncover the dynamics of travel narratives so that a reader can explore the aesthetic sensibility along with the issues of social concern.

The problem on which the present study focuses is that reading a text by embracing aestheticism undermines the social context that produces such aesthetics and it fails to meet social expectations. On the other hand, over emphasis on social agendas makes a text a political tool to fulfill the interests by ignoring the aesthetics of literary values that nurture our imagination and sensitivities to appreciate the beauty and the joy of life. Therefore, it is a method that makes difference to absorb the fertility of the narrative, *Flaubert in Egypt: A sensibility on Tour*, with purpose of examining the interwoven threads of aesthetics and social fabrics that define one another. The challenge is how to read a narrative with the sense of wonder and admiration for its taste and be aware of the social diversity that the narrative represents. In this context, to focus on the role of aesthetics and social issues in travel narrative of Flaubert, these research questions can be helpful. Why does Flaubert narrate his aesthetic experiences with the realistic representation of the social context? How does the social context support to make the aesthetic experience of reading meaningful in Flaubert's narrative? In what ways, the reader can bridge the divided worlds of aestheticism and sociologism in the context of Flaubert's narrative?

The underlying objective of this study is to find out why the negotiation between aesthetics and social issues is vital at the present context and what productivity this approach generates after reading Flaubert's narrative.

Flaubert's inclination to aestheticism does not limit his narrative to it rather unravels the secrets of the Egyptian societies. The narrative connects the human emotions and feelings with social fabrics where the masters and slaves, rich and poor, ladies and prostitutes, search their destinies. His art of placing the personal sensibilities with the public experiences becomes meaningful to taste aesthetics that emerges from the social context. In reading, the awareness of social diversity enriches reader's aesthetics of visualizing Egyptian landscape and architecture. The vulnerabilities of the poor, prostitutes, and climatic harshness of the desert create the atmosphere to admire the sublime pyramids, Sphinx, and the Nile river. The Nile looks more beautiful against the desert background.

Immanuel Kant's advocacy for the disinterested position of a judge of an art ignores the social and ideological influences on that person. The autonomy of an art separates it from the social context that contributes for its birth. Kant argues that "explication of the beautiful can be inferred . . . as object of liking devoid of all interest" (509). His argument for the judgment of beautiful without social interest overlooks the social dimension of an art. Searching aesthetics in Flaubert's narrative devoid of Egyptian social context would divorce art from the social currents that shape life. And this approach would be mechanical, without the background for the aesthetics. The spirit of Flaubert's narrative lies in the projection of social relations that justify the aesthetic experiences. For instance, the poverty of the prostitutes prepares them to offer their bodies to the strangers, like Flaubert. Getting the sexual pleasure, he cannot remain indifferent to their vulnerabilities. So, he becomes sympathetic to the prostitute, like Hanem. His description of the African slaves is not free from his moral obligation to them.

For the method of study, the paper integrates aestheticism with realism to have an approach for interpretation. Walter Pater's ideas of aestheticism, specially the concept of 'art for art's sake', and Gyorgy Lukacs's views on realism for the representation of social reality are useful theoretical concepts in this study. As the paper studies aesthetics in the social contexts, the integrated approach is essential.

The significance of this study lies on its methodological approach that places aesthetics in social relations. The implication is that the readers employing this approach may connect aesthetics and aesthetic experiences of reading with life in social relations, and its dynamics.

Review of Literature

The purpose of this review is to examine some key researches to identify the potential area for the present study.

The text, *Flaubert in Egypt: A sensibility on Tour*, has widely drawn the attention of critics. It has been a debated travel narrative regarding the political and social issues. About the political problem, Walter Wagner argues that Flaubert has colonial mentality as he perceives the non-European societies. Wagner critiques, "Flaubert embodies the ideal type of the culturally and economically superior male white colonizer who believes in white supremacy without seriously questioning it" (270). The statement illustrates that Wagner limits his study within postcolonial reading of Flaubert's narrative. However, Raisa Rexer interprets the narrative from the perspective of psycho-sexuality. She analyzes Flaubert's letters from the travel and draws the conclusion that there is an interdependent relation between sexual fertility and impaired creativity as they remain "two possibilities for artistic and social production: obscenity and romanticism" (97). At the personal level, Flaubert's overindulgence in sexual acts in Egypt as represented in the narrative, might have negatively impacted his creative potential for art. Another researcher, Soledad Fox, uncovers the influence of Cervantes in the travel narrative of Flaubert regarding the chivalric journey and sentimental romance. Comparing Cervantes's *Don Quixote* with Flaubert's travel narrative, Fox finds the similarities between them as both express the romantic spirit and adventurous journey in their respective contexts.

