

A THEMATIC STUDY OF *EMMA* BY JANE AUSTEN

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ABSTRACT

The development of the English novel took place from the eighteenth century onwards. This period is considered to be the golden period for novel writing. Among the pioneer women novelists of this period, the name of Jane Austen comes at the forefront. Jane Austen has presented a vivid picture of the contemporary English gentry in her novels and has become a celebrated author. She had a great observation power and presents her characters and situations in a realistic manner as if they have been a part of her experience. The principal themes in her novels are matrimony and social life and therefore her novels are also known as domestic novels. She is more successful in delineating the women characters rather than the male characters in her works. Though Austen presents the comic side of life rather than presenting the darker aspects but, she is never harsh or bitter in her expressions. Austen is a humorist and irony is her forte. Most of her works were published posthumously. The novel, Emma, was her last novel that she could see in print form. The heroine in this novel is a favorite of Austen. The main theme of this novel is marriage. The heroine, Emma, is the match maker in the novel who continuously thinks about bringing matrimonial alliance between others. She is a strong woman whose happiness doesn't depend on her marriage. Though she herself is young but doesn't think about her own marriage. She has many flaws in herself but learns from her experiences and with the passage of time, becomes more composed and mature. The novel ends happily with the marriage union of the heroine, Emma and Mr. Knightley.

KEYWORDS: *Marriage, Irony, Woman, Realism, Social Structure, Experience.*

INTRODUCTION

The period of eighteenth century in the history of English literature is known for the rise of the novels. The four wheels of the English novel, with their efforts established a platform for the growth of the English novels. As this period witnessed many social and political upheavals, so it became one of the most fertile periods for novel writings. As Terry Eagleton puts it in his *The English Novel*, "It was a time of radical movements and ideas, which found themselves confronting what in the heyday of Scott and Austen was effectively a British police state. The new experiments in fiction had some of their roots in this era of vision and anxiety, in new liberations of energy and new forms of repression" (95). During this period, women got importance as characters in the novels and also acquired a place for themselves in the world of writing. It became a golden period for women writers. They realized their potential for writing and presented their own experiences and perspectives rather than imitating men's perspectives. The prominent women novelists of this period were Ann Radcliffe, Fanny Burney, Elizabeth Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen. These women novelists contributed in their own ways in the development of the English novel. Regarding women writers, Compton Rickett says, "As poets, philosophers, historians, they have proved on the whole inferior to men; but in the art of fiction, they can certainly claim equality, and they can do so not because they rival men on their own special masculine ground, but

because by virtue of their femininity they bring into prose certain qualities in which they excel, and in which men are as a rule deficient” (259).

Jane Austen, an English novelist, was born on 16th December at Steventon. She was a later eighteenth century and an early nineteenth century writer. Austen’s family was quite well off and well cultured. The Austens mingled in educated and cultured society. Jane Austen had seven siblings. Her life was peaceful and therefore, no extremes were perceived in her nature. She was born a story teller and never got affected by criticisms. She was a voracious reader and started writing at a very early age, even before she was sixteen. She wrote the novel, *Elinor and Marianne* in 1796 modelled on Richardson’s epistolary novel. However, it was later revised and rewritten and published as *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811. Another novel that increased her popularity was *Pride and Prejudice* published in 1813. This novel has also been adopted into a movie, *Bride and Prejudice*. Other important novels by Austen were *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. She wrote her novels meticulously and that’s why her novels had formal perfection. All her characters or scenes make readers feel as if they are a part of her life. Jane Austen is held in high opinion amongst the English novelists. Austen was a great observer, she preferred to write whatever she observed and experienced without adding any personal touch. She projected the main currents of her society such as snobbery, love intrigues, social structure and so on. She was neither harsh nor sarcastic or didactic in her tone but irony was her important tool which she used to project the follies of society adding humour into it. According to Compton Rickett, “Faithful observation, personal detachment, and a fine sense of ironic comedy are among Jane Austen’s chief characteristics as a writer” (262). Austen is a realist and presents the social life of her time in her domestic novels. Though Austen presents the class structure of English society but never promotes any claims of superiority based on noble birth or social snobbery. The principal theme in majority of her novels is matrimony. She presents the life of women who depend on marriage for their social security and economic status. She also projects the struggles faced by women who do not inherit any money or belong to well off family and whose only hope for their marriage is their marriage with a prosperous man. Therefore, her stories revolve around marriage and therefore, women characters are important in all her novels.

