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Abstract

The objective of the present paper is to focus on the conversation of women and how far it is relevant to Austen’s fiction particularly with reference to *Emma*. Conversation as such has a broad connotation and it covers chit-chat, gossip and tea table conversation. In eighteenth century England conversation was the order of the day and Jane Austen as such was influenced by Conduct literature. It is through conversation that Jane Austen focuses on the clear cut division of her women characters. One is the most talkative, well equated with her counterpart the silent one, other is the shrewdest, and the last but not the least the intellectual one too falls under the same umbrella. It is pertinent to mention that social scenario of eighteenth century England too played a crucial role in the art of conversation. Particularly it had lot to do with women because they were deprived of political issues and other outdoor pursuits prevalent in eighteenth century England.

**Key words:** Conversation, Women, Conduct literature, Eighteenth Century, England.

Jane Austen has always been a mystery because there is still lot to be explored in her works. There are certain authentic facts which speak about Austen’s connection with the social and political scenario of her times. For instance her novels, *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice* were published between 1760 and 1820 when George III ruled over England. While taking Georgian era into consideration it is important to analyze the medium of social interaction. Georgian era was notable for its fashions, sea resorts, country houses, and people were liberal enough to enjoy as much as they could.

It is pertinent to mention that the medium of social interaction among people was only conversation. Conversation was an order of the day because of the emergence of leisured class. Telling news, talking about politics was exclusively meant for men. While women involved themselves mostly in family and personal issues. Keeping conversation of men and women into consideration there is a popular saying with reference to the social scenario which says: “One goes to the tavern for news and other goes to laundry for gossip” (Locklin 113). Even during eighteenth century various opinions about the conduct of conversation emerged. “In his ‘Essay on Conversation’ Fielding wrote that; ‘A well-bred man... will not take more of the discourse than falls to his share’ (Fielding 150) the anonymous author of *The Accomplished Youth* exhorted his pupil to ‘talk often, but never long’ (Anon 174); Lord Chesterfield felt it almost unnecessary, to point out what every child knows that ‘It is a great piece of ill-manners to interrupt any one when speaking, by speaking yourself or calling off the attention of the company to any foreign matter’. (Trusler 34)” (Morini 82). To go further it is important to analyze what conversation literally means, “Conversation is defined in the...
conceive *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* as the informal exchange of ideas, information etc. by spoken words. Even Samuel Johnson’s definition of the word converse in his *Dictionary of English Language* of 1775 is remarkably similar: ‘To convey the thoughts reciprocally in talk’” (Stovel 25). This yardstick is applicable to every human creature.

Jane Austen through her fiction speaks about all those norms which are essential for conversation. Her characters appear under different categories like boors, fools and critics and accordingly their conversation presents a variation. It is through conversation that important messages are passed. Conversation has always played an instrumental role, since from the times immemorial, because it leads to the formation of relationships, cooperation and mutual trust. The sixteenth century French Essayist Michael Montaigne recognized the importance of conversation when he wrote: “To my taste, the most fruitful and natural exercise of our mind is conversation, I find the practice of it, the most delightful activity in our lives” (Miller 1). This indicates that conversation is an integral part of human life. Keeping social scenario of eighteenth century England into consideration, conversation was witnessed only in social gathering. Usage of conversation has always been a debatable concept. This fact cannot be denied that men had access to every enterprise of life; women on the other hand had limited access. Taking conversation into consideration different opinions have been put forward. In the words of Leland Warren: “Conversation was especially necessary to young women of leisured class, who were traditionally cut off from the social intercourse.” Even Hannah More presents the same story. She described conversation as the “Sweet Goddess of the social hour.” She “recognizes its utilitarian importance especially for women. It banishes ‘fell ceremony’ and the ‘Base Detraction’ and is the means by which women’s intellectual ore must shine” (Hudson, Arnold 169, 170).

