

The status of Women during the 19th Century in Jane Austen's Novel: A case study of (Emma)

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Abstract

This paper studies the status of women in the 19th century as illustrated in Jane Austen's novel (Emma), by focusing on female characters in the novel in an intention to uncover how women are regarded within the society of the 19th century. The paper argues that women social lives in the 19th England, revolving around getting married, preferably to a rich man to secure their social position, a situation that imposed on them according to the society's norm, this paper endeavors to find the answer for two questions; What was the status of women during the 19th century according to Jane Austen's novel (Emma)? And how they were regarded and treated by their societies? It adopted historical research approach, depending on Jane Austen's novel (Emma), as a primary source, and various written and published materials such as books, academic researches, articles, and web pages as secondary sources, together with the analytical approach to analyze the research data. The results of the analysis confirmed the research hypothesis that women at the 19th century were regarded as immature to decide for their own future, this includes the author herself – Jane Austen and her elder sister Cassandra, who had barely finished their basic education only to return home - after their father experienced a financial shortage - to spare more money for the education of their male brothers

Keywords: Jane Austen, Emma, women, 19th century, Marriage, Education, Work

Introduction

Women throughout history are considered weak, vulnerable and incapable of managing their own affairs without the guidance and guardianship of their male relatives. Literature in particular provided considerable amount of information about how women in different societies are regarded and treated. In this regard, a question on how women status in 19th was been illustrated in Jane Austen's novel (Emma), whose main protagonist is a female. How they are regarded and treated in their society? What chances they have to contribute to their societies?

As a continuous issue that persists to our modern era, where men were more privileged, more in a position of power over women, they have respected social position, socially accepted, no matter he is single or married, educated or ignorant, good or evil, whereas, women were regarded as dependent, and inferior. They were mostly considered feeble and unstable, naturally in a weak position that necessitate provision of a male guardian throughout their life.

In the 19th century, England witnessed an increase in the number of guide books on the subjects of etiquette and manners, directed at young women. The increase in this kind of literature most likely originated from a general increase in the discussion of women's right to education and their place in society during the second half of the century. The increase of books on the subject of etiquette was most likely a natural reaction to the increasing market for this type of literature during the late 18th and early 19th century (Segrén, 2015).

This paper focuses on the status of Women during the 19th. Century in Jane Austen's novels with special reference to (Emma), the major heroine of the novel, who is an independent woman with a great fortune that decided not to get married. Jane Fairfax, who is not that rich, but smart and intelligent, nevertheless, has only two options, either she gets married or she must consider an employment as a governess to secure a decent life, or Miss Harriet who belongs to a lower class and should find herself a protective husband who will secure her future, and other characters in-between.

However, in *Emma*, Jane Austen's most mature novel, it behaves a little bit differently: The heroine does not even need to marry. She would much rather take on the role of the matchmaker, who believes she knows best which man suitable for which women. In the course of the novel, Emma has to go into critical situations some of which are really complicated. But no matter what Emma thought about marriage, she submitted to Mr. Knightly's request for marriage in the end, concluding this novel by what the rules and norms of her society dictate.

Austen treats concerns and worries of her society at that time, but only those with whom she has experienced (Hannah Eberle, 2011). And that is where her strength lies: she wrote about what she knew and what she was thinking critically about, namely; customs and habits in the family and among neighbors and friends. In her novel (*Emma*), she focuses on the family relationships between spouses and especially between possible (and impossible) spouses.

Women in the 19th century were considered silly and passionate creatures, many of their actions were criticized by society as they were considered scandals; women were not free from indecorous "sights". Even the intellect in a woman could be considered by many people an undesirable quality in a woman. Thus, the 19th century woman had to project an adequate image following the canons of the society (Hernández, 2015).

There were mainly three available roles for women: married, single and widowed. These three roles demanded certain qualities and they were also requested to fulfil stipulated purposes in life. Socially, women were demanded to have children and to take care of their future husbands. Marriage was the natural state and the objective of every woman. Matrimony was also seen as a means to an end, being the goal an economic stability in which women could carry a life without any problem. Nonetheless, if we take into account that many of the marriages that took place in the 19th century were due to economic reasons, matrimony was not necessarily intertwined with love. Subsequently, many wives ended up with tyrannical husbands and in dangerous situations. (Hernández, 2015)

2. The Aims of the Research

The aim of the paper is to study women's status in the 19th century illustrated in Jane Austen's novel (*Emma*), whose main protagonist is a female, and the way women were regarded and treated in their society.

3. Hypothesis of the Research

The paper argues that women social lives in the 19th England, revolving around getting married, preferably to a rich man to secure their social position, a situation that imposed on them according to the society's norm at the time.