The review uncovers that the discussed positions of the critics do not address the problem of aestheticism and realism in reading practices as one denies the other. Therefore, the present study tries to overcome this limitation by offering the integrated approach that tries to create a harmony between beauty and reality in the interpretation of an art.

Placing Aesthetics in the Social Fabric

Flaubert's experiences and representation of aesthetics are meaningful in the Egyptian context. Before traveling to Egypt in 1849, Flaubert had written about it as an ideal place to visit. His aspiration to tread on the foreign land grew from his reading of *Saint Anthony*. His romantic fervor to gratify his sensations led him to create the world of imagination as a writer. The same spirit empowered him to fall in love with married women; one woman was eleven years older than himself. His fascination for women and longing to see the mythical places of the orient express his inclination to aesthetics. However, his love for aesthetic does not limit him within the philosophy of aestheticism that advocates to art for art's sake. Flaubert's

meticulous observation of landscape and societies places him in the position of great realist who can capture the moments of sensations and record the narratives of the strangers. His description of the Egyptian social fabric: ethnic differences, sympathy for the underclass black, women and other marginalized, reflect his social awareness and ability to socialize among the strangers. Flaubert's social representation does not comply with the argument of Oscar Wilde, the leader of the aesthetic movement. Wilde argues, "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (899). Wilde's disregard for art's role for society does not apply in Flaubert's travel writing about Egypt.

Flaubert's excitement to have a glimpse of Egyptian landscape and monuments meets unexpected challenges due to his poor health and geographical harshness. He reveals, "Then my misery took another form: I thought of returning. (At every station I was on the point of getting off; only the fear of being a coward prevented me)" (21). It shows that for the aesthetics of his travel, he must endure the suffering and face the challenges. At another moment, he feels to have risen above such limitations and feels "enormously excited by the cities and the people" (42). The Egyptian architecture appeal his aesthetic sensibility that he admires, "Everything in Egypt seems made for architecture . . ." (58). Flaubert's admiration of the great art of pyramids and the Sphinx match with his expression of sublime experiences of sailing in the Nile river. He ponders philosophically seeing water of Nile, "If the Niger and Nile are but one and the same river, where does this water come from? What has it seen? . . . then there is the eternal dream of Cleopatra . . ." (98). The Nile as a metaphor, serves as a memory of the Egyptian history. Flaubert visualizes the time of Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt, and talks about her dream. In his visualization, the aesthetics of the Nile touches the political sphere of Egypt.

Flaubert does not divorce the cultural aesthetics of the Egyptian society from their social contexts. He explores the underlying social structures that regulate the cultural practices. He uncovers both aesthetically pleasing and socially contested relations and practices. For instance, he confesses the pleasure of sodomy at the baths, "One admits one's sodomy, and it is spoken of at table in the hotel. . . It's at the baths that such things take place" (84). He also does not miss the opportunity to gratify his urges with the prostitutes. Kuchuk Hanem, a prostitute from Damascus, becomes special for him as he admires her beautiful dance. However, he does not hide the bleak background of his joyful moments. Hanem's aesthetic body image contradicts with her poverty. Moreover, the thieves trouble her as they seek her hard-earned money. So, she remains vigilant from the intruders. Flaubert and his friend, Maxime Du Camp, utilize the moments; the poverty-stricken women readily offer themselves to the tourists. These instances illustrate that Flaubert's narrative unfolds social issues beside aesthetics.

Imagination and Reality: A Happy Marriage

Flaubert's representation of Egyptian society is largely realistic with some color of imagination that offers it literary flavor. For instance, he humorously narrates the marriage system in Muslim society of Egypt where a man can decide how many times he wants to marry. One old man, who smokes opium and is very rich, marries for twenty-one times and loses all his money (69). This gendered relation as a practice of the society is one of the instances of social issues that Flaubert represents in his narrative. In the words of Gyorgy Lukacs, "The literary practice of every true

realist demonstrates the importance of the overall objective social context. . . (1037). This is applicable in case of Flaubert's travel writing.

