

## Research Paper

## The theme of promiscuity in Emile Zola's Novel "Nana"

Dr. Gulab Jha

Associate professor (French)

Dept. of Foreign Languages

Gauhati University

Guwahati-781014

## ABSTRACT

*The subject of licentious women has fired the imagination of novelists, artists and historians spanning immeasurable time zones. The idea of a woman using her body as a paid profession has forever caused a great deal of controversy, especially when women were not supposed to explicitly demonstrate or act upon their sexual desire which was tantamount to gross transgression of the codes of morality. The exposition of debauchery or the 'wanton' women has been explored in French literature as early as the 15th century by Francois Villon. The theme had been dealt with more intensity and sheer brilliance by the eminent French Novelist Emile Zola in Nana and Gustave Flaubert in Madame Bovary.*

Zola himself claimed to be a naturalist. He undoubtedly dwells upon the darker side of working-class life. He deals with, in his novels, socio-political themes which embark upon heredity, adultery, prostitution, jealousy, murder, drink, pauperism, ambition, greed, revolt, duel, hypocrisy, government and its machineries. He wrote his novels as an architect builds a cathedral: not stone by stone, but deciding before even the ground is cleared how deep his foundations must be laid, how many buttresses will be needed to share up the walls and how many pillars should be raised to support the roof, and how high the spire to rise. It is perhaps not altogether irrelevant that Marco Zola, Emile's uncle, was a civil engineer, and that Francesco Zola, his father, became one when he left the French army; the dam he caused to be built outside Aix to secure the city's water supply was the work of a man trained to plan a great undertaking, down to the minutest detail, well in advance. It seems that Emile Zola, either inheriting the gift or assimilating it (he was devoted to the memory of his father), extended it into the sphere of literature. "This would at any rate explain why, when one tries to describe the qualities of his greatest works, architectural similes spring most readily to the mind: solidity of foundation, balance and symmetry, ascending and descending lines, vistas, patches of light and shadow, and, above all, highness of dimension"<sup>1</sup>. "Zola's design is obvious: he wishes to show the inglorious origins of imperial rule. He does this firstly by exposing the pettiness, cruelty, and cowardice of the champions of Bonapartism, and secondly by throwing a halo of martyrdom round the heads of the militant republicans doomed to extinction"<sup>2</sup>.

Zola has created a grand vegetation of women in his novels. His women "are transformed into symbols of the rottenness of the bourgeoisie or the savage depersonalized conflict between old-fashioned shop-keeping and modern commerce"<sup>3</sup>. They fall a prey, all the while, to socio-economic exploitation by their industrial and political masters; they are dominated by men and husbands, although, a few of them, willingly, cross the bar. They are housewives, working-people, agitators, drunkards and prostitutes and do their duties as mothers, aunts, wives, sisters, daughters, and neighbours, although, sometimes, with a wayward spirit. The "prostitutes are never anything but prostitutes, never, like

Nana, mystical embodiments of the corruption of the slummed spilling over and infecting the cultivated classes"<sup>4</sup>. The women abused their bodies for the sake of money and comforts. However, Zola has preached morality and added a strong beauty, despite hereditary and environmental factors, to all his women by marketing ploys, pressure to follow the latest fashion, and a continuous rearrangement of merchandise, all designed to draw women into the store and entice them to spend metaphors of seduction abound. These images believe a deeper structure of domination that regulates and exploits female consumers. "Thus, women become fodder for the force of consumerism, losing their common sense with their sense of identity"<sup>5</sup>. In his novels, Emile Zola constructs different models of male and female behavior and interaction. In several of his works, he portrays women as victims of harmful male domination and a socialization process that eventually entraps them in a submissive role. In true naturalist style, he displays the effects of various stifling environments on both male and female characters, thereby attributing much of their behaviour of their surroundings. Zola bases his work on real-life observations and creates characters that betray his perceptions of the world around him. In a letter to the editor of Le Figaro, "Zola defended himself against the reproach made by his reviewer of 'having insulted the lower classes' in Germinal. 'My only desire has been to show them such as our society makes them, and arouse such pity, such an outcry for justice, that France will at least cease to allow herself to be devoured by a handful of ambitious politicians, and devote herself to the health and happiness of her children.'"<sup>6</sup>

