
Emile Zola's The Ladies' Paradise

Emile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise*, published in 1883 is an important text in which Zola explores social perspectives and depicts extensive socio-economic experiences through his representation of the department store, based on Paris' first department store of the Second Empire. Zola expressed that he wanted to write about the modern activity and having a complete shift of philosophy and shifting relationships between classes, businesses, genders and even industries. Zola is able to do so by depicting the differences in sexual standards and gender roles, and displays that the advance of capitalism has led to both "social" and "consumption" modernity.

Although the development of varied modernity arises at the price of changing tradition and morality, the loss of these aesthetics is the unavoidable result of the development of this historical trend. Zola's portrayal of gender roles in *The Ladies' Paradise* publicized the unfair treatment of women and the opposing stereotypes concerning sexual behaviour. The facet about sexuality was prominent throughout the book and was strategically incorporated to highlight the need for gender equality within the society of the Second Empire. Zola even focuses on analyzing the double sexual standards by describing the shame women received for having affairs, compared to men, this, in order to draw attention to the societal need for gender neutrality. The higher moral expectations that surrounded women became much more obvious when it was revealed that the widower owner of *The Ladies' Paradise*, Octave Mouret, had multiple romantic partners but still maintained a positive image within society; it even appeared to be expected that a prominent and wealthy man such as Mouret would have many mistresses. He is a symbol that represents the male side of the double standard and how they were not faced with societal shame when they were known to be in multiple open relationships.

One of these mistresses, Madame Desforges declared that he had bought a house for a chorus girl and, at the same time, was being milked by two or three others. This revealed that Mouret had multiple mistresses who were aware of the others, however, while the language used by Madame Desforges made it appear as if she felt superior over the others, the reality that the mistresses knew they were not the only women in Mouret's life and continued to meet with him implied that his elite status was still intact. Instead, Denise Baudu, newcomer to Paris, represented the female version of the same double standard that was conveyed throughout the novel and the biased burden placed on women. As an independent young woman who came to Paris and trying to look after her brothers, Denise was forced to handle the pressures of avoiding the negative undertones associated with sexual behaviour; since it was difficult for women to avoid prostitution during the nineteenth century as it was easy and it was said everyone did it in the end because in Paris a woman could not live on what she earned.

Prostitution was very common, and women were desperate to provide for themselves; Zola used the historical idea of female prostitution to show how difficult it was for Denise to not give into this trend and attempt to lock out sexual relationships. Women were held to a more difficult standard than men, proved by how many women in the story who are accused of having open sexual relationships are shamed and discredited almost immediately. Denise is a great example of this, since she is instantly dismissed and not even allowed to explain herself when she is found fraternizing with a male at the Ladies' Paradise; a male whom we find out is her brother.

The effect of the emotional appeal she exclaims as she is dismissed, contributes to Zola's depiction of how it needed to be understood that women did not deserve the sexual scrutiny they received and of the bigger picture regarding gender equality of the time. Through the the novel, the idea of the double sexual standard was incorporated to prove that women and men were not treated the same way and how difficult it was for women to handle the additional pressure. This double standard, this contrast between men and women, even appears in the consumerism of the characters and of the people, leading to modernity but not yet gender equality. The rise of the department store, which is a symbol of capitalism and the modern city, changes the mode of consumption of every character; the department store changes the shopping atmosphere and marketing installations.

The iron frame construction and plate-glass windows fill the Ladies' Paradise with the essence of modern technology and light, compared with the small retailers' narrow and dark stores. The department store was the cathedral of modern business, strong and yet light, built for vast crowds of customers , and its owner, Mouret, was akin to the conductor of an orchestra, directing staff from his office as one does in a symphony. While these modern facilities are despised by the small tradesmen, Mouret always puts his most beautiful dresses there, creating a real circus parade to catch the girls -- stimulating people's desires of consumption. Mouret, while a model of all smart merchants during that period, seizes the chance and introduces a new business management model – the department store. The department store, by consolidating many different goods such as fur, fabric, umbrellas and colourful, trendy clothing under one roof begins a new type of selling.