4. Questions of the Research

The study poses the following questions:

- What the status of women was during the 19th century as illustrated in Jane Austen's novel (*Emma*)?
- How they were regarded and treated by their societies?

5. The Methodology of the Research

The paper adopted two research methodologies, the first is the historical research approach where the primary source of the research is Jane Austen's novel (*Emma*), and the relevant literature works and articles written by scholars about the topic in forms of books, academic researches, articles, or web based publications as secondary research sources. The second is the subjective critical analysis approach.

6. The Study

Jane Austen's novel *Emma* opens with a scene in which Emma Woodhouse and her father consider the effects of the marriage of Emma's long-time governess, Miss Taylor, to Mr. Weston:

"Sorrow came—a gentle sorrow—but not at all in the shape of any disagreeable consciousness. —Miss Taylor married. It was Miss Taylor's loss which first brought grief. It was on the wedding-day of this beloved friend that Emma first sat in mournful thought of any continuance."

The wedding over, and the bride-people gone, her father and herself were left to dine together, with no prospect of a third to cheer a long evening. Her father composed himself to sleep after dinner, as usual, and she had then only to sit and think of what she had lost". (Emma. Ch. 1, P17)

This shred feeling of lost as a consequence of marriage revealed in the following dialogue between Emma and her father after Miss Taylors' wedding:

'Poor Miss Taylor!—I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!'

'I cannot agree with you, papa; you know I cannot. Mr. Weston is such a good-humored, pleasant, excellent man, that he thoroughly deserves a good wife;—and you would not have had Miss Taylor live with us forever, and bear all my odd humours, when she might have a house of her own?'

'A house of her own!—But where is the advantage of a house of her own? This is three times as large.—And you have never any odd humours, my dear.' (Emma. Ch. 1, p19)

Rich, beautiful, and privileged Emma Woodhouse fancies herself to be an excellent matchmaker. When her governess marries the well-to-do widower Mr. Weston, a match that Emma views herself to have made, Emma has to find a new companion, she befriends the lower class Harriet Smith and sets out to similarly assist her. She is sure that her friend Harriet deserves a gentleman, though Harriet's own parents were unknown. She persuades Harriet into rejecting Mr. Martin, a farmer whom Emma believes is not a suitable match for Harriet, and she instead encourages her to admire Mr. Elton, the neighborhood vicar instead instead. This was what Emma thought about Mr. Martin, and tried to convince Harriet with her views, as explained in the following phrases:

"I think, Harriet, since your acquaintance with us, you have been repeatedly in the company of some such very real gentlemen, that you must yourself be struck with the difference in Mr. Martin. At Hartfield, you have had very good specimens of well educated, well-bred men. I should be surprised if, after seeing them, you could be in company with Mr. Martin again without perceiving him to be a very inferior creature—and rather wondering at yourself for having ever thought him at all agreeable before. Do not you begin to feel that now? Were not you struck? I am sure you must have been struck by his awkward look and abrupt manner, and the uncouthness of a voice which I heard to be wholly unmodulated as I stood here.' (Emma, Ch.4, p39)

Another female heroine in the novel, Jane Fairfax, another accomplished and beautiful young woman, returns to Highbury to visit her aunt and grandmother. Orphaned at an early age, Jane has been educated by her father's friends, the Campbells. She is expected to become a governess, her only apparent option; as she has no independent fortune to attract a suitable husband of rank and class. Emma's words clearly explained this situation:

"A single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else. (Emma, Ch.10, p83)

Jane Fairfax potential fate shows us how different a single woman who is not of good fortune can expect her life to be:

" a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. Those who can barely live, and

who live perform in a very small, and generally very inferior, society, may well be illiberal and cross. (Emma, Ch.10, p84)

Austen's characters often take a very pragmatic view about finances. Without money, you can't afford to be pleasurable. Therefore, any happy marriage has to take money into account.

Women of Austen's time did not have a proper education and as a result they lacked professional status and were completely dependent on matrimony for securing their financial need. Women's education at the 19th century was often set primarily as a tool to provide them with a low level of education at a finishing school, but this traditional education largely provided women only with skills necessary to organize their houses, play music, attract men and become dutiful wives. The traditional portrayal of a woman's education did not extend beyond the realm of her domestic duties. The marriage was very important for women in 19th century as they did not have proper education:

"The marriage is to Miss Taylor's advantage; Emma 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 secure in a comfortable provision".
(Emma, Ch1.p22)

Also, as the previous quotation explains, marriage was the only solution for uneducated women to provide financial stability.

