

Even 250 years later, book buffs across the country continue to read the British author with pleasure and curiosity, drawn to her unerring eye for human follies, writes **Indira Chandrasekhar**

# Austen's Indian afterlives



Regency era costume parties are a regular occurrence in the City of Bath in the United Kingdom, which was Austen's former home and a setting for many of her novels.

**T**he thing that strikes one about this collection of essays celebrating 250 years of Jane Austen by committed Indian readers is that each contributor — be they writer, academic, journalist, student — clearly has a particular and personal relationship with Austen's writing. They reflect upon her tremendous control of craft; comment on her language, her sharp yet gentle wit; their reading and their literary range have been affected by her; they have been touched, delighted and intrigued by her stories.



A vintage portrait of Jane Austen.

Editor of the collection, Meenakshi Shivram, makes a similar point in her introductory essay, when she speaks of the 'breathless yet tranquil anticipation' with which one reads Austen's work.

The volume contains a range of essays and viewpoints that draw from the particular perspectives of the writers' fields and positions. If space permitted, it would be a pleasure to spend time on what is such a

span of responses to Jane Austen: investigations of specifics in individual novels, essays that place her in the contemporary context of cinema and retelling and eco-consciousness and standards of global evaluation, unpeel the meaning of marriage in current India, examine the tools she used for framing the world including her skill at dealing with ambivalences. Essays on poetry, on the personalities of her heroines who strive to be individual in a conformist world, and speculation on the logic with which she constructed her characters, leading as she did a relatively cloistered life, fill out the book.

The second part of the book features responses by writers to a set of questions. I pick out a few from the many that struck me:

What can fiction writers learn from her? Character, character, character... (Nandini Sengupta).

How did you come across[her]? Her perfectly construed sentences [that] are then married to a cast of characters... (Nandita Bose)

What can writers learn from [her]? ... a masterclass on dialogue writing. (Prajwal Parajuly)

What is the big change between novels written then and those being written now? ... her male characters were not accorded the same curiosity and affection that she reserved for her female characters. (Shinie Antony)

What accounts for [her] unabated appeal? ...her grasp of romance, of the quest for love and the need to be loved ... all oiled with the steely pragmatism of economics, of money ... (Usha K R)

Githa Hariharan closes the collection with

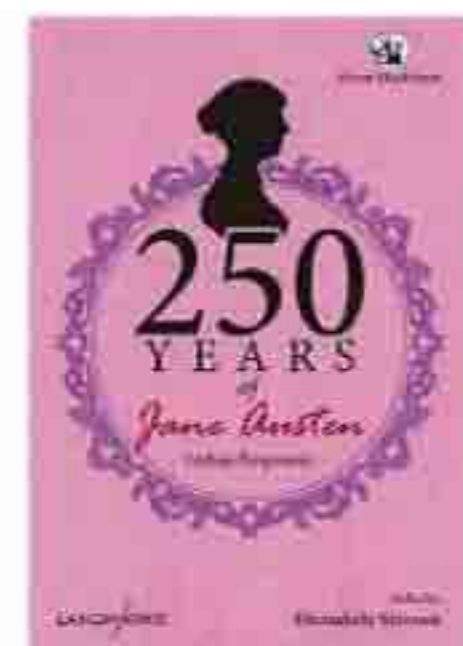
an Afterword that, in addition to talking about the inexplicable appeal of Austen, brings our awareness to the colonial context of slavery, trade and oceanic dominance, which play into the world Austen wrote about, cautioning us to 'read literature in better-informed, contextual ways'.

One asks oneself why this volume? Why does Jane Austen, writing from her very English ambit, continue to hold such interest among Indian readers? Arundhati Subramaniam, in her poem, 'Moment of Ivory (to Jane Austen)' reproduced by Jerry Pinto in the Foreword to the collection, asks, 'Is it the distance between us that renders picturesque / the gowns of apricot taffeta, / the hot corseted moralities, / the ruthless certitudes of genteel parlours?'

Perhaps that and more. But perhaps we must also recognise that even though the Austen-reading population in India is open

to a view that is wide and reaches far, in part because of the worlds her novels opened, we, as people, are never far away from the more circumscribed worlds, the sub-cosmoses in which we are enmeshed, and are hence eternally fascinated by the intrigues, match-making plots, and human relationships that hold and drive them.

The machinations and plots and blossoming of love, so wittily, sharply, lightly and perceptively described in Austen's novels, belong to us too. Continuing to think about them by reading her again, and through collections such as this that examine her work through different focal lenses, allows us not only to delight in the many layers in the world of Jane Austen, but also to think about and unravel the complexities that we confront in our societies and in the world. *The reviewer is Founder and Principal Editor, Out of Print magazine.*



**250 YEARS OF JANE AUSTEN**  
Meenakshi Shivram (Ed)  
Orient BlackSwan, pp 284, Rs 1,359