

SOCIAL SNOBBERY AND PRUDERY IN MATRIMONIAL ALLIANCES IN EMMA OF JANE AUSTEN

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Abstract

In the Victorian society, wealth and property played vital role in the matrimonial relationships. Money decided the settlement of marriage as women were crazy to marry a rich man. In the Victorian Age, England had become industrial and money culture infected all the people, rich and the poor. Wealth was considered an important factor for social status and social mobility. All marriage proposals were decided by money and the trend towards dowry had increased. It was very difficult for the girls to marry young boys without money. No wonder being the true critic and interpreter of society, Jane Austen took up the themes of love, sex money and wealth in her novels. Wealth plays dominant role in deciding the fate of women in the world of Jane Austen. Women characters of Jane Austen are intoxicated with money and are snobbish and hypocrite. In the marriages of Elizabeth, Jane, Harriet, Anne and Fanny money plays a vital role. Austen's heroines don't marry for money but they are always crazy to find a rich husband. Emma has a good fortune, is always respectable" (69).

Keywords: Money, Matrimonial, Interpreter, Love, Sex, Marriages, Snobbery, Dowry, Wealth

Jane Austen wrote Emma focusing on the themes of love, marriage and money, presenting Emma as the main heroine of the novel. The critics are of the view that Jane Austen had high opinion of her heroine as she stated that Emma is the main protagonist "whom no one but myself will much like" (126). The reviewers are of the view that Jane Austen considered Emma as her own daughter. Austen's niece was born when she completed her classic novel Emma. Austen was anxious to see the baby as she expressed: "As I wish very much to see your Jemima, I am sure you will like to see my Emma" (207). Emma is certainly a different and unique character as she is involved in the match making business and the plot unfolds many complexities in the matrimonial relationships. Emma belongs to the elite class and has an annual income of 20000 pounds and her economic security gives her freedom to indulge in match fixing games. Barbara Z. Thaden describes the world of Emma thus:

Readers of Austen's three previously published novels would automatically be alerted that they are now in a different world or rather the same world viewed from an entirely different perspective. Emma is at the pinnacle of her society, with no inducement to marry or to change her position, unlike Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and Fanny Price. (48)

Emma enjoys great status in the society of Highbury because of the power of wealth of her parents. She is the sole mistress of the huge

estate of her father. Yet, "by giving her heroine such perfection through the possession of every material thing and every social prerogative that ever a polite person could want," According to Nancy Armstrong: "Austen creates deficiency on another level" (152-53). The power of wealth adversely affects the behavior of Emma who begins intervening in the life others. She has plenty free time and she uses her free time in imagining her own world and dreaming to shape the life of others. Terry Eagleton finds a connection between the wealth of Emma and her imagination:

There is, thus, an indirect route from being extremely well-heeled to bring morally irresponsible, which is the opposite of the paternalistic ethic; there is doctrine that wealth and high rank bring with them responsibilities to others. Emma is at the summit of her society, but exactly because of this she is a kind of transgressor. (Eagleton 112)

Emma becomes a snob with her power of money and wealth and she becomes responsible in ruining the life of many characters in the novel. Mr. Knightley, the future husband of Emma is also trapped in the vicious cycle of Emma's deviant behaviour. Emma is mad in thinking of strict class structure and believing in class superiority. Duckworth argues that "It is Emma's snobbery and instance on a strict social hierarchy that readers dislike most about her" (Duckworth 150). Jane Austen hated snobbery and it is evidenced in her novel she has exposed

and ridiculed her heroine Emma whose journey is a tale of gradual diminution and deflation of self. Most of the women characters in the novel are snobbish, mean and hypocrite. They display their social arrogance as they manipulate many things to torture others. Emma uses snobbery as a social weapon to form relations with others. Emma is blind to her flaws and she thinks that she is always right. The plot of the novel is narrated by Emma and all events are unfolded through her eyes: “readers “travel with Emma rather than stand against her” (Booth 97).