The cultural practices get space in Flaubert's narrative. His interest in the Muslim customs: birth, circumcision, marriage, the pilgrimage to Mecca and death-rites, evidences that social relations are significant in the narrative. His representation goes beyond Walter Pater's idea of art, "To see the object as in itself it really is" (836), for criticism. Rather than limiting within the narrow space of social aspect, Flaubert offers more comprehensive picture of overall society. To illustrate further, his observation of a ceremony of a Doseh is remarkable. It is a horse riding by a sheik, a priest, over the bodies of prostrated Muslim folks on the ground. He captures the image of brave people who challenge the fear of death as they remain unmoved under the horse of the priest. This episode offers the reader a window to observe the power of faith in people to overcome the fear of mortality. Flaubert's art of writing is highly descriptive. The concretized expressions are photographic with the vivid pictures of landscape, architecture, market places, crowd of people and animals. On the top of it, Maxime Du Camp's camera becomes a boon to capture the images of choice for the memory. For instance, Flaubert describes, "A cold morning, spent photographing. . . at the S.E. corner of the great pyramid" (56). Flaubert's art of capturing the social reality is not mechanical, like Du Camp's camera. It is lively since it places aesthetics in the social context where one supports the other. The plain desert surrounds the high, sublime pyramids. The dismal desert glorifies their beauty. Similarly, Poverty presses Hanem to dance beautifully.

During the travel, Flaubert comes across a case related to justice system that is quite extreme regarding the torture given to the culprit. A seller, who cheats customers on the weight of commodity, gets severe penalty as his ears are nailed on the wall and forced to bear the weight of his body by the ear just touching the ground by the toes. This harsh implementation of laws discloses the seriousness of Egyptian authority about the laws. On another occasion, Flaubert meets some black girls whose backs are marked with scars by the hot iron. They differentiate the slave girls from the free ones with the marks. However, he finds, "the European is accorded greater respect than the native" (42). They are not free from the colonial culture to recognize the power of the Europeans. Flaubert's eyes fall on the problem of slavery and prevalence of social hierarchies in terms of race, gender, and class. The underprivileged women, poor workers and people of color remain at the bottom of the social ladder. Observing such disparities, John Finlay argues, "Flaubert responded to Egypt because he thought he saw there an indifference to pain and disease, and a familiarization with grotesque. . ." (500). The representation of the social diversity makes Flaubert's narrative a meaningful social document of multiple voices.

Flaubert's and his friend's sublime experience of swimming in the Red Sea is aesthetically pleasing. He compares his sensual feelings with thousand liquid breasts that cross his body. Another moment, Flaubert describes the night scene at Luxor, "the great plain looks like an ocean. . . white in the moonlight, as are our Nubian shirts; the air is warm, the sky streams with stars. . ." (164). These are few instances of Flaubert's experiences of aesthetics. The more, he offers the details of the Nile, the pyramids and architecture that are breathtaking.

His aesthetic dimension is as captivating as his contribution for realistic representation. Probably, observing the connection between the two, Paul Bourget and Nancy O' Connor view that his desire to make reconciliation between romantic and scientific spirits within him contributed to choose special technique to create character (29). Since Flaubert expresses the aesthetic experiences that emerge from the social contexts, both become meaningful as they support each other.

Flaubert raises the questions about social relations, existence, and future societies. He argues that a job would not give him satisfaction and wants to do something creative. He contemplates on the essence of life. So, he stresses on the underlying principle of life. He explains, "The thing we all lack is not style, nor the dexterity of finger and bow known as talent . . . No, what we lack is the intrinsic principle, the soul of the thing, the very idea of the subject. We take notes, we make journeys: emptiness . . . What is the good of all that?" (198-199). The last question asks about the meaning of people's activities. Are they meaningful to life? From his statements, one may assume his pessimistic outlook. However, if one observes his love for aesthetics, he seems highly optimistic and grabs the opportunity as the situations offer. He is more for the present rather than for the past and the future to utilize the moments.

Creative Acts for Freedom, and Social Relations

Flaubert finds creative act more meaningful than gaining information from others mechanically. In his letter to his mother, Flaubert expresses his disinterest for a job but would engage in creative work of writing through exploration. About his social relations, Flaubert's letters to his mother and friends reflect that he expresses his emotions openly and shares psychological impulses. In the sense of reflecting the social reality and giving space to his psychology in his writing, Flaubert stands closer to the view of Leon Trotsky. Trotsky claims, "The creation and perception of art forms is one of the functions of this psychology" (1010). Trotsky's argument is that art must capture the social and psychological reality rather than mechanically dealing with forms alone. The beauty of Flaubert's writing is that it glorifies human sensations and captures the social dynamism. Therefore, he blends aestheticism with realism.

