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"Small is Beautiful": Relocating Highbury as a locale in Jane Austen's Emma

Dr. Nitai Saha
Assistant Professor of English
Munshi Premchand Mahavidyalaya
Darjeeling
West Bengal
India

Abstract:

In her portrayal of Highbury social life, Jane Austen condemns all social forms of aggression, and harps on social harmony." Moreover, by placing Emma's fine and interesting mind at the centre of the novel, the novelist makes us experience the life of Highbury through the heroine's consciousness. There is a whole larger world outside of it of which she says nothing, but that does not invalidate the world she had made. The world of *Emma* may be painted on a very small canvas, perhaps even on two inches of ivory, but the frame that sustains that canvas is very large and beautiful.

The social and spatial are so thoroughly imbued with each other's progression that their analytical separation quickly becomes a misleading exercise. Indeed, a sustained investigation of the 'out of place' metaphor points to the fact that social power and social resistance are always already spatial. When an expression such as 'out of place' is used, it is impossible to clearly demarcate whether social or geographical place is denoted—place means both.

---- Cresswell

Landscape is anchored in human life, not something to look at but to live in, and to live in socially. Landscape is a unity of people and environment which opposes in its reality the false dichotomy of man and nature.

---- Cosgrove





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"Jane Austen was", observes A.C. Bradley, "intensely fond of the country, but we find scarcely a trace of the distinctively new modes of feelings towards nature" (362). There is in English fiction no better delineation of the life of the smaller English countryside than we have in her novels. The spinster daughter of a country parson, Jane Austen restricted herself to the area of experience with which she was familiar. A village like Highbury or a country house like Mansfield Park forms the very hub of her novels because, to quote Bradley once again, "she is perfectly innocent of the idea that civilization is the fall of man from some paradisal state of nature" (362). Against the background so familiar to her, Jane Austen sets the creatures of her imagination, making them behave according to the accepted standards of her class and society. Though she ignored the historical events of her time, the reality of the world she has portrayed is by no means lessened by it.

A group of critics spoke much of Jane Austen's design to merge aesthetic and moral values into a Highbury universe that shows us how to live well within a culture through the affirmation of right conduct within existing norms. In Highbury, Austen creates a small, but a whole and a beautiful world. Repeatedly, the reader gets the sense of an active community, with its members watching one another and exchanging opinions with each other. Jane Austen's famous literary advice to her niece Anna--"3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (9 September 1814)--has been widely accepted as a key to her own praxis, and *Emma* is the novel most frequently cited as the exemplar of Austen's focus on isolated and insulated country communities. From Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century to Nancy Mitford in the early twentieth, readers have commented on Austen's rigorous economy of scale. Scott likens her work to "the Flemish school of painting" (67), and Mitford focuses on the pleasures of its rural insularity: "nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen's delicious novels" (3).

Much twentieth-century scholarship, while providing wide-ranging reconsiderations of Austen's achievement, retains, on the whole, this theme of *Emma*'s geographic miniaturism. Marvin Mudrick's provocative re-reading of Austen's irony finds in *Emma* a "delicate ordering of a small calm world, the miniature world of the English rural gentry at the start of the nineteenth century"; Malcohn Bradbury labels Highbury "a more or less self-contained social unit"; and Adena Rosmarin calls *Emma* "the most spatially and socially circumscribed of Austen's novels" (Lodge 98, 158-59, 214). Recent critics have turned their attention to the ideological uses of such social and spatial limits: Deidre Lynch points out how both Austen's and Mitford's texts can be deployed as "vehicles of securing the continuity





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of everyday Englishness across cultural divides" (1106); John Wiltshire, who describes Highbury as "provincial and confined," reads in its insularity an analysis of class and gender issues as well as "the fantasy of the pastoral paradise" (67); and William Galperin uncovers the novel's ideologically nostalgic effect, one that enables readers to imagine "either an oasis, delightfully removed from the bustle of metropolitan life, or a sharply demarcated social space in which a normative, increasingly partial idea of Englishness is postulated on behalf of specific class and ideological interests" (180).