Interestingly, Emma is examined as “the most flawed of all Austen's heroines” (Koppel 25). Many critics have called her anti-heroine of Jane Austen because all her actions ruin the characters in the novel. She doesn't make any positive contribution to the society. She got education from a governess whose “mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint” (Austen 5). She is a typical wealthy woman and her education is also typical of wealthy women of high class:

The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and disposition to think a little too well of herself . . . The danger, however, was at present so unperceived that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her. (5)

Emma is manipulative in her approach to her friend Harriet. She misguides Harriet who wants to know whether she should accept the proposal of Robert Martin or not. Emma sees everything through her green eyes and despises Martin because of his low caste. She thinks that he is below the standard and Harriet can get a better match than Robert Martin. Emma misguides Harriet to reject Robert Martin. Her manipulation ruins the life of Harriet. Emma acts like an anti-heroine and look like the social enemy in the novel. Her wealth becomes a source of psychological tortures to other people living in Highbury. Emma's wealth results in “doing just what she liked” (Austen 5). “Austen's other novels reserve such freedom and selfishness for unsympathetic characters . . . characters hopelessly incapable of regeneration, such as Mrs. Ferrars, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Sir Walter Eliot” (Thaden 48 and 49).. Austen “has undertaken the much more difficult task of incorporating and correcting snobbery within the character of the heroine

herself” (Shannon 644).

The sins of Emma are social and moral and Jane Austen gives an interesting story of her growth and loss of self. She doesn't understand her moral responsibilities in accepting the lower class people. She is often aggressive and doesn't like anyone to go against her actions. Her dogmatic behaviour is the main flaw of her personality. Austen has depicted her journey from a snobbish girl to a mature woman of society. Many critics have called her an unfeeling snob. Emma presents herself as the chief caretaker of her father as she takes all decisions independently and her father agrees what she says. She looks after her father and keeps him happy and delighted. Jane Austen observes thus:

Although Emma, dearly loves her father, they don't have interests of the resources in common, the playfulness of wit and the bite of argument: her father is somewhere else. He is obsessed to the point of looniness with his wealth; he lies in terror of the weather. (16)

Emma often cancels her appointments in order to keep her father happy and to give him the company. She gives the same devotion to her brother-in laws, sister and nephew's and is very popular in the family being sociable and sensible. Mrs. Weston has high praise for Emma: “Where shall we see a better daughter, or kinder sister, or a truer friend?” (Austen 32). She has tender relations with her father. In Highbury, she enjoys respect and status as everybody loves her and regards her as the chief advisor, guide and caretaker.

Whenever there is any problem, people come to her for help, support and advice. She sends food to Mrs. And Miss Bates who is the widow of a vicar and her unmarried daughter. All women of Highbury has special consideration for Emma. The clergy belongs to the upper class. He got education from Oxford which gave him a good job. Emma gives full support to the Bates and after the death of the Vicar, they are in poverty. Emma seriously thinks of the future of Bates and carries out the acts of charity in Highbury. She often emerges as the Queen of her village. She knows that she belongs to the upper class and her actions are in the nature of feudalism. She represents the powers of feudalism and it is expected from her to look after the interests of the poor and the downtrodden. In the days of

feudalism, the landlords spent time and money to look after the poor and the unfortunate. Thus she performs her feudal responsibilities and exercises her class privileges: : “the ability to exercise patronage, to offer charity, and generally to aid others—in brief, to encompass them as dependents—is a key mark of social superiority” (Segal 700).

Emma is free from vanity about her appearance and Emma writes that Emma is “handsome” (5). She is a pleasing character and Mr. Knightly has also special respect for her. He remarks:, “Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it; her vanity lies another way” (32). Emma is rightly assessed by Knightly as the narrator informs:, “Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them” (9-10). Mr. Knightley observes that the character of Emma is the mirror in the novel who gives her own analysis of other people. In spite of the true analysis of Emma, she is full of contradictions and flaws and Mr. Knightley “offers the best reflection of her character. I have a very sincere interest in Emma....There is an anxiety, a curiosity in what one feels for Emma. I wonder what will become of her” (35). Knightley knows that she suffers from many deficiencies; he has no courage to point out the defects of Emma directly. She is presented thus: “She was not much deceived as to her own skill either as an artist or a musician, but she was not unwilling to have others deceived, or sorry to know her reputation for accomplishment often higher than it deserved” (35-36). Emma is proud that she is a talented lady; the best woman in the Highbury. She does not accept her shortcomings and feels comfortable in dominating others and intervening in the personal life of the people of Highbury.