Zola introduces Nana – an exquisitely beautiful woman, a slum child, actress, courtesan, and one of the world literature's great heroines, ranking with Anna Karenina, Moll Flanders and Emma Bovary. Nana, whose voracious appetites destroy the men and women drawn into her orbit, was denounced as pornography on its publication but the book endures today as a literary classic. Beginning with her appearance on stage as "The Blond Venus", Nana becomes the ultimate goddess of love, an object of men's fantasies and obsessions, ruthlessly using her sexuality to obtain wealth and to send her ruined lovers to the gutter from which she ascended. Nana is the scandal of Parisian society. However,

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it shows the novel's power as a study of character and society. Psychologically astute and morally censored, Nana is a masterpiece, and a prototype for modern American fiction from Theodore Dreiser to Dominick Dunne. Incidentally, Nana takes her place in the general panorama of Les Rougon-Macquart as the daughter of Gervaise of L' Assommoir. She is born in the terrible menagerie and from childhood lives in a lax atmosphere of poverty and neglect. Her natural beauty helps her to predetermine her destiny, and so, from the status of gutter-snipe tart she rises in the social scale to be one of the third-rate 'actresses' with an abundance of sex appeal who are highly popular among the men. From this point of vantage she pursues her career in the oldest profession, going through every stage of harlotry, until she arrives as the fancy lady of a rich nobleman who is a court chamberlain: the deplorable Count Muffat de Beuville. And then Nana becomes a fashionable lady who moves about freely in 'society' and is an accepted figure in the world of vice and decadence. She does this and much more. Far from this point we are shown in terms of mounting tragedy how terribly Nana's influence has havoc with the personality, the social position, the whole life, fortune and 'house' of her paramour Count Muffat, a man whom she never loves and for whom she feels first contempt and then hatred. The courtesan sees through this life; and the reader is on her side. George Moore writes : "Nana is the Messalina of modern days and, obeying the epic tendency of his genius, Emile Zola has instituted a comparison between the death of the 'golden fly', conceived in drunkenness and debauchery, and the harlot city of the Third Emperor, which, rotten with vice, falls before the victorious arms of the Germans." Though the 'obscenity' and 'pornography' Zola has been accused of, yet his novels are of frightening moral power and takes an honorable place beside the literary giants of the nineteenth century – Balzac, Dickens and Dostoevsky. As Anatole France said by his grave side: 'He was a moment of the human conscience.' In no book of his do we see the truth of this more clearly than in Nana. Nana is said to have a tremendously attractive skin and her name is constantly repeated with the melodious vivacity of its two syllables. Bordenave calls the Variety Theatre his 'whorehouse' in which the play "The Blond Venus" has been continuously staged for some weeks. The veteran theatre-goers composed of many journalists, a few writers, several financiers, many prostitutes, and some respectable women who are dumbfounded and maddened by the role of Venus being played by Nana who was white, plump and natural as a broad-hipped loud-mouthed fishwife. She begins her main song: 'When Venus roams at midnight' (N). Her appearance is contradicted with her voice which is that of a crow. However, she wins over the audience by her foamy and fleshy naked body with her round shoulders; Amazonian breasts with pink tips firmly tilted upward, broad, voluptuously swaying hips, and plump fair-skinned thighs through a transparent cloth. The golden hair of her armpits transforms her into a disquieting woman with the madness of her sex and unknown depths of desire. She keeps smiling as if she were a destroyer of men – 'she would destroy them all with her marble flesh and strong sex' (ibid). At the end of the first night performance, La Faloise says to Bordenave, 'Everyone in Paris will come to your theatre' (N), and hopes good for two hundred performances.

Zola's attitude towards marriage and sexual morality is shaped by his strong sense of social duty and social order, and by his preoccupation with controlled energy. Personal behaviour is seen in terms of social equilibrium and the natural order. He demands that women