The narrator in *Emma* characterizes Highbury by describing the activities, pleasures, and drawbacks from her own perspective and through the eyes of the characters.

- Of the ball at which "Everybody seemed happy," the narrator comments, "Of very important, very recordable events, it was not more productive than such meetings usually are" (p. 284).
- For Emma and Mrs. Weston, talking about "all those little matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends was one of the first gratifications of each" (118).
- Mr. John Knightley anticipated that the evening at the Westons would be "five dull hours in another man's house, with nothing to say or to hear that was not said and heard yesterday and may not be heard and heard again to-morrow" (p. 115).

Austen's comments and her portrayal of Highbury pleasures are meant to recreate the actuality of the lives most people lead.

Highbury's isolation and limitedness is contrasted soon with a comment "Our lot is cast in a goodly heritage." Highbury is depicted as a cheerful community. For, despite Emma's weariness, her wish not quite to define her identity in terms of the place-Highbury is not seen from the position of an amused or superior outside observer. Though the readers see from one point of view, the novel generates, says Marilyn Butler, "a sense of busy interplay between characters and social classes, a network of visiting gossip, charitable acts, and neighborly concern" (394). The depiction of Highbury ball-scene reinforces the sense of a social commonwealth. In the words of John Wiltshire "One of the achievements of the novel is to populate the Highbury world and give it apparent depth" (427).

In *Emma* none of the characters are even shown to be having any intellectual or political decision. All the conversations between various characters, even between Mr. Knightly and Emma focus merely on the happenings of their village Highbury and its people. They talk of nothing except the nature and behaviour of various characters, when they are to arrive in Highbury or about marriage and the suitability of partners. In this sense even within





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the three or four families that she chooses, Jane Austen limits herself, only to issues such as courtship and marriage, which concern ladies in the parlour such as Emma.

A crucial social issue that Jane Austen takes up in *Emma* is the position of women in the society. Even educated women like Jane or Emma are restricted to the feminine accomplishments of their time--a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages. Jane Fairfax in spite of her all accomplishments and elegance of mind has only one option open to her other than marriage and that is of becoming a governess Given the social structure where women lacked education and economic independence-their preoccupation with marriage and husband-hunting is natural and this is what forms the basis of Jane Austen novels including *Emma*.

Jane Austen's vision is limited by her unquestioning acceptance of a class society. The social snobbery in *Emma* can be seen as a manifestation of the typical attitude of the general class of her time. Marriage is governed strictly by parameters of class. Emma considers Robert Martin as a yeoman who is socially Harriet's inferior and snobbishly gets Harriet to turn down Robert Martin's proposal. She plans to have Harriet and Elton married. Knightly who is otherwise the model character also displays his social snobbery when he feels that Harriet should consider herself lucky to be married to Robert Martin and should not aspire for persons socially above her. However, while Jane Austen does condemn snobbery, which leads to lack of consideration on unkindness, she does not condemn the institution of class itself. She is no reformer and sees marriages within the class structure as being the ideal solution as is indicated through Emma's approval of the Robert Martin-Harriet Smith marriage in the end.

Certainly, *Emma* provides ample justification for this continuing emphasis on its narrow boundaries. While it narrates episodes referring to places as distant as Ireland, all of the novel's action occurs within Highbury and its environs. The reader is taken on no jaunts to Bath or Derbyshire or Portsmouth, and Emma, unlike all other Austen heroines, never leaves home. In fact, Highbury, for all its seeming insularity, mirrors and participates integrally in the demographic, geographic and cultural forces that were changing the face of England. In *Emma*, London, a mere sixteen miles away, is an urgently encroaching presence, a mega-metropolis that diminishes Highbury's autonomous existence and has already penetrated into its communal and domestic spaces. Read in relation to earlier fiction and in the context of social history, *Emma*'s small scale registers some very weighty changes. The novel records a shift in Highbury's status, as London increasingly co-opts its economic and





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social life, slowly but inexorably colonizing this corner of Surrey; turning the once flourishing rural enclave into a suburban satellite. However, the novel shows Highbury and London participating in a mutually enriching reciprocal social and cultural traffic. In *Emma*, Austen has constructed a society that ensures its own survival in an organically evolving socio-demographic reality by re-casting itself as a thriving hybrid of the urban and rural.

