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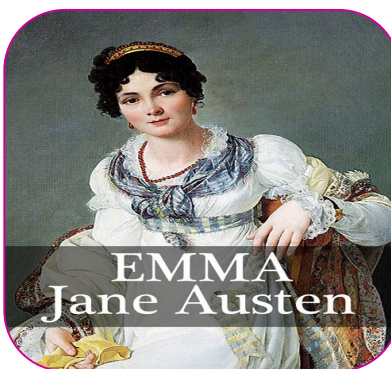
### FEMALE FRIENDSHIP VIS-À-VIS MARRIAGE PLOT IN JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA*: A FEMINISTIC READING

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#### ABSTRACT

*In the novels of Jane Austen, society is set in opposition to true personal relationship. Society sets constraints on the individual, and also offers deceitful opportunities of escape from these constraints. The individual has to discover his own way of release. In quest of such ways Austen's characters, particularly female characters, are seen contesting one another in*



*order to seek a pleasant life. In the backdrop of such contests, the paper aims to explore the intrigue of female friendship and marriage plot in Jane Austen's novel Emma.*

#### KEY WORDS:

*Female Friendship, Marriage Plot, Individual Freedom, Social Constraints.*

A Jane Austen novel proceeds in two phases. In the first, the heroine is shown in her original circumstances: her family; her circle of acquaintances; her economic advantages or disadvantages. Above all, we are shown her basic temperament, and the qualities of her nature which make for her happiness in this environment. In this phase the irony is cheerful and overt, the intriguers, if there are any, are ingenuous rather than ingenious, it is usually not yet clear to what fatalities the heroine's nature is endangering herself. The first phase exhibits the heroine surrounded by the bars of her cage. The second phase brings to a crisis in the heroine's nature constitute an obstacle to her favourable destiny. The effect of both elements is usually first to make the heroine aware of her confinement, or of the painfulness of it, as never before, and secondly to make the confinement seem inevitable and permanent just when she is developing urgent desire for release. Thus in the novels of Austen, society is set in opposition to true personal relationship. Society sets constraints on the individual, and also offers deceitful opportunities of escape from these constraints. The individual has to discover his own way of release. In *Emma*, the heroine's social snobbery at the beginning of the novel cause the disruption of protégée's engagement to a modest farmer; and see that Emma's interference was mistaken, not on the personal ground, but on the grounds of social propriety as well. There is no reason, in the world of the novels, why what is personally right should not be socially right also. Indeed we employ Austen's novels in this analysis precisely because her fictional construction ironically calls attention to the meaningful principles implicit in the relations and actions she represents. Austen never abstracts these principles away from social pragmatics of such complex problem, as finding a suitable marriage partner.

In my paper, I would like to point out, although the marriage plot provides the frame for *Emma*, certain elements of the actions call attention to the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality disrupts and

distorts the relationship between women. The novel structurally protests the over determination of the marriage plot by repeatedly raising and then undercutting our romantic expectations and by locating the real romantic story offstage where we cannot indulge ourselves in it. What romance there is turns out to be illusory- whether it is the romance that Emma offers Harriet with Mr. Elton or the romantic flirtation carried on between Emma and Frank Churchill. Women's friendship has not been seen as a possible counterplot because of the patriarchal ideology. When Austen sketched women in their relations to one another, she made visible a dynamic of women's frustrated need for one another. In this need and its disappointment, another pattern of meaning emerges from this narrative about female friendship and the harm that marriage do to it. This meta-narrative, reveals how much the imperative to marry costs women- how it inhibits the range of possible relationships with other women, makes them dependant on male approval, and limits their imaginative and social autonomy. Austen's resistance to the marriage plot can be felt in our discomfort with Knightly's unremitting paternalism. Trapped as an author as her character is trapped as women, Austen underscores the inevitability of their narrative in the claustrophobia of Highbury. None of Austen's women characters neither Emma, nor Jane Fairfax, nor Mrs. Weston can outwit her destiny. Their stories only look back to repeat themselves as these women become wives, mother and teacher, preparing the next generation for its part in the marriage plot.

Austen's message at this level would seem to be that women who imagine themselves only in the marriage plot will miss the possibilities of friendship with other women. In *Emma*, Austen puts thwarted friendship at the center of her marriage plots, to signal out what is lost by women's complicity in the marriage plot. At every turn marriage is inimical to women's friendship. The friendship between Emma and Jane, is not only blocked by their respective involvement in their own marriage scenarios, but is further confounded by competition and mutual envy. Emma resents Jane's superior discipline and accomplishment because it spoils her self idealization and Jane is hurt by Frank Churchill's open flirtation with Emma. Competition between Emma and Jane is possible to the same extent as their friendship and for the same reason because Jane Fairfax is Emma's only peer. But ultimately the novel evades their mutual recognition of equality, whether in friendship or in competition. As with other manifestation of the relations among women's competition in this novel serve as a reminder of the patriarchal structure within which women lives. Mrs. Elton's marriage puts her into competition with all other women in her society and gives her precedence even over Emma Woodhouse. Throughout the novel Emma imagines that she competes with other women only for intellectual or artistic distinction. In this elegancies of mind and manners she recognizes that she is better than Harriet but less disciplined than Jane (Indeed, it is Jane Fairfax as much as Knightly who sets in motion Emma's recognition of her short comings). On the other hand, Jane and Harriet are aware from the start that, despite the self referential nature of Emma's perception of their competition for men (for Mr. Knightly, for Frank Churchill and for Mr. Elton). Emma's eventual recognition of this common object simultaneously precipitates her entry into womanhood and definitively cuts her off from these other women. Her competitive feelings for them are turned to account for the marriage plot.