should take seriously their social tasks and is critical of those who do not adequately fulfill their roles as good wives and mothers. "He underlines the disastrous consequences of a wife's neglect of her domestic or maternal duties".<sup>7</sup> It must be emphasized that Zola's attack on promiscuity is not that of Christian morality, nor (as we have seen) is his ultimate view of marriage that of Christianity. "The doctrine of original sin conflicts with Zola's belief in the intrinsic goodness of life and the ultimate beneficence of nature, while the Christian values of renunciation and chastity are incompatible with his myth of fecundity".<sup>8</sup> "Sexual jealousy in the male occasions some of the most violent scenes in Zola's novels, and not only in those written in his early period. Georges Hugon and Count Muffat both cherish the naïve delusion that Nana will be faithful to them; their disillusion drives the one to suicide, the other to religion. In *Germinal*, one remembers Hennebeau's agony at discovering the adultery of his wife. There is the bestial jealousy, retrospective again, of Roubaud in the opening chapter of *La Bête humaine*, when he realized Severine was not a virgin when he married her".<sup>9</sup> Nana, the actress/prostitute is seen as both the product of a corrupt society and the catalyst of its destruction. The theme of the progressive contamination of high society by Nana is reflected in the personal disintegration of Count Muffat and the defect of his wife, Sabine. The life-style of Sabine takes on the ruinous extravagance of that of Nana, marked by images of waste, sterility and destruction. Nana proposes engagement of Estelle, Sabine's daughter, to Dagueuet, one of her own lovers. "Zola's moralizing satire is directed against the rapacious appetites, predatory greed and crass self-interest of the Rougons. His dissection of society reveals the moral corruption, egoism and hypocrisy of an acquisitive society. He exposes the sterility of bourgeois life and lays bare the materialist foundations of bourgeois ideology, of which the Second Empire was for him the epitomized political expression."<sup>10</sup> In *Nana*, Zola questions the notions of male and female gender roles by intertwining themes of role reversal, homosexuality, and androgyny. Nana is perhaps his most daring novel in its depiction of sexuality, yet his interest in androgyny and sex roles here is not an unusual phenomenon for the period. As Naomi Schor points out : "The proliferation of androgynous protagonists in nineteenth-century French novels bespeaks a generalized breakdown in valid criteria for sexual classification, reflecting no doubt a questioning of traditional male/female roles in contemporary society." In the opening scene of the novel, we are introduced to the protagonist not by her presence, but by her absence and the excitement that builds in anticipation of her arrival on scene for a musical show of which she is the star. Whereas in the novel *L'Assommoir*, her mother Gervaise is established from the outset as a passive figure awaiting the return of her lover, Nana, on the contrary, is anxiously awaited on stage. Zola presents her as indefinable and unable to be categorized, making her identity uncontrollable by those around her. She is depicted as a controlling, not a controlled force, from the beginning. Unlike her mother's, Nana's public applause in a large theatre sets her apart from the typical woman's role of the time, which confined her largely to the home and to domestic responsibilities. Zola calls her 'devourer of men' and categorizes her as powerful, capable of shattering gender stereotypes and overpowering men. Her position prefigures the important role she will play throughout the novel. Similarly, the hold she maintains over her male audience in particular applies to her life outside of the theatre as well. The