The novel, *Emma* published in 1815, has been named after the heroine of the novel. It is a wonderful example of Jane Austen’s art of characterization and genius. Most of the readers and Jane Austen herself have liked the heroine, Emma, despite her shortcomings and sometimes imperfect judgments. The huge liking for the heroine clearly shows the skill of Jane Austen as a novelist. The novel is set in the village of Highbury. Emma Woodhouse lives at her residence, Hartfield, with her father Mr. Woodhouse in a large and populous village, Highbury. The leading theme in the novel is surely marriage and the novelist also presents the class structure of the contemporary English society. The distinctions in the class structure directly affects the matrimonial alliances in the novel which is a fact in case of our social structure. Marriage and class distinctions have always existed in our social structure. The novelist also projects the idea of woman empowerment through Emma in the novel. As the story moves on, a transformation and development in Emma’s character takes place. She learns from her bitter experiences to look at life from a new perspective and with a mature outlook. The novels of Austen often deal with the problem of learning by painful experience, this is evident in the novel *Emma* as well. The protagonist, Emma seems prepared to learn from her experiences. The novel ends happily with the evolution of new Emma who becomes more composed and more understanding. The major characters in the novel are Emma Woodhouse, the heroine, Mr. Knightley, Miss Harriet Smith, Mr. Woodhouse, Mr. and Mrs. Elton, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax whereas some minor characters are Miss Bates, Mr. and Mrs. Weston, Mr. Robert Martin, etc.

Emma Woodhouse is an educated, self-confident and a self-deluded girl who considers herself a perfect match maker for her friends and relatives. Emma is around twenty- one years of age when she is introduced in the novel. She is the youngest of the two daughters of an affectionate father, Mr. Woodhouse. She had lost her mother at a very young age and had been looked after by a governess, Miss Taylor who later becomes Mrs. Weston with the efforts of Emma as claimed by her. However, this claim has been refuted by Mr. Knightley, a sensible and an old and intimate friend of the Woodhouse family as is presented in the novel:

I do not understand what you mean by "success", ' said Mr. Knightly. *'Success supposes endeavor. Your time has been properly and delicately spent, if you have been endeavoring for the last four years to bring about this marriage. A worthy employment for a young lady's mind! But if, which I rather imagine, your making the match, as you call it, means only your planning it, you're saying to yourself one idle day, 'I think it would be a very good thing for Miss Taylor if Mr. Weston were to marry her,' and saying it again to yourself every now and then afterwards-- why do you talk of success? Where is your merit? What are you proud of? You made a lucky guess; and that is all that can be said.'* (8)

However, Emma doesn't take Mr. Knightley's comments in a negative way, rather she very well understands his friendly motives behind it. On various occasions, there are difference of opinions between Emma and Mr. Knightley where Emma is proved wrong and Mr. Knightley right. But with the passage of time, Emma realizes her wrong judgments and assessment of situations and persons in the novel. Therefore, it could be said that Mr. Knightley plays a vital role in bringing about the transformation and development of Emma's character.

Marriage has always been an indispensable part of our social structure. It has been an important part of our lives specially the female lot in almost every period throughout the world. The mothers of particularly young girls are always on a lookout for a suitable groom for their daughters. The mothers are very conscious about their daughters' looks and presentations. They take their daughters to various functions and parties so that they could arrange for their matrimonial alliance. This feature was present even during the time of Austen and she has vividly presented it in her novels. The army personnels specially had great charm and fascination as suitable grooms during the eighteenth century. In her novels, she presents various gatherings and dance parties where match making is performed as well as the people enjoy their lives. The novel, Emma deals with the theme of marriage and so the story begins with the marriage of Mrs. Weston and then many more marriages take place such as Frank Churchill with Jane Fairfax, Harriet Smith with Robert Martin, Mr. Elton with Mrs. Elton and finally Mr. Knightley with Emma. In the novel, Emma develops a liking for Miss Harriet Smith whose parentage is not known. As Emma is the match maker, she tries to improve the life of Harriet Smith by bringing about a matrimonial alliance between her and the vicar, Mr. Elton. Emma feels so confident in her deeds that she deliberately creates distance between Harriet and Mr. Robert Martin, a farmer by profession who had feelings for Harriet. Emma does not consider Robert Martin to be a suitable match for Harriet as she feels that Harriet is fit to be a wife of someone from a higher status and therefore, infuses in Harriet's mind the thought of Mr. Elton and his love for her. This clearly shows Emma's concern for social status and class and thus presents her social snobbery.