Emma's exclusive attention to marriage plot of her own devising is consistent with her inability to enter into a relation of equality with other women. Her obsession with arranging marriages blinds her to other relational possibilities including the possibility of friendship in which one is neither patron nor dependant. Grateful as she is to her governess /friend Mrs. Weston for her guidance and education, this connection was never based on equality. And the great attraction of Harriet Smith was that "everything could be done for her. Emma's subsequent failure to connect with her enthusiasm for these other unequally structured relationships might be interpreted in the light of her preoccupied with marriage plot.

Friendship between women is necessarily problematic in a genre destined to fulfill the marriage plot. The plot must justify a women's submission to the authority of a husband. Destined ultimately to play the heroine in her own marriage plot, Emma must be made to acknowledge her dependence on Knightly. The deformation of women's friendship can be read as a running commentary on the marriage plot.

Emma Woodhouse may be "handsome, clever and rich"(chap.1,p5), but she is virtually an orphan. 'Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct memory of her

caresses”(chap.1,p.5) and her father, ‘hypochondriacal , whining and pitifully” dependent on Emma, acts more like a child than a parent living in Hartfield, a mansion of her own and free from the social and economic constraints which press other Austen heroines into dependence on men, Emma seems to be the character most equipped to contemplate and to act upon the fullness of feminine identity. Secured in good looks and her wealth, Emma speaks of marriage as a choice rather than a necessity,

I have none of the usual inducement of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be difficult thing! But I never have been in love it is not any way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall and without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a mine. Fortune I do not want, employment I do not want; consequences I do not want. I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I am of Hartfield.... (chap10, p.66).

Emma thinks of herself as a man’s equal and says of Knightly; “we always say that we like to one another” (chap.1 p.9). Yet, finally at the end of a series of misguided and failed female friendship, Emma realizes that she too must marry, with no less inevitability than Austen’s other heroines.

In *Emma*, we find many testimonies to the pleasure of women’s friendship. The most obvious of these is the relation between Emma and Mrs. Weston. “Perhaps no man can be a good judge of the comfort a woman feels in the society of her own sex, after being used to it all her life”(p.29). In her own unstinting fondness for Emma, in her idealized motherliness, Mrs. Weston is described as;

Well informed, useful, gentle, knowing all the ways of the family’s, interested in all its concerns, and peculiarly, interested in (Emma’s) every pleasures, every scheme of hers; one to whom she could speak every thought as it arose, and who had such a affection of her as could never find fault”(chap.1p.6). Emma could tell nothing of Hartfield in which Mrs. Weston had not a lively concern; and half an hour’s uninterrupted communication of all those with the daily happiness of private life depends, as was one of the first gratification each (chap.14 p.91).

Indeed, the precipitating cause of the action in the novel is the separation of these friends because Mrs. Weston’s marriage leaves Emma in need of companionship. By the end of the novel we have lamented the separation of four sets of friends: Jane Fairfax from Miss Campbell, the inevitable cooling friendship between Emma and Harriet, and the double estrangement of Emma from Mrs. Weston when the latter has a baby girl to engross her care. But the great unfinished business of the novel is the never quite managed friendship of Emma and Jane Fairfax. Their conversation promises the most delighted equality of tastes and interests, yet they are parted on the eve of their mutual goodwill by their marriage. All through the novel we long for an improvement in their relation, for the sake of each differently- deprived young women. If the half of the novel is devoted to the misuse of friendship exemplified by Emma’s manipulations of Harriet’s romantic feelings and material expectations –the second half adds pressure upon the warm bonding between Emma and Jane. Isabella assumes it to be the most eligible connection, and Knightly urges Emma several times to befriend Jane Fairfax. In the end, Emma does move closer to Jane, making three symbolic overtures only to have them rejected: she invites Jane to Hartfield, she puts her carriage at her disposal and she sends her some arrowroot. But in spite of everything, the narrative repeatedly evades the looked for friendship. Emma’s obsession with arranging marriage blinds her to other relational possibilities – including the possibility of friendship in which one is neither patron nor dependent. By pitting the demands of closure against the autonomy of women, comic romances limits what female characters can do in their fictional world. Fiction like history may offer us many narrow and distorted ideas of women’s lives. Thus the question of whether or not Emma is representative occurs at the intersections of genre and reader. Now the question arises: is Emma’s marriage a sign of her independence or a chastisement for the delusion of autonomy? How should we read Emma’s professed immunity to marriage? To these questions, we must find an internal consensus on their meaning. Austen demonstrates that Emma and Knightly perceives marriage very differently. Knightly understands the economic constraints on Miss Weston as again in autonomy. He remarks that:

(Emma) knows how much the marriage is to Miss Taylor is advantage. She knows how very acceptable it must be at Miss Taylor's time of life to be settled in a home of her own and how important to her to be of comfortable provision (chap.1 p.10).