The main focus of Jane Austen is to depict the journey of a woman who goes downhill because of her stupid illusions and dreams and fruitless experiments. The main focus of the novelist is to depict the development of a woman from immaturity to self-knowledge. While “All of Austen's works are concerned with the relationship of love and virtue,” Anne Ruderman observes thus: “this connection is especially important in Emma, as the heroine's education is a central theme” (271). Elaine

Hoffman Baruch observes that Emma is a Bildungsroman referring to “education of the hero who is brought to a high level of consciousness through a series of experiences that lead to his development, yet many of the great novels that deal with women treat similar themes” (35). Every experience of Emma lands her to untold miseries and clearly contributes to her education and personal growth.

E.N. Hayes observes that Emma is a “vain, stupid, selfish little fool” (17). He further argues that Emma is not serious about learning and to change her snobbish behavior, “the modern reader to evaluate our society, or how to be and move in our world” (20). Hayes says that “The damning flaw of Jane Austen's novels is that the author never participates in the lives of her characters, never feels for them, only watches them and smiles a vapid, [Mona Lisa] smile” (19). The modern critics do not like Emma for her vain and snobbish behavior. Jane Austen narrates the premise of Emma and how the heroine should “be and move in our world.” Jane Austen is seriously concerned with the education of her heroine. Hayes' point of view: “Far from having nothing worthwhile to say to modern men and women, through the discrepancy between appearance and reality she reminds us of human fallibility and the need for modesty, unselfishness, and compassion” (650). Jane Austen wrote this novel in the Victorian age and she was aware of the morality of the Victorians. Emma is a case study of snobbery and she needs practical experience. She has been living in the world of fancy and fantasy. Jane Austen has given an authentic view of her character, morals and motives.

The first important stroke of her debacle is dramatized through her association and her match fixing venture with her friend Harriet Smith. Her associations with Miss Bates and her adventures with Mr. Elton and Jane Fairfax reveal her poor understanding of human nature. In each of these relationships, Emma is a failure; she uses her snobbish manipulations and display her snobbish tendencies. Her shallow standards put her in embarrassing situation. The novel begins with the wedding of Miss Taylor and the loneliness of Emma. She has married a rich widower and has moved to Rendalls for good. Her husband has purchased “little estate” near Highbury (13). The guests

leave Woodhouse and Emma and her father are alone in "gentle sorrow". The happiness of Mrs. Weston is a loss for Emma as she sits in "mournful thought" brooding "what she had lost" (4). Emma is free from all restraints and boundaries. Miss Harriet fills her void and she finds in her a true and dependable friend. She tries to forget Miss Taylor and begins enjoying the company of Harriet. Emma is proud of her skills as she is proud of her competence to manage Harriet's future. She becomes the main director of the drama of wedding of Miss. Harriet. Emma is sure that her friendship with Harriet will be fruitful for both of them. Emma chooses Harriet Smith who is a sweet, docile and naïve girl. She has no practical experience of life as she fully depends on Emma who becomes her friend and the real mentor.

