

# Identity: Female self through Austen's Emma

R.Abarna<sup>1\*</sup>

## Abstract

Jane Austen hides her identity, due to prevailing social norms and prejudices against women writers at the time. But she expressed the feelings by her novels. Emma addresses the national identity in the novel by Austen. Everybody else is being married or searching for someone to marry. But the one character is the first woman in the novel who is single in choice. It shows meddle in people's love, live and the flaws. In the present article, we will analyze the way in which Austen designed the character of Emma Woodhouse the strategies that she used to maintain the balance in readers perception and the result of my creative work.

## Keywords

Meddle, Flaws, Identity, maturity, female self

<sup>1</sup>BNehru Memorial College, Puthanampatti, Trichy - 621007

## 1. Introduction

Who am I? Identity can refer to an individual, a small group, or a social collective and encompass issues such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and the body. In the identities theme, we will explore where values, beliefs, and behaviors come from. Jane Austen was an English novelist known primarily for her six novels, which implicitly interpret, critique, and comment upon the British landed gentry at the end of the 18th century. Austen's plots often explore the dependence of women on marriage for the pursuit of favourable social standing and economic security. Her works are an implicit critique of the novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and part of the transition to 19th century literary realism.

In Jane Austen's Emma the theme of identity is explored through the main character, Emma Woodhouse. Emma initially sees herself as a matchmaker and believes she understands the romantic inclinations of those around her. However, her journey involves self-discovery as she realizes her own flaws and misconceptions about others. She delves into the complexities of self-perception and societal expectations, highlighting how individuals can misinterpret both their own identities and those of others in the pursuit of social harmony and personal fulfillment. I won't try to match the breadth or eloquence of her response. I rather want to add that at its core, Emma seems to illustrate the importance of knowing about others own heart.

Before she began the novel, Austen wrote, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." In the first sentence she introduces the main character as "Emma Woodhouse, beautiful, clever, and rich." Emma is privileged and headstrong, greatly overestimating her matchmaking abilities, her imagination often leading her astray. Emma was the last novel to be completed and published during Jane Austen's life, as Persuasion, the last novel Austen wrote, was published posthumously. Emma has been adapted for several

films, many television series, multiple stage plays, and has been the inspiration for several novels.

Emma tries her best to inquiry herself and her identity. She happens to be the reigning queen of her village's social scene. Austen chooses the 19th century as a setting of the text but on the other she foregrounds Emma as a radical and bold female protagonist unlike other females of contemporary scenario. By presenting this dualism between society and protagonist, Austen evokes the exploration of emerging female self in Emma. This research work in particular tries to deal with Austen's most celebrated novel Emma, the portrayal of independent and outspoken women in the rigid 19th century social scenario. The overall circumstances of the novel disclose the condition of major woman character like Emma, Jane, and Harriet. Though, these women characters have internalized patriarchal norms and values and their superiority, they are not totally the puppet in the hands of men. Emma's masculine efforts are reflected in her deeds like matchmaking, deciding for Harriet's husband, choosing her own appropriate fiancé.

Similarly, Harriet's efforts to marry a well respected suitor, Jane's secret engagement with Frank are the instances that problematize the roles of 19th century women. Thus, this research work will take the roles of these female characters in to the dimension of its study. This dissertation aims to denote the journey of main characters towards their exploration of self and identity in Jane Austen's Emma. The male dominated British society of late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century did not let any women to exist side to side with males. But Emma, the protagonist of the novel, makes a journey toward her self and identity making her equal with the males. She not only becomes equal, but also she lets other characters like Harriet and Jane to understand the equal position of the women in the society and act as per it.

"Evil to some is always good to others." [Ch-12]

The novel explores her character development, self-discovery, and the consequences of her attempts at matchmaking. Throughout the story, Emma's identity is shaped by her relationships,

experiences, and the realization of her own flaws. She has both faults and strengths in matchmaking. Her faults include a tendency to be overly confident in her matchmaking abilities, leading to misguided and sometimes harmful attempts at pairing people. Emma's desire to manipulate others' romantic lives stems from her privileged position and lack of understanding of the complexities of love. On the positive side, Emma genuinely cares about the well-being of those around her and desires to see them happy. Despite her missteps, she eventually learns from her mistakes and matures, realizing the importance of humility and self-awareness in matters of the heart. Emma's character development throughout the novel reflects Austen's exploration of the complexities of human relationships and personal growth.