Conversation worked like a tonic for women and kept them updated about what was going on in the neighbourhood. “Even as they lived, worked and socialized among men, women, constituted their own critical communities through gossip and visiting. Women’s sense of who they were intellectually depended upon whom they defined as their female peers and what those friends and neighbours and kin said about them” (Locklin 115). This is quite relevant to what is seen in Austen’s fiction. Austen through her fiction gave voice to her women characters. With Austen woman’s conversation signifies sharing of knowledge and at times it often proves to be productive. Jane Austen herself had been a keen observer about what was going on where. She had her eye on everything. “Her neighbours often served for her amusement but it was her own nonsense that gave zest to the gossip” (Hudson, Arnold 27). Austen’s fiction is notable for its friendship among women. Friendship is seen among sisters, mothers, daughters, aunts and nieces and even in the neighbourhood. For instance *Northanger Abbey* presents bonding between Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe, *Sense and Sensibility* is an excellent example of sisterly relation seen between Elior and Marianne Dashwood. In *Pride and Prejudice* there’s is good Chemistry between Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, sharing secrets with each other. Even Mrs. Bennet too has cordial relations with her neighbor Lady Lucas. Likewise in *Persuasion* female bonding is seen between nurse Rooke and Mrs. Smith. Even Lady Russell too is an intimate friend of Elliot’s.

Austen’s novels can be better described as conversational machines embedded with dialogue and overhearing. To quote from novels like *Sense and Sensibility* where Sir John Dashwood hosts a party and “no poverty of any kind except of conversation
appeared...” (Stovel and Gregg XVIII) and in *Emma* when party is hosted by Coles “…the children came in, and were talked to and admired and the unusual rate of conversation; a few clever things said, a few downright silly, but by much the larger proportion neither the one nor the other-nothing worse than every day remarks, dull repetition, old news, and heavy jokes” (Austen 191). It would be more appropriate to say that conversation is the only weapon through which characters have access to each other, and venue of conversation mostly remains indoor, like ballroom, drawing room, and dinning-table. Conversation is seen executed even when characters go for a drive and long walk so as to visit their near and dear ones. Variety of topics are discussed, “…ranging from the intellectual and social qualities of individual to such general themes as sense, sensibility, morality, professions, female accomplishments improvement’s poems and novels” (Morini 82). The hallmark of Austen’s fiction is “… 3 or 4 families in a country village” (Lefaye 151). *Emma* as such offers an outstanding example in terms of conversation. To go further it is important to analyze what *Emma* is all about. In brief *Emma* presents misunderstanding on the part of heroine. She has a mistaken notion about relationships, but ends up in losing the battle of dominance the very moment she enters in wedlock with a man who has been her mentor throughout the novel. Apart from all this what is seen in *Emma* there is only conversation and nothing else. Keeping Robert Martin aside every character has a voice and they do make assessments about each other on the basis of conversation. For instance Frank Churchill declares about Jane Fairfax that “One cannot love a reserved person” (Austen 177). “Conversation is the other commodity that Mr. Knightley in his Grand Turk mood requires from young women” (Beer 65). Women like Emma Woodhouse, Harriet Smith, Mrs. Weston and Miss Bates speak too much; particularly Mrs. Elton symbolizes verbal aggression. It is through her conversation that she tries to speak about her dominance. Conversation for all these women is almost similar to a competition and the purpose is to supersede each other. With conversation there is always bonding which goes side by side. For instance Isabella and Emma Woodhouse are sisters. Jane Fairfax is the niece of Miss Bates, Harriet Smith is the protégée of Emma Woodhouse putting up at a local boarding school adjacent to Hartfield. Several outsiders like Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill and Mrs. Elton (Augusta Hawkins) make their way to the narrow world of Highbury. It is only through conversation that people in Highbury are given latest update about what was going on where. It is usual with Jane Austen that facts about characters are revealed only through conversation. It is only in social gathering that multiple voices are heard, and conversation becomes the focus. *Emma* as such provides an excellent example where characters keep on visiting on each other and with the result learn everything. Taking Miss Bates into consideration the narrator describes her as a “… a great talker upon little matters, which exactly suited Mr. Woodhouse, full of trivial communications and harmless gossip” (Austen 16). Her persona presents a contrast to her mother and niece who remain silent. Miss Bates is mostly interested in the trivial details of life and this exactly matches with what Jane Austen communicated through her letters. Being an old maid in Highbury she is content with whatsoever has been bestowed and as such finds pleasure only in the company of near and dear ones. Emma Woodhouse cannot be blamed when she complains about her excessive talking but her conversation is useful so far as the plot of the novel is concerned, thereby giving some essential clues about Jane Fairfax and several others characters. “Her talk is also a constant validation of others, concern for others, and applause for other’s concern. Miss Bates’s talk weaves a web of interdependence of reciprocity, the exchange of trivial pleasures of gossip.”In
brief she is the happy go-lucky person except at the Box Hill where her personality undergoes a complete transformation. Even in the cinematic adaptation of *Emma* the conversation of this old maid, indeed acts as a source of information. The question which needs to be addressed is connected with her entry; she is introduced not in the beginning, but in the middle of the novel. Why? Reasons are several because on the whole the novel revolves around the growth and learning of Emma Woodhouse and all the minor characters act as a foil to her schemes. “Ronald Blythe’s introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel links her late entrance with the lapse of the seasons: winter comes first in *Emma*; Miss Bates’ ‘starling chatter’ heralds; the spring (23). There is naturalistic observation in this: Mrs. And Miss Bates’s social lives would be sharply curtailed in winter which also restricts general social life in Highbury and gives Emma an excuse for not visiting them. But there is more to this than naturalism for Miss Bates has another reason of silence for she stops talking well before the novel closes…” (Grundy 50-51). It seems as if her creator had prepared her to be there in the nick of time, and when complications are resolved she disappears. On the whole her conversation proves to be productive.