This is a good depiction of the commercial operations beginning to enjoy greater freedom during the Second French Empire. In Mouret's opinion, the idea that business depends on making as much profit as possible in every single transaction is already out of fashion; traders must sell goods as quickly as possible in order to exchange for new goods -- only by increasing the turnover rate can one maximize profits. And in order to accelerate this circulation of goods, Mouret develops many creative selling strategies, such as he dumping the cheap goods to attract more customers and using tempting advertisements to increase sales volume. While Mouret is realizing this ambitious plan, the small tradesmen cannot do anything other than closing their stores due to their inability to win against this new mode of production. Bourras, one of the struggling small tradesmen, sold walking-sticks and umbrellas, did repairs, and even carved handles, a skill which had earned him quite a reputation as an artist . He sees the umbrella as an artistic opportunity to display his hand carved handles, which always present an elegant fantasy, and as such, he disdains the mass production in Ladies' Paradise. Even when his business unavoidably declines, he still does not despair and invents a popular automatic umbrella with romantic decorations. Yet, the Ladies' Paradise immediately improves his invention, decorating the umbrellas with beautiful silk. Bourras' failure is one of dozens and his inevitability fails in the price competition; his failure symbolizes the extinction of hand-craftsmanship and also shows that machines are progressively replacing manual production, as seen in the Second Industrial Revolution.

Though Mouret occasionally feels a some compassion concerning the small tradesmen who become victims in this transition period, he still thinks this result is a necessity and no one can stop the progress. He knows that the old fashion trading will inevitably collapse, even if he were to close the Ladies' Paradise. While Mouret's thoughts may seem cruel, they really show Zola's attitude towards the change of monopoly capitalism and modernity. Zola uses his profound observation to grasp the essence of the capitalist insider: centralized monopoly capital

is developed in the brutal competition and improved by bankrupting the contenders. It is always futile to try to hold back the progress of history. In fact, Zola has already shown his opinion implicitly through the repetitive comparison between the gloominess of Uncle Bourras's shop and the commodious and bright Ladies' Paradise. Zola also spends a lot of space describing social modernity, which is the result of the rise of department store. From the family and physical levels, the liberation of women is undoubtedly the main feature of the Second Empire. Women's products start to take a crucial role in the consumption market and women gradually become main forces in the flow of capital. Although women are of great importance in consumption market, they do not necessarily gain respect. Mouret always conducts himself in a most gracious manner and behaves tenderly to women in all kinds of occasions.

However, he disdains them in his heart and treats them as the source of his financial success. Moreover, he takes advantage of women's psychological weaknesses to accumulate his fortune. His conversation with his friends unveils his stratagem: "It was Woman the shops were competing for so fiercely, it was Woman they were continually snaring with their bargains after dazing with their displays" (76). In fact, although five female clients in the novel seem to enjoy shopping in the department store, compared with the smart and resourceful Denise, the material comforts alone will not bring the spiritual peace and real happiness. Zola not only demonstrates the life-and-death struggle on the society, he also stresses the disadvantage of rationality on the modern life—the life which is manipulated by the logic of economic and mass- production will not bring true happiness. Moreover, women also have an important effect on determining the social status of men. During this period, most ambitious men had lovers with important husbands. With the help of their lovers, men could easily achieve success. Mouret's story with his lover is a good example to illustrate the importance of this kind of improper relationship. He takes advantage of his lover and enlarges his company.

This woman is not only his lover, but also his customer. Mouret creates a relationship between women's consumption and their status as lovers—they both act as a source of revenue. For female customers in this novel, luxury always connects with extramarital affairs. However, we should not simply judge the right and wrong of their behavior, for they are all victims and they do promote the development of capitalism. The enormous wheels of the development of productive forces do not care about a code of ethics; instead, their hurtling destroys all obstacles in their way. From what has been discussed above we can easily find that although Zola sympathizes with small tradesman's bankruptcy, he does not support the opposite sides of the development of capitalism. He believes that the small tradesman's business is originally not the business of freedom, peace and honesty; moreover, small tradesmen must perish along with the old form. Thus, *The Ladies' Paradise* not only affirms the commercial, industrial and technological progress of that era, it also exposes and castigates the cruel development of capitalism and barbaric means by which it supplants the older economy. Furthermore, it describes the heinous and ugly reality of a society that supports consumption over all other aesthetic virtues.