



## “Our Stability in Good Thoughts”: Revisiting “Emma” in Pandemic Times

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**Abstract:** Jane Austen is regarded as one of the great classical writers in the pantheon of English literature. Macaulay called her a ‘prose Shakespeare’. She delineates the lives of genteel English people with the delicacy and finesse of a miniaturist. In creating and interpreting human motives and character she is nonpareil. Though she writes of three-four families in a typical English village with its eighteenth century social hierarchical set-up, yet her narratives have unique malleability and cultural translatability and become a classic point of reference. They become excellent guides to navigating a world full of change and its attendant chaos. They resonate with twenty-first century debates about ‘civil society’. Is civil society a social construct or does it incorporate a description of human capacities and approach; is it a factor of economics or an enterprise of intellectuality or is it a cultural torque which will engineer a redescription of Aristotle’s ‘koinonia politike’ or human community? A re-reading of Emma in the pandemic isolationism reveals the Austenian narrative as enriching.

**Keywords:** regenerative, cultural translatability, perception, human community

### INTRODUCTION

A regenerative aesthetics is the profound effect of a revisit to the world of Emma. The aesthetic experience involves the cognition of beauty of expression and execution or ‘artistic form’, as well as ‘feeling’ and ‘perception’ of values. Words like ‘sight’, ‘perception’, ‘reflection’, ‘thought’, ‘considered’, ‘comprehension’, ‘image’, ‘regard’, ‘prospect’, ‘view’, ‘judgement’, ‘insight’, ‘foresight’ and opposing qualities of ‘blindness’, ‘deception’, ‘insensibility’, abound in a Jane Austen narrative. Re-reading *Emma* in the pandemic lockdown offered a window opening onto a vista replete with meaningfulness powered by the energy of culture and positivity of spirit.

Jane Austen writes novels of character and *Emma* is about Emma’s progress from self-deception and vanity to perception and humility. Emma’s character is subtly nuanced and she is the most engaging of Jane Austen’s heroines.

### DISCUSSION

Whereas her other heroines like Elizabeth Bennet, are victims of snobbery, Emma is the personification of snobbery itself. Emma’s fault is self-love or ‘hubris’ in that she wants to play God in altering and arranging as she sees fit, the destiny of others, and to this end any means will do. Emma’s vanity directs her to arrange other people’s happiness in the belief that her wisdom is infallible, especially where match-making is concerned. There is nothing sinister or depraved about her; rather her nature is sound and can lead to clear judgement and right action if her intelligence is not blinded by imagination and fanciful ideas. Jane Austen analyses that “the real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (*Emma*,1). Mr. Woodhouse is too indulgent a father and a rather feeble hypochondriac who looks to her for support and comfort; Miss Taylor her governess and now a dear companion is hardly formidable and Emma is naturally precocious. Moreover belonging to the landed gentry she enjoys high status and is regarded “so great a personage in Highbury” (*Emma*, 19). Her vanity is thus understandable and being self-willed what Emma requires most is “a subjection of the fancy to the understanding” (*Emma*,30).

Proud and assuming, Emma indulges in match-making without concerning herself with the feelings of those involved and for her “it is the greatest amusement in the world!” (*Emma*,7). Adopting the orphan girl Harriet Smith as her protegee, Emma fills her mind with grand ideas of marrying the Vicar, Mr. Elton who is her social superior. Convinced that Harriet is high born because she is good-looking and graceful, Emma makes her reject Martin’s marriage proposal as he is a farmer of “inferior society” having lower social status (*Emma*, 18). When Elton proposes to Emma and thinks Harriet to be a nobody, Emma has “the conviction of her having blundered most dreadfully” (*Emma*,121). Realizing that she has run away with fanciful notions and her pre-conceptions, Emma vows to undertake “necessary penance” and try “repressing imagination all the rest of her life” (*Emma*, 124-5). She is acutely

aware and embarrassed that Harriet's pain and humiliation are greater than her own. Yet she is not sorry for causing distress to Martin who really loves Harriet; rather she treats it as an error of the intellect, not a moral or ethical lapse. Again, Emma entertains a fanciful whim of a marriage alliance between Harriet and Frank Churchill who belongs to the rich aristocratic class though she does not consciously encourage Harriet's hopes. When Harriet discloses her hopes of marrying Mr. Knightley, Emma is horrified that she is responsible for this drastic situation. From a simple and humble girl, Harriet, the illegitimate orphan, had grown so vain as to think herself a most suitable wife for a man of so noble a family. In bitter self-recrimination she realizes: "with common sense I am afraid I have had little to do" (*Emma*, 355). She recalls Knightley's prophetic words that she would be doing a great disservice to Harriet by puffing her up with wrong expectations and bringing a disconnect with her own milieu. Emma realizes with what "insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny" (*Emma*, 364). Ashamed at her own conduct that she had tried to play God without sense or sensibility: "how inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct", she now vows to "thoroughly understand her own heart" as the first endeavour in acquiring "the knowledge of herself" (*Emma*, 364). It suddenly dawns on her that she has been long in love with Mr. Knightley and she rues "the blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart" (*Emma*, 365). Emma has finally assimilated the meaning of responsibility: that we must endure the consequences of our acts.