Emma sees Harriet as "a girl who wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect. She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners" (Austen 19). The critics observe that Emma is not finding a friend in Harriet but she is chosen a doll to play to pass her time and to break her alienation. She is used as tool for her amusement and she loses no time to teach her social respectability. She intends to make her a lady under the pretense of teaching mannerism to Harriet and to bring refinement in her. For Emma this was "certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers" (19). Emma misuses her power, wealth and social status to elevate Harriet unnecessarily. Her actions are the pastime pleasures of a feudal lady. She plans to upgrade the class status of Harriet in vain because Harriet is unable to maintain her elite class status. Emma justifies her choice as Jane Austen writes: "Harriet certainly was not clever, but she had a sweet docile, grateful disposition; was totally free from conceit; and only desiring to be guided by anyone she looked up to" (21). Mr. Knightley comments thus:

He did not make "due allowance for the influence of a strong passions at war with all interested motives. Mr. Knightley saw no such passions, and of course thought nothing of its effects; but she saw too much of it feel a doubt of it overcoming any hesitations that a reasonable

prudence might originally suggest. (59)

Harriet spent a happy summer with Martin before she met Emma. She met with the farming family of Martin Smith. She also was happy to meet two daughters and a son and the natural environment. Harriet is greatly impressed by the amiable personality of Martin and the supportive nature of his family. She shares all her experiences with Emma. But Emma is not convinced and wants Harriet to think and dream big. She has poor opinion about the farming community and wants Harriet to have a good and prosperous husband belonging to an upper class. She informs Harriet that, "I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it"(24).

Mr. Knightley believes that Martin is good boy and there is nothing wrong with the match of Harriet and Martin because he is "open, straight forward, and very well judging" (47), Emma thinks that Mr. Martin is only a farming boy and a working class person, he will not be able to give real happiness to Harriet Certainly he is below her social consideration. Emma is selfish because she thinks that if Harriet married Martin, she would not be able to continue friendship with a low class woman. She wants to determine Harriet's romantic future. She wants to take the risk and plays with the emotions and sentiments of Harriet. The snobbish feelings of Emma motivate her to break the romantic association of Harriet with Martin.

Mr. Martin sends the marriage proposal to Harriet and this upsets Emma who uses all her power and position to put water on the wedding prospects of Harriet. Emma motivates Harriet to reject the marriage proposal and impresses upon her to follow her advice. Harriet begs for Emma's advice but Emma states, "I shall not give you any advice, Harriet. I will have nothing to do with it. This is a point which you must settle with your own feelings"(42). She cleverly asks Harriet if Mr. Martin is the "most agreeable man she has ever been in company with" in a tone of sarcasm. She feels bad but soon she comes under the spell of Emma and forgets everything about the proposal of Martin. Emma expresses her snobbery thus, "You would have thrown yourself out of all good society! I must have given you up....I would not

have visited Mrs. Robert Martin, of Abbey Mill Farm. Now I am secure of you forever”(43).

Harriet has no say in the matter as she is trapped in the social class consciousness of Emma. She puts faith in Emma and rejects the marriage proposal of Martin. She belongs to the lower class and she has no courage to go against the wishes of her rich friend. Emma is highly imaginative and takes Harriet's social position thus: “There can be no doubt of [Harriet] being a gentleman's daughter” (25). Mr. Knightley is shocked to know about the rejection of proposal and feels very bad because a good match is lost. Being snobbish and impractical, Emma justifies her wrong decision and argues with Mr. Knightley claiming to be right. Mr. Knightley tells her that she is wrong as she has poor knowledge of matrimonial alliances. Harriet is a poor girl, she cannot afford to give huge dowry. In the Victorian age, two options were available to women; either give huge dowry and marry a good boy or join nunnery. Money and wealth decided the matrimonial alliances. Mr. Knightley tells her that she has ruined the happiness of Harriet by misleading her. The climax comes when Harriet declares that she loves Mr. Knightley at the end of the novel giving a true shock to Emma. This is a moment of intense revelation and deep regret for Emma. She had never imagined that Harriet would emerge as her rival.

Oh! Had she never brought Harriet forward!....Had she not...prevented her marrying the unexceptional young man who would have made her happy and respectable in the life to which she ought to belong-all would have been safe; none of this dreadful sequel would have been (325).