Unlike earlier novels by Austen and her predecessors, *Emma* does not demonize London and its dangerous urban culture. A quick glance at some canonical eighteenth-century novels establishes the pattern. Daniel Defoe's criminal Moll Flanders flourishes in what Peter Ackroyd calls "the disorder and mutability...the speed and acceleration of the London streets" (343-345) and twenty-five years later, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* depicts a London in which urban anonymity enables a libertine to incarcerate his victim. Frances Burney's heroine in *Evelina* (1778) finds herself perpetually in danger because public spaces--Vauxhall, Ranelagh--are teeming with undesirable and unregulated populations. Even William Godwin's protagonist in Caleb Williams (1794) goes to ground in the capital, "London being a place in which, on account of the magnitude of its dimensions, it might well be supposed that an individual could remain hidden and unknown" (262).

Caleb's characterization of the metropole is echoed in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mr. Bennet knows Lydia and Wickham must be in London because "where else can they be so well concealed?" (P 299). London's size and compartmentalization enable another kind of social sin, when Miss Bingley and Darcy conceal from Bingley Jane's presence in town. In *Mansfield Park*, of course, London not only houses and nurtures the immoral Crawfords but unleashes Maria Bertram's worst impulses. In *Sense and Sensibility* London is the site of Willoughby's betrayal of Marianne, and it offers to the immoral Lady Susan "the fairest field of action" (MW 294). These early novels, then, seem to enact Catherine Morland's breathless announcement "'that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London'" (NA 112). Austen's own correspondence playfully references this sense of the menacing metropolis: "Here I am once more," she writes to Cassandra on 23 August 1796, "in this Scene of Dissipation & Vice and I begin already to find my Morals corrupted".

In *Emma*, on the other hand, London is neither a den of iniquity nor even a carefully distinguished metropolitan "other" against which country pleasures and ethics can be measured. It is, rather, a constant stage-sharing presence, woven into the fabric of the narrative just as it is into the lives of Highbury's inhabitants. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan





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Gubar have argued that Emma, the character "is clearly an avatar of Austen the artist" (Lodge 207). If Austen has created a heroine whose imaginative powers resemble those of the author, she has also reproduced the mobile environment in which that author lived.

Highbury, only sixteen miles from London, cannot be thought of as any distance at all. Mr. Weston, characteristically, thinks London far only when the Churchills settle even closer to Highbury, having earlier gloried in the proximity to London that would allow Frank to visit 'at any hour' (309). Weston himself makes nothing of the distance, joining a party at Hartfield immediately after returning from a day's business in London. Only John Knightley comments (internally and sardonically) on this casual attitude to the journey, and only because "[a] man who had been in motion since eight o'clock in the morning, and might now have been still, who had been long talking, and might have been silent, who had been in more than one crowd, and might have been alone!" (303) would choose a social engagement rather than a quiet evening at home. Others, too, travel back and forth as a matter of course. Mr. Elton assures Emma that "'he could ride to London at any time" (49) to have her picture framed. Frank, famously, undertakes a day's journey to London to acquire a piano for Jane Fairfax. We first meet Mr. George Knightley himself when he replicates Mr. Weston's walk to Hartfield after having "returned to a late dinner" (9), and later in the novel he races back from Brunswick Square to console Emma in her supposed grief over Frank's engagement to Jane. Indeed, the only character who thinks of London as dauntingly remote is Mr. Woodhouse, and he, of course, finds the half-mile to Randalls "'such a distance" (8).

The London to which all these Highbury residents travel was, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, not only home to almost a million residents, but also the financial, commercial, and cultural center of England: the capital "already seemed disproportionately large both in numbers and influence.... There were many complaints that London for long had sucked the vitals of trade to herself and attempted to set the tone of the whole of English society ..." (Briggs 41). London's size and sprawl had grown rapidly through the eighteenth century. (In 1771, Tobias Smollett, in the voice of the protagonist of Humphry Clinker describes the capital's insatiable appetite for more bodies:

"The capital is become an overgrown monster; which, like a dropsical head, will in time leave the body and extremities without nourishment and support.... What wonder that our villages are depopulated, and our farms in want of day-labourers? ... The tide of luxury has swept all the inhabitants from the open country." (118)





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Matthew Bramble particularly deplores the migration of farm workers to the city, and certainly the majority of new Londoners were of the laboring class, but, as he points out, even gentry and aristocrats flocked to the capital--"The poorest squire, as well as the richest peer, must have his house in town ..." (118).