As she involves herself in the affairs of others, she fails to recognize her own feelings and misunderstands the dynamics of the relationships around her. Austen explores the themes of social class, love, and personal growth. Eventually, she realizes her mistakes and learns valuable lessons about humility and empathy. The narrative unfolds with wit and irony, showcasing Austen's keen observations of social manners and relationships in early 19th-century England. Emma Woodhouse meddles with Harriet Smith's love life. Harriet likes Robert Martin, but Emma talks her into liking Mr. Elton, who ends up proposing to Emma. Emma then thinks Harriet likes Frank Churchill, and she encourages the feelings, but then finds out it is Mr. Knightly she likes. Emma realizes her feelings for Mr. Knightly and accepts his proposal, while Harriet accepts Robert's second offer.

Austen begins novel with Mr. and Mrs. Weston's wedding. Emma feels she made the match by predicting the two would end up together. She is sad to lose her friend, but she is glad to see her so happy. Emma quickly finds a new friend in Harriet Smith, a young woman who was sent to a school run by Mrs. Goddard, and whose origins are unknown. Emma thinks Harriet is a sweet girl, and she wants to help her, so she takes her under her wing. She advises Harriet and tries to guide her. Harriet is friends with the Martin family, and she is fond of the son, Robert Martin. Emma is against the relationship between Harriet and Robert, who is a farmer. When he proposes to Harriet through a letter, Emma manipulates Harriet into rejecting him. Emma wants Harriet to marry Mr. Elton, the vicar in Highbury, the town the novel is set. Mr. Knightley, who is friends with Robert, scolds Emma when he finds out her role in the rejection, and he warns her that her meddling will not end well. Emma believes Mr. Elton has feelings for Harriet, and she tries to encourage it. However, after a ball when Mr. Elton and Emma ride home together in a carriage, he proposes to Emma. He is rejected, and he leaves for Bath, where he finds a wife.

"This is an "Emma" for the modern age, one that retains the formal trappings but largely diverges from Austen's philosophical sensibilities."

Emma successfully presents women's exploration of self and identity in the male dominated British society of late

eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. The main character of the novel, Emma is able to live independently and liberally among the males who are the product of patriarchal norms and values. On the other hand Jane Austen has presented a society which is patriarchal but Emma, the protagonist of the novel, struggles for equality, her identity and respectable position of women in the society which becomes successful. She is juxtaposed to the modern Feminist characters who long and slogan for the reign of the women – a no men's land. With many ups and downs, failures and success, Emma becomes successful, perfect and respected woman in the society. She has got many lessons; she has become matured within the society and created her own existence among males in the village of Highbury. Emma did not plan about her life and marriage whole her life; she was much worried about others; her great grief was for Harriet whose match she tried many times but failed. Ultimately, Harriet's marriage with Robert Martin gave her utmost satisfaction. She was getting what she had struggled for, though gradually

Austen's novel Emma, it is apt to relate Mary Wollstonecraft who thinks that women need to analyze their uncultivated understandings, to follow noble pursuits, to allow their constitution to retain its natural strength, to condescend to use art for not highlighting little vanities and excite tenderness or to gratify the arrogant power of man, but to use art to assert their claim to pursue reasonable pleasures and render themselves conspicuous by practicing the virtues which dignify mankind." (A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects, 1972: 41-42)

This book is relevant in understanding British feminism and social ethics in context of Indian settings because the question of woman's writing as per se feminist thought is to break the silence and the writing connects the space between the private (personal feelings) and the public spheres (social surroundings or state of life).

Practically, females were denied education, social encounter, inheritance of property and even thinking'. They were confined inside the four walls of a house. It was a long established fact that had women been given equal opportunities like men, they would be on the same ground with males – may be this is the fact that they have been deprived of all such things! In this connection, Austen creates a woman who had been given all the facilities the women lacked, and she is similar in all aspects with males. It shows that if they had been given chance, they would not be less than men.

Austen's portrays Emma had lacks experience; she is naïve and immature. The whole story is her journey from immaturity to maturity, inexperience to experience, and naivety to perfection. She, at the end of the novel, with many ups and downs, victories and failures, is able to be a matured and respected woman who has explored her self – her identity in a long run.

## 2. Conclusion

Emma is right to justify that unless the women's consciousness integrates counter mechanisms with powerful forces of environment, surroundings and conditions, the behavior pattern of women and men cannot be changed for oneness and equality.

## References

- [1] Ardener, Edwin. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness". *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1988. 330-351.
- [2] Martín, Reginald. *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Criticism*. Houndmills: The MacMillan P, 1988
- [3] Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Ed. S.S Chhabra. Delhi: Surjeet, 1988.
- [4] Dady, Hawkins Mark. Ed. *Readers Guide to Literature in English*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1996.
- [5] Bracken, H. *Emma — Jane Austen, Summary, Characters, & Facts*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Emma-novel-by-Austen>
- [6] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>
- [7] *Identities — Ithaca College*. (n.d.). Ithaca College. <https://www.ithaca.edu/academics/integrativecore-curriculum/themes/identities>