Emma for the first time realizes her stupendous folly by socially elevating Harriet. It was her foolishness to look down Martin as a social inferior and giving Harriet a feeling of respectability and the elite culture. Harriet's happiness is ruined and Emma feels guilty for the first time, she experiences the psychological pain in hurting the emotions of Harriet. Her penitence toward Harriet is double: She lets the friendship fade and she releases the attitude of social superiority for the first time after this horrible experience. Emma realizes that Martin is a suitable match for Harriet as they belong to the same class. Mr. Martin pursues Harriet

again and she accepts his hand for marriage. Emma is cut to size as all her wisdom proves a treat to the happiness of Harriet. Her adventure turns misadventure as all her calculations about Harriet and Martin prove wrong.

Emma's experience with Miss Bates is again very enlightening for her. Miss Bates is a complex character and it is not very difficult to understand her inner intentions. She is a chattering box and a source of laughter; she spends most of her time in gossip and past time pleasures. She is not a talented woman and Emma dislikes her. Financial condition of Miss Bates is very bad as she has been living on charity after the death of her father. Miss Bates is very popular in Highbury and even Emma is willing to visit her to ward off her guilt. Jane Austen comments thus:

She had many a hint from Mr. Knightley and some from her own heart, as to her deficiency but none were equal to counteract the persuasion of it being very disagreeable; waste of time, tiresome women and all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second rate and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them forever, and was therefore she seldom went off near them. (121)

Emma dislikes Miss Bates considering her low rank. It is observed that she is the daughter of a gentleman. The only difference is the money and wealth. Miss Bates's poverty is the main problem and she has become “ridiculous to society and especially to Emma” (69). Jane Austen has dramatized the social snobbery of Emma. She openly “makes fun of Miss Bates, even going as far as presenting a diverting imitation of her” (177).

Mrs. Weston doesn't like the attitude of Emma as she disparages her for her irresponsible remarks directed at Miss Bates. The Box Hill episode of the novel is brilliantly presented by Jane Austen. Emma's false morality and snobbery is punctured in this episode. Mr. Knightley is also critical of Emma as he says: “How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible” (294). Emma tries to “laugh it off” (294). Mr. Knightley has to chastise Emma for her social snobbery and wrong judgment of character. Emma thinks that all other classes

below her rank are inferiors and she has right to take a dig at them. Emma's lack of "cultivation" is exposed in the famous Box-Hill episode.

"Austen manages to make the reader feel that Emma has committed the gravest possible of sins by her offhand joke at a picnic" (Ruderman 274), and this brings a turning point in the life of Emma. She sees for the first time the significance of good manners and Mr. Knightley chastises her correctly condemning her false morality and snobbery. She feels devastated and is made to confront the reality: "Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life . . . As she reflected more, she seemed to feel it more. She never had been so depressed" (Austen 296). In her return journey, Emma is seen crying and tears roll down her cheeks. In this simple domestic act, Emma's weak character is exposed. She sits beside her father to seek relief as Austen remarks: "As a daughter, she hoped she was not without heart. She hoped no one could have to say to her, 'How could you be so unfeeling to your father?'" (296).

For the first time Emma realizes "at last recognizes that her intelligence, wealth, and social pre-eminence require kindness, rather than contempt, toward Miss Bates. She awakens to the obligations of her position" (Shannon 641). Emma exhibits a change in her behaviour in her relationships to others in Highbury. She realizes that money and wealth cannot win her people. Her money and wealth and social status is nothing if people don't love her. Emma gives up her selfish outlook of life and behaves like a mature woman. No wonder, Mr. Knightley plays a positive role in bringing improvement and transformation in the personality of Emma.