7. Discussion

As stated previously within this study, Jane Austen's novel (Emma) starts with Emma and her father thinking about the marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Most of

their thoughts are negative. For both of them, this negative response is not so much to the institution of marriage as it is to the changes which follow marriage. To Mr. Woodhouse, wedding, as the origin of change, is always disagreeable, since he is alarmed by any kind of change. Emma, although she is able to recognize the "*promise of happiness for her friend*" regrets that the marriage will deprive her of Miss Taylor's companionship. But Emma does not tell her father of her regrets. Instead, she tries to cheer themselves up by enumerating good things about the marriage. She reminds her father that the Weston's will be living near to them and that Mr. Weston is a fine man. Thus, early in the novel, the economic importance of marriage for a woman is emphasized. (Sprehe, 1987. p22) From the very beginning of the novel, the subject of the novel was made clear: marriage and its necessity to female characters of the novel.

Clearly marriages and talk of marriages pervade this novel. And when one take into account both the number of marriages at the novel's end and the novel's account of the alternatives to marriage available to a young woman of the class from which Jane Austen and most of her original readers came - to remain dependent upon her family as an old maid or to attempt to earn a meager salary as a governess—we might conclude that the novel is, at least in part, a tract urging all to marry. (Sprehe, 1987)

Just as there are a number of different ideals coexisting in society today, there were naturally a number of influential ideals in 18-19th-century England. The ideal that is more regarded in that era "the Regency ideal" that refers to the ideal promoted by Fordyce, Gregory, and Rousseau. This was an ideal conceived by men, but aimed at women. This ideal promoted very traditional gender roles. Women are encouraged to be beautiful, graceful, meek, quiet, accomplished, and devoted to their parents and husbands. The ideal woman as presented by prominent moralists at the time, fits well into the context of the late 18th- and early 19th century middle-classes, where woman's primary function was to be a contrast to the active, vigorous man. (Sprehe, 1987)

Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands laboured all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. The fact that women had such great influence at home was used as an argument against giving them the vote. (Hughes, 2014)

8. Findings

After analyzing the novel of Emma, it is clear that women status was governed by three main features:

8.1 Education

The 19th century's rules and norms defined the level of education any woman should receive is a kind of education to prepare her for her role at home, middle-class girls were coached in what were known as 'accomplishments'. These would be learned either at boarding school or from a resident governess. This clearly stated in all Jane Austen's Emma. This fact is stated by Mr. Knightley's words about Emma's level of education, thus he tells Mr. Weston:

" I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding". (Emma, ch5, p43)

At that time it was important for a well-educated girl to soften her knowledge with a graceful and feminine manner. No-one wanted to be called a 'blue-stocking', the name given to women who had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits. Blue-stockings were considered unfeminine and off-putting in the way that they attempted to usurp men's 'natural' intellectual superiority. Some doctors reported that too much study actually had a damaging effect on the ovaries, turning attractive young women into dried-up prunes. Later in the century, when Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women, many

families refused to let their clever daughters attend for fear that they would make themselves unmarriageable. (Hughes, 2014)

In Emma, Jane Austen depicts Jane Fairfax to show clearly that educated, clever girls were not valued and respected based on their talents and merits. Although Jane Fairfax is well educated. This position gives her fewer choices but to marry someone rich. As a result, she gets engaged to Frank, a handsome and rich man. Who had to keep his relationship a secret, to inherit the wealth of his aunt, because he knew that his aunt would not accept his marriage to a poor girl. They faced many difficulties before being able to get married.

8.2 Marriage

At that time, a young girl was not expected to focus too obviously on finding a husband. Women were assumed to desire marriage because it allowed them to become mothers rather than to pursue emotional satisfaction.

Girls usually married in their early to mid-20s. Typically, the groom would be five years older. Not only did this reinforce the 'natural' hierarchy between the sexes, but it also made sound financial sense. A young man needed to be able to show that he earned enough money to support a wife and any future children before the girl's father would give his permission. Some unfortunate couples were obliged to endure an engagement lasting decades before they could afford to marry. (Hughes, 2014)

Austen shows that during the period of the 19th century marriage was a challenging aspect for women of that time. Marriage was the most important aspect which could guarantee a flourishing future; yet it was socially directed, and had to be undertaken, often based upon the financial resources of the man, and ultimately resulted in the woman being mistress of her house.

As we can see from this quotation, as Emma telling Mr. Knightley:

"It is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a

woman to be ready for anybody who asks her". (Emma, Ch 8. Pp 62-63)

As Emma's father says early in the novel, Matrimony, as the origin of change, was always disagreeable. For women in Austen's time, marriage was one of the only ways of changing your lifestyle. It's no wonder that so much of the novel is devoted to imagining (and re-imagining) different potential matches. Marriage here isn't just about love, however. Questions of love are complicated by money, family, land and social status, all of which come into play whenever Emma attempts to arrange marriages – including her own. Austen emphasizes the social aspects of marriage in order to expose the economic and class dynamics of romantic love.