In Mrs. Elton (Augusta Hawkins) there is exactly an opposite of Miss Bates in terms of conversation. Conversation for her signifies social dominance the way, she handles Jane Fairfax in the novel reflects her domineering attitude. She intervenes in her affairs and presents herself to be patron, ready to offer financial help. Even when Jane Fairfax voluntarily decides to pick up her letters from post office, Mrs. Elton intervenes “Oh! She shall not do such a thing.... We will not allow her to do such a thing again…” (Austen 259). The word “we” itself conveys domineering attitude. The way she compares Hartfield with Maplegrove cannot be ignored, and her purpose is simply to let down Emma Woodhouse. Her conversation with Emma Woodhouse is an authentic evidence of what kind of person she basically is. Of and on she mostly speaks about her acquaintances, Suckling’s who never appear personally in Highbury. Only George Knightley knows how to adjust with her, rest of the characters fall in front of her like a pack of cards. The conversation of Mrs. Elton revolves around snobbery and vulgarity. She appears very late in the novel, and her role is to fulfill the gaps, without contributing too much to the action of the plot. Unlike Emma Woodhouse who learns through self-knowledge, Mrs. Elton never grows. In brief “Miss Bates and Mrs. Elton are marginal characters though they both have their conversational and narrative roles to play. While the obvious protagonist of the novel is eponymous heroine” (Morini 121). Rest of the women including Mrs. Perry, Mrs. Cole and Mrs. Goddard too has their little roles to perform. Particularly “…Mrs. And Miss Bates and Mrs. Goddard, three ladies are almost always at the service of an invitation from Hartfield…” (Austen 15). Even Mrs. Weston (Miss Taylor) functions like a rock of Gibraltar in the novel and at times gives interesting clues. She has good chemistry with Emma Woodhouse but sometimes her clues lead to misunderstanding. She can be described as an inaugurator of *Emma’s* match making schemes.

Austen by introducing so many women characters in *Emma* deserves appreciation because on the whole it adds variety to the game, of conversation. Moreover it is through conversation that personality trait of several characters is consequently revealed. Through conversation Jane Austen conveys a universal message that human beings are communicators and it is conversation which keeps the flux of life on the move.
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