majority of the women in this novel assume a dominating role, generally attributed to males, whereas the men become the more submissive and vulnerable characters. A study of male and female spaces substantiates these reversals in Nana. The predominance of female-dominated domains, such as the dressing room, bedroom and private sitting room, symbolize from the start of the novel women's control over men. More often than not, it is the men who invade the female domain, and who must succumb to its "rules", as is the case in the area of the theater designated the waiting room, where the men, with a patient and submissive air, passively sit and await a reply from the actresses. Although the men make up the traditionally dominating sex and hold an important rank in society, in this setting they are emasculated and demoted. Nana's male clients are forced to await her company in various rooms of her apartment. The men are frequently subject to the woman's will, waiting passively for their cue. One way in which Zola examines gender blending in Nana is through his descriptions of men possessing female qualities and vice versa. All three of the following examples are taken from the Muffat hotel, where Sabine is holding her salon. First, Zola describes Count Vandeuves as the last of a great race, feminine and witty. Later, the son of one of the guests is presented as having light eyes and curly blond hair of a girl disguised as a boy. Finally, in contrast with the above two cases, Mme de Chezelles is presented as thin and daring like a boy. Such illustrations of somewhat androgynous figures direct the reader's attention to issues of gender and gender differentiation by calling them into question. In addition, Zola presents the theme of cross dressing as a means of further reducing sex and gender distinction. When Georges comes to visit Nana in her country home, he is soaking wet from the rain and Nana decides to dress him in her clothing. It is she who takes the upper hand in this 'game' and undermines sexual roles while Georges passively accepts to do as she requests. She is enchanted by this cross dressing, as Georges becomes symbolically transformed into a female. This is not the only example of transvestism in the novel. When Nana enters Laure's restaurant for the first time with her female lover Satin, she is struck by the androgyny of one character in particular. "One instant, she was interested by a young man, with short, curly hair and an insolent face, holding captive to his smallest whims a whole table of girls. But, as the young man was laughing, his chest swelled up. Hey, that's a woman! She [Nana] escapes in a small cry. Nana is portrayed as needing to investigate her own sexuality, since she finds such little satisfaction in the lovers she retains. Her dissatisfaction explores alternative avenues, such as lesbianism, transvestism, and homoeroticism to find some happiness and fulfillment. "The desire and ability to subvert traditional male and female pairing, therefore, are manifestations of the protagonist's discontent and subversion in so much as she breaks out of conventional socially-dictated gender roles." (11). When Nana is unable to find satisfaction in male companionship, she turns to women as a possible source of pleasure. By introducing the theme of lesbianism, Zola both depicts its effect on men and explores its deviation from and resemblance to conventional male-female pairing. Zola paints lesbianism as an added source of power for the women. After Nana is kicked out of the house by her boyfriend, Satin becomes her lover and consoler. Eventually Satin is placed on even footing with the men, and causes in this case a lack on differentiation between the sexes. Nana reaches a point at which she cheats on Satin like she cheated on Count, invoking yet another parallel between female-female and female-male relationships. Just as she

cheats on Muffat with other men, Nana is also unfaithful to Satin with other women, and her actions cause a marked similarity between the two situations. To depict another discussion of subversion in Nana's character, actions and relationship, Zola adds the theme of homoeroticism, or deriving pleasure from observing and touching her own body, as a further source of sexual empowerment. Zola explains in great detail Nana's enjoyment as she engages in self-admiration and stimulation:

Nana snuggled up to herself... And puffed up, melting in a caress of her whole body, she rubbed her cheeks on the right, on the left against her shoulders, with tenderness... She stuck out her lips, kissed herself for a long time near her underarm, laughing at the other Nana, who also kissed herself in the mirror (Nana- Translated by Lowell Blair: A Bantam classic Books, New York 1995). The viewed sexual exploits of Nana lead to a sort of sexual anarchy, in which conventional gender roles and socialization are confounded. Although Zola associates Nana with evil and corruption, condemning the damaging effects of her sexuality, he instills in her strength and resourcefulness. "Through her character he attests to the power and influence of women in society and their ability to subvert both gender identity and class hierarchy." (12)

Zola's gender perception is unique. He tried to champion and promote his women against male domination; there is a tinge of morality about women. When Etienne bids good bye to La Maheude in *Germinal* at the far end of the novel, there is an emotional talk between the two. Levaque woman became pregnant by Bouteloup in her husband's absence, but, instead of rumours of her own affairs with him, she thanks God because she did not sleep with him. Had she done this act of lechery, she would have repented afterwards. But she preserves the dignity of purity.

"The novel, as it develops, becomes a tremendous phantasmagoria in which an opulent and cultured civilization is shown sinking through vulgarity and debauchery to enervation and ultimate dissolution." (13). Nana herself presides over and activates this ruin. There is something of a bad divinity in this creation, who first appears as an actress playing the part of Venus in a mock-antique opera-bouffée. But she is the Venus that Tannhausen saw the goddess turned demon. "She conquers the theatre public not by her acting, which is pitiable, nor by her singing, which is atrocious, nor even by her beauty but simply by 'the omnipotence of her sex.'" (14) "Zola's fictions were rooted in a personal antipathy to sexual promiscuity which he elevated to the status of a natural law. We can begin now to see how the horror of erotic passion arose in Zola in a conflict between a desperate desire for security of sexual possession in the very widest sense of the term 'possession' and an awareness that such security is difficult or impossible to attain, short of finding a bridge 'straight from the hands of God.'" (15). Nana is, of course, an exceptional novel written by Zola with a purpose of setting the society in order. In reality, he wanted to instruct the people, to show them the function of the deprived/oppressed class. For him writing was an instrument which serves to think and to divulge his social theory. Thus he wants; it seems, to bring a social transformation.

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