While Smollett's text inveighs against those who migrate because of greed or ambition, Austen represents this demographic shift as an organic outcome of social change; indeed, when Alistair M. Duckworth says that Emma presides "[a]t the center of a world apparently unendangered by any possibility of discontinuity" (148), we must emphasize the word "apparently" and note that Austen makes very clear that she is representing a society on the move. She tells us, early in the novel, that Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley have settled in London; as a younger son, John Knightley must practice a profession, and London is the natural home for a rising attorney (7). Moreover, since Emma after her engagement to Mr. Knightley is "never struck with any sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded" (449), we can assume that the younger Knightley branch will perforce become Londoners. The Westons, too, have migrated to London, and although Mr. Weston never quite abandons his native town, it can be assumed that the "brothers already established in a good way in London"(16) The influx of population to London has necessitated a geographical spread so extensive that its separate urban districts manifest not only class divisions but even distinctly different ecologies. Isabella counters her father's conviction that London cannot be a healthy place to live with eager defense of her environment: own "We are not at all in a bad air. Our part of London is so very superior to most others!--You must not confound us with London in general, my dear sir. The neighbourhood of Brunswick Square is very different from almost all the rest."(103)

Isabella here is not merely deflecting Mr. Woodhouse's anxiety but articulating a material reality: for at the same time as it was drawing populations from the countryside, London was expanding into the rural districts on its outskirts. As early as 1726, Daniel Defoe described an urban sprawl that erased the boundaries between city and country: "We see several villages, formerly standing, as it were, in the country, and at a great distance, now joined to the streets by continued buildings, and more making haste to meet in the like manner" (287-88). At midcentury, Horace Walpole's correspondence chronicles this inexorable expansion: in 1774 he writes to Horace Mann, "London increases every day; I believe there will soon be no other town left in England"; two years later he tells Mann that "London could put Florence into its





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fob pocket.... Rows of houses shoot out every way like a polypus...." (569, 228).Surrey, the country in which Austen sets Highbury, was certainly being swallowed by the metropole.

Highbury seems well on its way to becoming a part of this megalopolis that has commandeered populations, acres and economies previously attached to rural areas. It has, as we have seen, lost members of gentry families to London. The draining away of gentry has a material correlative in the Crown Inn's large public space, which "had been built many years ago for a ballroom, and while the neighbourhood had been in a particularly populous, dancing state, had been occasionally used as such; -- but such brilliant days had long passed away." Indeed, when Frank presses Emma to revive the tradition of balls, she points to "[t]he want of proper families in the place" (197-98). The Crown also fails to serve as the kind communal center described in William Howitt's 1838 memoir of English country life: "There is nothing more characteristic in rural life than a village alehouse, or inn. It is the centre of information, and the regular, or occasional rendezvous of almost everybody in the neighbourhood" (480). Although Mr. Weston speaks of his "business at the Crown about his hay" (193), and although it functions as a place to meet on parish business (456-57), it has dwindled into a space "to accommodate a whist club established among the gentlemen and half-gentlemen of the place" (197). Too close to London to thrive as a posting stage, it has become emblematic of a one-horse (or perhaps a two-horse) town, "where a couple of pair of post-horses were kept, more for the convenience of the neighbourhood than from any run on the road" (197). Highbury's economic life, too, seems dominated by London's huge industrial and commercial reach.