(<https://www.shmoop.com/emma>)

Jane Austen, in all her novels, is concerned about what happens to single women who are either financially dependent or socially insecure. In Emma, Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, and Harriet Smith all faced uncertain fates because of financial or social vulnerability. (<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny>)

The poor single women has a very narrow chance in happiness, and she may suffer neglect and exploitation, as stated in Emma's words:

"It is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! The proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else".
(Emma, Ch. 10. P83)

8.3 Work

Sprehe, 1987 stated that alternatives to marriage available to a young woman of the class from which Jane Austen and most of her original readers came - to remain dependent upon her family as an old maid or to attempt to earn a meager salary as a governess—we might conclude that the novel is, at least in part, a tract urging all to marry.

Women have few work opportunities, for those who are well-off, the situation is far acceptable, where as we could notice, Emma has a charitable role in supporting the needy families in her community. As such, Emma tries to help Miss Bates, a middle aged spinster, and her mother who live a modest life. But the situation is really challenging for those single poor ones.

Through Emma, Austen expresses how a governess job was negatively perceived by English society. Emma, represent the status of women who still occupy marginalized positions in English society. Through her heroines, Austen tries to give readers a real representation of women in Austen's time who struggle to practice their freedom in society. These protagonists face many problems that restrict women in a particular position, either becoming a wife, mother, or an old maid. Austen's novels highlight the major issues that maintain the continuation of women's inferiority, oppression, and dependency. They also explore these issues in depth in order to break the arbitrary norms and traditions that prevent women from attaining their rights. (Abdulhaq, p8)

Hala M. abdulhag has affirmed in her thesis that (Austen illustrates the oppression of women through her criticism of the limited opportunities provided in her society. She argues that a governess is not highly respected; the position does not pay well nor provide good working conditions. Becoming governesses—or teachers—at that time brought a woman's status down and prevented her from charming a husband from the aristocracy (Gao 385). For instance, in Emma, Emma keeps silent when Mrs. Elton, the village vicar's wife, encourages Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates's niece, to apply for a governess job. Emma keeps it to herself that English society does not show any appreciation for governesses). (Abdul hag, p2)

9. Conclusion

The paper has landed on facts about the society norms and rules towards women, that in the 19th. Century society regarded women even if she is well educated and clever, as weak, and incapable to decide her fate, and should always find a well – of husband to support her, this is clearly seen in the marriage of Jane Fairfax and Frank. Although Miss Fairfax received good education and besides being so intelligent, She and Frank had to

keep their relationship secret from Frank's aunt who would never acknowledge this marriage due to Miss Fairfax lower social class. This result is partially consistent with Nancy Sprehe (1987) who examines the novel itself to determine what Emma thinks and says about marriage. But it differs in her intention to unveil what does Emma consider as she evaluates the marriages of others and what she would want in her own marriage? What qualities does she think are desirable in a mate? Next, Sprehe (1987) looks at Austen's presentation of both Emma and Mr. Knightley. Since Emma is the story's heroine and Mr. Knightley is revealed to be her ideal husband, where she uncovers Austen's opinion about the qualities which Austen thought essential to mature adults. Therefore, what qualities does Austen ascribe to them? What does she see as necessary to the "perfect happiness of the union"? The author also discusses Austen's opinion of marriage through a reading of her surviving letters. And she finds her letters to her sister Cassandra reveal that Austen was an astute observer of those around her and she was aware of the interests and concerns of women in their everyday lives. This is in one hand consistent with this research objective in trying to determine how Jane Austen reflect women status in 19th century.

It is also obvious that some marriages are based upon greed and financial position of one of the spouses. This can be seen in Harriet relationship with Elton who rejected her to marry Augusta Hawkins despite being simple minded and talkative lady, just because she is an heiress with ten thousand pounds in her bank account.

The paper also showed that male society in that era classify people according to their ranks and position within the society, where they disagree and discourage marriage between different social classes. Again, this can be noticed when Harriet had to accept Robert Martin second proposal for marriage because he is the most socially suitable for her. He is a farmer and she is parentless from a lower class.

This also can be observed in the relationship between Frank and Jane Fairfax, who dare not show their engagement in front of Frank's aunt, who will reject that relationship and deprive Frank

from her will. In line with this, Emma found her match with Mr. Knightley, because both belong to the upper class.

Finally, even Jane Austen herself has failed to find a suitable husband because she is poor, regardless of her personality, cleverness, and being from an upper middle class – her father is a clergyman, and had six rich brothers, but she could find her match.

All the stated above facts answered the research questions about the status of women in the 19th century. It is also obvious that society treats women on class and gender basis, and not based on merit, education, or cleverness.

According to this we could accept the hypothesis of the research that says:

Women social lives in the 19th century England, revolving around getting married, preferably to a rich man to secure their social position. Although this situation is imposed over women by the males and not their choice.

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