For all her faults, yet we can agree with Mr. Knightley when he calls Emma the "sweetest and best of all creatures, faultless in spite of all her faults" (*Emma*, 382). Emma's journey is from presumption and romantic unrealism to disillusion and suffering to a knowledge of herself and the world. Emma is in contrast to Miss Bates, who despite her meagre means, her foolish and garrulous inanity, possesses "universal good will" and is "a standing lesson of how to be happy" and is the recipient of Knightley's solicitude (*Emma*, 16, 223). When Emma is rude to her, Knightley rightly admonishes her for being "unfeeling" and "insolent" (*Emma*, 330). A feeling of deep contrition makes Emma call upon the Bates's and sets her on course correction towards humility. Emma is honest in acknowledging that "her false and insolent estimate of her own" led her to abhorrent conduct; she wins our admiration because she is prepared to correct herself (*Emma*, 366). Emma is about Emma becoming "more acquainted with herself", the necessity of conscious self-definition and self-criticism. Like King Lear she too is cut down to size by learning her mistakes and there is a development of broader sympathy and empathy. Through her character Jane Austen highlights the dry destructiveness of egotism, the fallibility of the human mind, the need for modesty, unselfishness and the value of compassion. In the large and populous village of Highbury "the Woodhouses were first in consequence there. All looked up to them" yet Mr. Woodhouse is "beloved for the friendliness of his heart and his amiable temper", always genuinely concerned for everybody's health and happiness (*Emma*, 3). Emma has sincere commitment towards the less fortunate sections of society as is evident in her visit to a poor sick family and palliative measures she undertakes by providing nourishing gruel from her home.

## CONCLUSION

Revisiting *Emma* in pandemic times has been a regenerative experience. Jane Austen's text offers invaluable perception of "our stability in good thoughts" (*Emma*, 76-77). Emma's "charitable visit" to the poor sick family can be seen through the hierarchical structure of Eighteenth-century England, yet in pandemic times we have all rallied to the support of our neighbours who may hail from different parts of a multicultural India. Civil society has rallied to the support of rural migrants; school teachers have commendably gone beyond their regular duties to feed the poor; we have supported our domestic staff and workers in the hardship of lockdown; India has gifted and supplied vaccines to many countries. Jane Austen's text has a gallery of lovable characters who are so concerned about the good of society--- Mrs. Goddard and her sanguine orphanage; Colonel Campbell and family adopting Jane Fairfax, the orphaned daughter of his junior officer; the patience and fortitude of Jane Fairfax in her dealing with the irresponsible ways of her beau, Frank Churchill; the good sense and principles of Martin the hard-working farmer; the trading family of Coles organizing social meets and spreading good cheer; the amiable and sensible manners and conduct of the Westons who together with Isabella and John Knightley make admirable couples enjoying fruitful marriages; above all Mr. Knightley the wealthy gentleman, owner of the large estate Donwell Abbey, "good-natured, useful, considerate" benevolent, humane, respecting all and respected by all, as a role model worth emulating.

Reading *Emma* in the pandemic lockdown, cut off from social life, prey to doomsday scenarios, has been an uplifting and rejuvenating experience; a reinstatement of belief that "warmth and tenderness of heart, with an affectionate, open manner, will beat all the clearness of head in the world, for attraction"—an ethics displayed and corroborated by the conduct of society in these frightening times (*Emma*, 235).

The Indian novelist Premchand, presiding over the All India Progressive Writers' Association in 1936, called out the need for socially purposeful writing. An Austen 'Novel of Manners' always seeks a balance between individual and social good. Does the "irretrievability" of this "classic realist text" of *Emma*, in the words of Catherine Belsey, imply that "nothing can be done" with it? (*Critical Practice*, 79); or is it a force with leverage power? A Jane Austen text is very amenable to 'cultural translation' particularly in the realm of psychological profiles and ethical assessments. As an Indian reader, my response is to consider and question whether it is correct to undermine the value of tradition and of truth, humility, discipline and the power of community togetherness and to concur with the author: "does not every thing serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other" (*Emma*, 392). This is particularly true for the world today as we live under the dark looming shadow of the apocalyptic. The Jane Austen fandom reveals how the boundaries between the popular and academic readings are tenuous because her readers and texts are able to blur and merge worlds, times and subjects and find universal resonances. Perhaps the yearning for order, for balance, community feeling and social harmony, the dream to have a mutually satisfying relationship sealed by the bond of marriage is the subconscious motivating factor behind her enduring popularity. Claudia Johnson analyses how her "art is uniquely comforting" (*Jane Austen Cults*, 127). Austen's "microscopic art of the anatomy of feelings" peppered with realism, satire and humour, a world where common sense, pragmatism and fineness of sensibility and romantic promise hold sway-- these create her cultural value of a Classic (Saglia, 82).

Howard Gardner in his book, *5 Minds for the Future*, writes how “one cannot be a full person, let alone have a deep understanding of our world (including its epochal changes of climate), unless one is rooted as well in art, literature, and philosophy”. There is an urgent need to “embed ethics in the sinews of all important institutions” as a vital step toward “an ethical career and responsible citizenship”. The five kinds of mind that people will need “if we are to thrive in the world during the eras to come” are the “Disciplined mind” acquiring professional skills; the “Synthesizing mind” able to amalgamate information from disparate sources and collate it; the “Creating mind” which can break new ground and put forth new innovative ideas; the “Respectful mind” that recognizes differences between individuals and groups and makes efforts to understand the need of ‘others’ and tries to work effectively with them; the “Ethical mind” that goes beyond self-centred goals and ponders how citizens can work unselfishly to improve the lot of humanity (Gardner, xviii-xix, 1,3). But this task of cultivating the mind goes beyond the classroom and is a lifelong commitment. The world of Jane Austen’s novels portray the most remarkable and impressive representatives of human kind and *Emma* speaks in a contemporary voice.

Jane Austen’s commitment to sense and sensibility, to larger values of social cooperativeness and quality of social and community life, to an ethics of care and concern for individual fulfilment and the actualities of social existence, its vitality and problematics, is for posterity, indeed the bit of ivory carved out with exquisite workmanship by the author’s genius.

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