Travel aesthetics may seem ideal to arouse aspiration for the unknown places and people. However, the challenges that a traveler meets during the exploration change the anticipated dream. Flaubert's imagined Egypt differs from what he experiences during the travel. Life threatening heat, no water to drink for more than two days while riding camels on the desert, possible attack by jackals and fear of robbers and thieves are some instances of challenges that Flaubert and his friend face. Their pleasure of seeing the view of the desert by sitting on the backs of camels is spoiled as the camel breaks a leg that falls on the hole. The three water bags reserved for three days are torn by the weight of the falling camel and no drop remains to drink. The conducive situation for the aesthetic experience, turns into a nightmare where their concern is solely to save lives. The excitement and joy of consuming the view disappears for few days.

The sense of freedom creates a mood to feel the sensations around. Flaubert's virtually carefree lifestyle shows aesthetic inclination. His aspiration for personal freedom defies the social regulations and moral codes. His affair with multiple women, visit to prostitutes in Egypt

and open expression of sexuality evidence that his preference for sensuality contradict with social expectations. For instance, in his letter to Louis, he shares, “You won’t believe that Max and I talk constantly about the future of society . . . it will be regulated like a college. Teachers will be the law. Everyone will be in uniform” (212). His distaste for college like regulation in the future society seems hostile to the nurturing of aesthetic sensibility.

After visiting Egypt, Flaubert and Du Camp travel to Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Greece, and Italy till 1851. They gather aesthetic experiences and face unexpected hardships. Flaubert’s depiction of lively social context makes his aesthetic sensibilities more meaningful.

Conclusion

In the present context, travel literature is in critical juncture to balance aesthetics with socio-political representations. Therefore, this study sees the necessity of adopting a balanced and critical approach that interprets travel narratives without embracing either aestheticism or sociologism. The problem with aestheticism and sociologism is that one overlooks the other. Therefore, there is a necessity of reading travel narratives being aesthetically sensitive and socially constructive so that aesthetics becomes socially meaningful. The analysis uncovers that *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour* gives space for both aesthetics and social representation. The approach, this study employs, negotiates between the two and finds that Flaubert’s aesthetic experiences emerge from the social context that he represents in the narrative. So, from the perspective of offering the social diversity, the narrative is realistic and meaningful. It represents the key issues: relations between men and women, socio-political structure, Islamic cultural values, and landscape. The narrative unfolds aesthetic sensibilities, excitements of the travelers, their interactions with the local folks, the pleasure of immersing in the aesthetics of dance and song of women, sailing in the Nile and observing the panorama of desert monuments. The vivid description of the objects of beauty and sublime offers aesthetic sensibility to the reader. Moreover, in this narrative, the personal meets with the public, imagination with reality, feelings and emotions with logic, and fascination with repulsion. It establishes the tie between aesthetic sensibility and social representation.

Works Cited

Bourget, Paul and Nancy O’ Connor. “On Flaubert”. *New England Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2013, pp. 10-30.

Finlay, John. “Flaubert in Egypt”. *The Hudson Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1983, pp. 496-509.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*. Penguin Books, 1996.

Fox, Soledad. “Flaubert and Don Quixote”. *New England Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2006, pp. 166-174.

Kant, Immanuel. “Critique of Judgment”. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, pp. 504-535.

Lukacs, Gyorgy. “Realism in Balance”. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, pp. 1033-1058.

Pater, Walter. "Studies in the History of Renaissance". *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, pp. 835-841.

Rexer, Raisa. "Sex Education: Obscenity, Romanticism, and Creativity in Flaubert's Letters from the 'Voyage en Egypt' and 'L'Education Sentimentale'". *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 44, no.1/2, 2015-2016, pp. 95-110.

Trotsky, Leon. "Literature and Revolution". *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, pp. 1005-1017.

Wagner, Walter. "The Myth of the Orient in Flaubert's Voyage en Egypt and Bachmann's Das Buch Franz". *New Perspective on Imagology*, vol. 30, Brill, 2022, pp. 257-273.

Wilde, Oscar. "Preface to the Picture of Dorian Gray". *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, pp. 899-912.