Reading history reminds us that Knightly's sensitivity is grounded both in business sense and a profoundly paternalistic view of marriage. Yet he is right in recognizing that Miss Taylor is more typical in her vulnerability than Emma because she is not rich and not financially secure as a female heir. Emma tells Harriet she will marry only for love but she nevertheless conceives of marriage not as an economic necessity as Knightly does, but as a sacrifice of her power. Emma's conception of her own autonomy presumes that her unmarried condition is free. If Emma's resistance to marriage is part of the feminist reader's fulfillment, it is also, Emma's own private fantasy. Emma's marriage to Knightly comprises two problems- marriage itself and marriage specifically to Knightly. Knightly's suitability as a lover is an open question throughout the novel and his sudden shift from mentor to lover is itself a comic turn. Knightly's character invites a discussion of cultural perspective. Once again the knowledge of social history complicates the feminist reader's response to him. Knightly would represent a perfectly marriageable bachelor in a society where the median age for first marriage for men of his class coincides with the median age for inheritance of property and in which the perpetuation of ownership was a cardinal rule which determined social variable, like the age of marriage. Thus the cultural expectation determines the romantic potential of Austen's lover.

Should Emma marry; could not her correction happen in some other way? Can we imagine a genre in which "female character demarks the advent of her maturity by some other measures? *Emma's* peculiar narrative structure with its double critique of Emma by the narrator and by Knightly offers a promising problem for the feminist reader. Why do we need a commentary on Emma's fault from the narrator, if there are enumerated so voluminously and directly by Knightly? Is Emma's self delusion so dangerous or so deductive to the reader that she requires this kind of compensatory correction?

It is a commonplace to think about Emma's development as a gradual process of Emma's internalizing Knightly's advice. In this figuration the novel moves from a dramatic antagonism of Emma versus Emma in which self doubt leads Emma to moral enlightenment. Emma subverts the patriarchal structure in which they are inscribed imagining Austen's own quiet subversion of the repressive ideology, her novel seems to endorse. In reclaiming authority both Austen and these characters assert their irrepressible interiority and their belief in female subjectivity. Emma is frequently "wrong" but perhaps she is right to question the absoluteness with which Knightly does in fact view the distinction between them. Perhaps her "wrongness" is often closer to being "right" (i.e. to yielding knowledge of the fictions that sustain social existence). We might try then to read the novel as a contest between Emma and Knightly, a contest between two equally compelling interpretations of the self (specially the female self) and society. Knightly states his views succinctly when he objects to Emma's adoption of Harriet Smith as a protégée:

I am much mistaken if Emma's doctrine gives any strength of mind, or trend at all to make a girl adopt herself rationally to the varieties of her situation in life. They only give a little polish (chap30).

Despite to start opposition, Knightly's strength of mind borders on the conformist virtue of adaptability; Emma polish is by no means 'superficial'

If we assume that women's friendship is a natural outgrowth of shared experiences and interest, then whatever blocks, distorts or interpret that friendship might be seen as symptomatic of the way the culture undercuts women's power of women within a culture. As Austen has taken care to point out in the case of Mr. Weston, a man of financial independence may choose an amiable worker without money or connection. But Mr. Knightly, the ranking man in the town, thinks Emma's romantic schemes for Harriet unrealistic and insists on the importance of birth and breeding. "I am very much mistaken of your sex in the general would not think such a beauty and such a temper, higher claims a woman could possess" (90).

Austen gives the authoritative Mr. Knightly a reply favoring the still higher claims of women's "reason, education and lineage"(130).

Thus we might say that the ending in Austen's novel is a means of interrogating patriarchal plot and power. The marriage that ends her novels can be saved by reading them not as a statement of romantic

harmony or escape, but in the context in which she places them. Far from acquiescing to women's traditional roles in culture, Austen's parodic conclusion measure the distance between novelistic conventions with their culturally coded sentiments and the social realities of patriarchal power. Austen's ironic undercutting of romance in this novel, together with the unresolved but repeated plea for friendship between women, constitutes her subversive message. In the separation of Emma from Mrs. Weston, from Harriet and finally from Jane Fairfax herself, Austen provided a critique of her society and of the conventions of the novel of manners that developed to reflect that society. She may not have invented a new story for women, but she knew, what was wrong with the old story.

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