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Literature and Society: Assessing Emma's Relevance in Modern Indian Context

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Abstract:

This paper shall focus on how Jane Austen's "Emma" is still topical in contemporary Indian culture because of its classic examination of the independence of women, social expectations, and the intricacies of interpersonal relationships. As we know that, Emma is a character in a patriarchal culture, represents the challenges and ambitions faced by women trying to balance their own aspirations with those of society. The paper will explore the angle where Emma's story has a lot of resonance in modern India, where women are standing up for themselves and questioning gender norms. The paper also makes readers consider how society has changed in its perception of women's roles and the continuous fight for gender equality. In the Indian context and with reference to Indian society, the topic of patriarchy and patriarchal marriages is relevant because they still exist today in numerous societies in India where the voice of women is still minimal. Like the modern, rich, independent women, Emma is a privileged young woman whose primary concern is to pair couples based on their social status while, like the modern urban woman, she chooses to remain single.

Keywords- *Patriarchy, Empowerment, Modern society, Interpersonal relationships, urban*

Introduction:

The approaching July will commemorate the bicentennial of Austen's demise, however her literary works persistently feature in educational curricula, are avidly consumed for delight, are adapted into visual media such as television series and movies, and are frequently reimaged in contemporary formats. The works of Jane Austen, such as *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and the Indian adaptation *Emma Aisha*, offer a highly accessible and easily immersive experience into the world she describes, thanks to a variety of resources. This presentation will examine the

enduring relevance of Jane Austen's "Emma" in current Indian culture, specifically in regard to the empowerment of women, societal norms, and the complexities of human connections. However, what is the reason behind the enduring fascination of contemporary audiences from all origins and cultures with fictional characters and storylines that were conceived many years ago? What is the significance of Austen and her works in contemporary society?

Literature has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting its norms, values, and dynamics. Jane Austen's novel "Emma," published in 1815, is a prime example of literature's capacity to dissect and critique societal constructs. Set in Regency-era England, "Emma" navigates themes of social hierarchy, matchmaking, and individual agency with nuance and wit. Despite its historical context, the novel's exploration of human nature and societal intricacies transcends time and place, inviting readers from diverse backgrounds to engage with its themes.

By being able to be revamped, renewed, and repurposed, Austen will never become just another writer of classic literature. Instead, she will continue to beckon readers into her world, accept movie lovers that visualize Colin Firth as their dream Mr. Darcy, and allow for her audience to grow and shift with her as they leave childhood behind and emerge as adults that perceive the story differently but still find solace in-between the lines.

The modern-day feminist movement may be traced back to the intellectual developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The peak of The Feminist Controversy occurred during the 1970s. This tradition stemmed from the growing popularity of Reformation and the ensuing dissemination of the concept of spiritual equality and freedom, which were fundamental principles of the Protestant church, throughout Europe after the Reformation. The topic of gender equality remained of interest throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, serving as inspiration for numerous essays, publications, and treatises. One notable example is Mary Woolstonecraft's ambitious work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in which she claimed that women should have the opportunity to pursue education and professional careers.

Woolstonecraft rejected the notion that women's sole purpose is for pleasing men and advocated for equal treatment of women in terms of education, employment prospects, and political participation. She also argued for the adoption of analogous moral principles to both

genders. Emma Woodhouse, who is twenty-one years old, is not shown as an idealised character, but she possesses a complete combination of good health and beauty. Additionally, she has a strong ability to evoke warm compassion from others. In addition to her energy and confidence, she possesses the notable qualities of beauty, affluence and a luxurious residence, which she uses to demonstrate her perception of grandeur.

The central character in 'Emma' is depicted as a powerful young woman who has a great deal of authority with her peers, whom she dominates throughout the novel. Emma lives in an elegant and affluent society. She is very egotistical and is so busy telling everyone else what to do she fails to notice that she herself is heading towards a crisis of her own. One can see similar characters in the independent entrepreneurs, industrialists, authors, builders, architects of the 21st century urban women.

When we look around today, especially with the quintessential social media and the presence of modern girls and women in them; flaunting their new earned freedom, self-declared feminist and “My Life My rules” attitude, we feel all this has been already visualized by Austen while she portrayed Emma Woodhouse, Emma Woodhouse is 21 years old and not as much of a romanticized individual, she nevertheless radiates maturity, beauty, and the ability to evoke deep emotion. She is the renowned protagonist with outer trappings of assets, beauty, and a pleasant home to back her conviction of dominance in addition to her youthful optimism.

In the Indian context, where societal norms and structures differ significantly from Austen's England, the relevance of "Emma" may seem dubious at first glance. However, upon closer examination, parallels emerge between the social milieu depicted in the novel and contemporary Indian society. Eva Figes words are so relevant when she says "the problem of women's breeding and education to earn her own living, which was the growing theme throughout the century." (Sex and Subterfuge, p.53)

Social Hierarchy and Class Dynamics: The novel's protagonist, Emma Woodhouse, occupies a privileged position in society, belonging to the landed gentry. Her interactions with characters from different social strata, such as the lower-class Harriet Smith and the nouveau riche Robert Martin, shed light on the complexities of social hierarchy and the challenges of navigating class distinctions. In the Indian context, social hierarchy is similarly stratified, albeit along different

lines. Caste, religion, and economic status play significant roles in determining an individual's social standing. The dynamics of caste-based discrimination and the challenges faced by individuals from marginalized communities find echoes in Austen's exploration of class prejudice in "Emma."

Gender Dynamics and Marriage in "Emma" and Modern India:

"I lay it down as a general rule, Harriet, that if a woman doubts as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him."(p.47)

Another significant aspect of "Emma" is its portrayal of gender dynamics and the institution of marriage. In Austen's world, marriage is both a social contract and a means of securing financial stability and social status. Women like Emma are expected to marry well, thereby ensuring their own and their family's social standing. In modern India, although significant progress has been made towards gender equality, Marriage continues to be a pivotal institution, often serving as a marker of adulthood and societal acceptance. Women are frequently expected to prioritize familial obligations and marital duties over personal aspirations, echoing the experiences of Austen's female characters.

Individual Agency and Autonomy Central to "Emma" is the theme of individual agency and autonomy, particularly concerning women's roles and choices in a patriarchal society. Despite her privileged position, Emma's journey towards self-awareness and personal growth involves confronting societal expectations and asserting her independence. In the Indian context, discussions surrounding women's agency and autonomy are fraught with complexities arising from cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors. While strides have been made towards gender equality and women's empowerment, persistent patriarchal attitudes continue to shape women's lives and limit their opportunities for self-expression and self-determination.

It is now established that, Jane Austen's "Emma" remains a relevant and insightful work of literature that transcends its historical and cultural context to speak to readers across time and place. "Emma" serves as a thought-provoking mirror reflecting both the enduring challenges and the possibilities for change in Indian society.

To quote Emma "Not for the world," "would I advise you either way. You must be the best judge of your own happiness."(p.46).And to quote Indira Nooyi, the CEO of Pepsico "An

important attribute of success is to be yourself. Never hide what makes you, you. (The Power of Being You: Indra Nooyi's Lessons for Women Entrepreneurs)

Conclusion: By exploring these intersections and drawing connections between "Emma" and contemporary Indian society, this research paper underscores the enduring significance of literature in shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. As India continues to evolve and confront new challenges, the lessons gleaned from "Emma" serve as a reminder of the enduring power of storytelling to illuminate the human condition and transcend temporal and geographical boundaries.

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