The interpenetration of London and Highbury, then, creates a kind of cultural seamlessness absent in the earlier novels of Austen or her eighteenth-century predecessors. This kind of homogeneity of values stems in part of course from the demographics: the fact that at least a sixth of England's population knew London "must have acted as a powerful solvent of the customs, prejudices and modes of action of traditional, rural England" (Wrigley 50). O. H. K. Spate recasts this benign blending in a more imperial light, arguing that despite the rise of industrial centers in the north, London "continued to exert its magnetism.... The momentum of London, the attractive and reproductive power of that vast aggregate of human needs and wills, carried it on to a new domination" (547). Even Howitt's celebration of English country life concedes that urban habits seep into rural life through the upper classes' regular pilgrimages to London: "One of the chief features of the life of the nobility and gentry of England is their annual visit to the Metropolis; and it is one which has a most essential





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influence on rural life itself" (594). Highbury's proximity to and interconnection with London creates a climate of urban values in which even the egregious act of riding thirty-two miles for a proper haircut is merely fatuous.

So how does Highbury survive as a town when its population, its economy, and its autonomy feel the pressure of the giant city at its back? As a provincial market town belonging in the category that "looked towards the past" (Briggs 38), it should, one might expect, entirely cease to exist as an autonomous entity, especially given its proximity to London. In fact, this very nearness provides Highbury with an identity and a future, for Highbury takes up the burden of housing a population connected to both country and city; both gentry and the rising middle class take up either permanent or weekend residence in locations within easy reach of London. As Prince points out, "On the great roads out of London government officials and citizens of London built themselves comfortable brick boxes.... New brickwork and stucco was to be seen far beyond a half day's journey from the City" (98). (3)

Highbury, it would seem, is particularly successful at integrating urban and rural cultures, constituting itself as a highly desirable example of this new hybridthe suburb. When Galperin claims that "the world of the novel ... is irretrievably moribund," he elides, I think, some of the dynamism represented in the text. While Highbury may be dominated by Donwell Abbey, it makes room for many who are not landed gentry, including the Woodhouses themselves, who are "first in consequence there" (7), with so much money "from other sources" than land "as to make them scarcely secondary to Donwell Abbey itself" (136). Indeed, Hartfield "may have been built originally as a weekend retreat from a London business" (Delaney 539). Highbury, moreover, offers to London residents something more significant than an opportunity to join the ranks of country gentry and thereby forget, as do the Bingley sisters, "that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade" (PP 15). On the contrary, this enclave of Surrey welcomes those who want to work in the great capital and live in the "countryside," a desire and social development that is recognizably modern. Mr. Weston spends twenty years commuting between his "useful occupation" in London and his house in Highbury, and still has business in town. Highbury embraces the new ethos that combines gentility and work, not by mutating into an industrial center like northern towns, but by providing a reposeful home for those whose professional lives require proximity to the financial and cultural giant that is London. Far from fearing or resenting the





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powerful presence or pressure of London, Highbury quietly adapts to its new role, sacrificing its old autonomy but claiming a vital identity in the new geography of England.

Raymond Williams observes that in Jane Austen's novels, "much of the interest, and many of the sources of the action... lie in the changes of fortune--the facts of general change and of a certain mobility--which were affecting the landed families at this time" (113). In *Emma*, Austen meticulously reproduces some of the sweeping demographic and social changes visited on country towns near an ever-growing London. She does so not with despair or even dismay, but with an even-tempered fidelity to historical realities. Moreover, in her representation of Highbury's survival, she argues that country society need not collapse or atrophy, as apprehended by Smollett, Walpole, and others, and that the environs of London can flourish by entering into a profitable partnership with the metropole. Austen's portrayal of life in Highbury has often been criticized as narrow and trivial, and the subject and presentation have been judged too limited for *Emma* to be a great novel. But Austen perceives the limitation or constraint of her world in the novel as a condition of life.

In the final analysis, as Ian Watt points out, in her portrayal of Highbury social life, "Jane Austen condemns all social forms of aggression, and harps on social harmony." (415) Moreover, by placing Emma's fine and interesting mind at the centre of the novel, the novelist makes us experience the life of Highbury through the heroine's consciousness. There is a whole larger world outside of it of which she says nothing, but that does not invalidate the world she had made. The world of *Emma* may be painted on a very small canvas, perhaps even on two inches of ivory, but the frame that sustains that canvas is very large and beautiful.







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