As the novel progresses, Jane Austen introduces another woman, Jane Fairfax in the novel to teach a real lesson to Emma. Indeed, "it is Jane Fairfax as much as Knightley who sets in motion Emma's recognition of her short comings" (Perry 193). Emma's reason is clouded by her prejudices and snobbish feelings when she comes in contact with Jane. But by the end of the journey, Jane becomes a fast friend of Emma and she plays a very important role in the development of the plot. Miss Bates has high opinion of Jane and Emma is confused in the beginning: "One is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax. Every

letter from her is read forty times over. . . I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death." (Austen 70). Everyone in Highbury praises Jane Fairfax: She is "sweet and amiable Jane is; how she is so very accomplished and superior, and how she would be such a delightful companion for Emma. After all, Jane is exactly Emma's age" (83). For Emma, Jane is a rival and she cannot tolerate people singing of her good nature. She wants to explore the mystery about Jane Fairfax. Emma visits Jane's aunt and finally comes to the conclusion that her achievements are not exaggerated. Emma "senses a rivalry immediately for, it is embarrassingly clear to Emma that Jane is not just the only girl around who is not her inferior—she is superior" (Morgan "Charms" 42). Emma is confused and she makes up her mind not to dislike Jane when she visits Highbury. Emma "determines that she would dislike her no longer" (131). But after some time she expresses her dislike for Jane thus: "She was . . . so cold, so cautious! There was no getting at her real opinion . . . She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved" (132). Emma expresses her irritation because Jane is silent and unresponsive. She doesn't disclose her heart to anyone.

Frank confuses Emma by giving letters to Jane and creating suspense in the novel. Mr. Knightley is watching all these events keenly. He observes that Jane is feeling stressed and sick. Emma reacts thus: "She could not endure to give him the true explanation; for though her suspicions were by no means removed, she was really ashamed of having ever imparted them" (275). Emma's lack of understanding is highlighted by Jane Austen. Emma's harsh opinions of Jane vanishes as she "most heartily [grieves] over the idleness of her childhood—and sat down and practiced [the piano-forte] vigorously an hour and a half" (181). She decides to be normal and gives up the jealousy over Jane's affair. She realizes that Jane is a talented girl and she must admire her good talents. Emma feels compassion for Jane and develops intimacy with her. She comes to know that Jane is going to become a governess so she seeks out her company and stops avoiding her company. Jane's rejection of Emma becomes a source of psychological anguish to Emma. She expresses her negative feelings for

Emma and this troubles her. The climax comes at the end of the novel when she comes to know that she is engaged with Frank with whom she had been flirting and dancing. Emma is really shocked but she is responsible for her own actions and bad understanding of human nature. Frank had played with the sentiments of Emma and impressed her. She started loving him and enjoyed her good company. She has been secretly engaged with Frank Churchill for months. "No doubt it had been from jealousy.—In Jane's eyes, she had been a rival" (317). Sadly, Emma's journey brings social and moral degradation and awareness about her lack of judgment. Every relation of Emma teaches her a lesson and develops her personality. Her journey is full of shocking situations but she learns at the end of the novel and is shocked to know that even Miss Harriet is in love with Mr. Knightley. She marries Mr. Knightley but at this time she has given up all her snobbery and has become a good woman free from jealousies and snobberies.

In her company with Mr Knightley, she learns sobriety; human kindness and compassion for all. Mr. Knightley's love and attention teaches her a lot and moulds her into a good personality. She throws away her snobbery and selfishness and emerges as a loving and kind woman; the real Queen of Highbury.

To conclude, Austen's novel Emma is a classic dealing with the themes of love, marriage and wealth. Emma plays a vital role in match-fixing and she shows her social snobbery. At the outset of the novel, Emma emerges as an anti-heroine who is proud and snobbish; jealous and mean. Her weaknesses are painfully evident in most of the scenes of the novel. It is only at the end of the novel that Emma is totally transformed and she feels humiliated when she flirts with Frank and wrongly believes that Jane is in love with Mr. Dixon. In the major part of the novel, the flaws of Emma are dramatized when she comes in contact with so many people. Jane Fairfax is a minor character but in comparison with Emma, she looks serious, silent and deep. Her relationship with Emma brings about the real realization and transformation in the heroine of Jane Austen. She comments thus: "She was already so far gone on the road leading away from strict rectitude and propriety, she was finding so much

joy in the abandonment of those principles which might have enabled her to resist him, that he obtained her all her promises but one" (263)

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