Emma realizes errors in her judgment as the story progresses. In case of Mr. Elton, she is shocked when Mr. Elton proposes Emma instead of Harriet. She sadly realizes how incorrect she had been in her assessment of Mr. Elton's character. This is evident in the following lines where she realizes her faults, "She was quite concerned and ashamed, and

resolved to do such things no more” (116). She realizes her fault in assessing the character of Frank Churchill whom she first considers to be a possible groom for herself and then for Harriet. She realizes error in her judgment when Frank Churchill’s secret engagement to Jane Fairfax is revealed. Though she had always been warned by Mr. Knightley in all her faulty decisions, but she learned her mistakes only after her own experiences. Emma is not able to understand even Harriet with whom she had been so intimate for a long time. The revelation from Harriet that she is in love with Mr. George Knightley comes as a shock to Emma. It is, in fact, only after this revelation by Harriet that Emma realizes her love for Mr. Knightley. It seems that Emma might have been unconsciously in love with Mr. Knightley as she initially had respect for him, then affection and later fell in love with him. Now she felt miserable at the thought of Mr. Knightley choosing for Harriet. Once again, she realizes her errors in her judgments. She neither completely understands herself nor others. But finally, Mr. Knightley declares his love for Emma and they happily get united.

The novelist meticulously presents the development and maturity of the protagonist, Emma. The heroine, Emma, seems to be a self-empowered woman who does not depend on marriage for her happiness. The heroine, as mentioned in the very beginning of the novel is “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty on years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (1). Emma due to her socially well-off parentage is full of self-confidence and has tremendous imagination capacity where she thinks herself to be right in her decisions about others’ life. Terry Eagleton puts it in his book, “Emma has an excess of imagination, which involves causing damage to others...Because of her social privilege, Emma sees others as actors in her own private theatre, rather than as they really are” (112). Other than a match maker, some other aspects of Emma have also been projected. With the passage of time, Emma progresses from a callous girl to an empathetic person, from a proud to a sober person, from an immature girl of hasty judgments to a mature and mentally more balanced person. Emma learns from her experiences and becomes a better person by the end of the novel. Another fascinating quality of Emma is that she is herself at a marriageable age, but instead of thinking about her own marriage she gets engrossed in finding the matches for others. Usually, this quality could seldom be found in young girls who harbour many dreams for their own marriage. This definitely reflects Emma’s goodness. This quality could also be interpreted in a different way, where Emma by not bothering about her own marriage, and not letting her happiness depend on marriage, definitely proves to be a self - empowered woman. Jane Austen has vividly portrayed the society of her time in the novels with great precision and minute details. It was the period when women started thinking for their own individuality and identity as this is evident in the novel through the character of Emma. Some of the pioneer feminist critics belong to this period. One of the most prominent names is that of Mary Wollstonecraft.

Jane Austen is a realist and she prefers to present the comic side of life. Irony is her favourite device through which she tries to emphasize the scenes and situations. Austen presents the absurdities and faults in her characters through mild humour and irony. This irony pervades throughout the novel. Irony basically means a contrast between appearance and reality. In the novel, Emma’s faults have been treated with irony, like she is not able to understand people and is always willing to intervene in their affairs. Emma’s ignorance of her own nature is emphasized through series of ironic parallels drawn by the novelist. Austen is neither didactic nor has any malice towards anyone. She portrays the comic side of life. Austen has a commendable insight of human mind and characters. She successfully portrays the women characters and their psyche in her novels. Austen also presents the social and class structures in her novels, the characters in her novels are from the gentry and also from the bourgeoisie. In her novels, less of intellectual activities and more of social

activities are mentioned. We do not usually find men talking amongst themselves, they are often found talking in the company of women. In the novel, some social occasions are presented along with some picnics, dinner parties, dances and so on.

Jane Austen's novels are relevant even today. It is because of her skillfully handling of her narrative strategy, themes and portrayal of characters. She vividly delineates the social life of England during her times. Though she was not that popular during her own times but gradually her works gained popularity and she became a celebrated author. Walter Scott was one of her early admirers and then William J. Long and Compton Rickett also appreciated her art of storytelling. Austen excels in the art of observation and presents the characters and situations or events that it all seems a part of her autobiography. Though her power of self-detachment always enabled her to keep out of her stories She did not touch a character or an event that were beyond her experience and presented them in a most realistic manner. Jane Austen's social themes, themes of matrimony, influence, moral values, irony and humour, art of characterization and her technique and craftsmanship in her novels indeed make her stand apart in the world of literary authors.

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