

Still Austen...

Why Jane Austen's novels continue to comfort and connect readers across cultures even after over two centuries

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“It is a truth universally acknowledged...” For bibliophiles, just a few words are enough to transport them to the world of *Pride and Prejudice* — to ballrooms, banter, and the quiet tensions of 19th-century society. More than 251 years after her birth, Jane Austen continues to rule readers' hearts. Her world of drawing rooms, dances, and delicate social codes may seem distant, yet her insights into human behaviour — love, ambition, insecurity, pride — remain uncannily familiar. Today, Austen is not merely remembered; she is actively read, debated, adapted, and reimagined across continents, including in India.

Austen and Indian readers

Despite being rooted in Regency England, Austen's work appeal to readers from far of lands. As Meenakshi Shivram, professor and editor of *250 Years of Jane Austen: Indian Responses* (published by Orient BlackSwan), explains, “I don't think we (Indians) interpret her works differently. We appreciate her works for what they are. And great works appeal to all. She's not just an English writer. She's not just a writer of 250 years ago. She lives with us here now. She talks to us about the now — and that's what great writers are all about. They appeal to all kinds of people at all times.”

Adding further, she says, “Labelling someone as an Indian reader, or labelling a writer as a British English writer — these labels don't work anymore, and I think we should break them. It's really like asking, how do Indians interpret *Game of Thrones*? Or how do Indians interpret Dostoevsky? We don't do it differently. We love it the way all other people love these texts. Great texts.”

Her words underline a key truth: Austen's appeal lies in her universality. Indian readers, like readers everywhere, connect with her because she speaks about human condition.

Why Austen still resonates

Shivram further elaborates on why Austen's themes continue to endure. “So, there are these two aspects to Austen. A lot of people today respond to her themes because she is talking about the human heart and the human mind, which I don't think has changed in a long time. On the surface, it looks like the search for a suitable partner, a universal quest across time and place. But she also explores little jealousies, internal conflicts, doubts, and insecurities...I think what continues to circulate 250 years later is also her style — how she crafted her characters, their minds, behaviours, and situations. So it's not just the theme, but many aspects of Jane



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—Vesmir

Austen that resonate with readers across the world.”

This layered storytelling is why Austen continues to feel relevant in India today, where questions of marriage, social standing, and personal desire are deeply rooted in our social fabric.

Feminist voice

For many, Austen's work is also an early voice of feminism. Devanshi Kumari, PhD, Film Studies, notes, “For a woman who challenged the patriarchal norms in the 19th century, Jane Austen is indeed an early feminist voice. Through her work, Austen navigated the life of women in the 19th century, which was largely centred around finding a good husband. The leading female characters of Austen's novels challenged society pressures, putting their agency and happiness to the forefront, making Austen's one the most prolific feminists of all time.”

Her heroines, particularly Elizabeth Bennet, embody this spirit. “She chal-

lenged the societal norms by declining marriage offers from Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy. In a time where securing a husband with good fortune was all a woman had to worry about, this was a bold plot line. And that is what still makes Elizabeth a relatable heroine in modern times. And that relatability is why readers keep going back to Austen's work,” Devanshi explains.

At the same time, Shivram offers a nuanced perspective. “She was as much a feminist as any woman is. In her time, women were not allowed to write, yet she did. Her novels reflect not just women's rights, but the rights of all human beings for equality. She questions the vulnerability of women who do not inherit property, and even if she is not overtly critical, that does not make her any less feminist. Jane Austen will continue to be seen as one because she spoke about dignity for all.”

Why readers keep returning

Austen's novels are also enduring comfort reads. As Vesmir, writer, poet, TEDx speaker, and founder of Tangerine book and poetry circle, observes, “I think readers return to Austen because her novels offer emotional clarity. Her stories unfold through ordinary social moments where misunderstandings eventually resolve and character matters more than status. At the same time, she observes human behaviour with remarkable sharpness. Pride, vanity, insecurity, and kindness appear in subtle ways. I feel that readers recognise parts of themselves in these characters, which is why her books

often feel both insightful and comforting.”

Expanding on the same sentiments, Devanshi Kumari highlights how Austen's writing reveals new layers with every reading. “Each time you read Austen's work, you unravel a new layer to the plot and the characters. Nuanced and critical of the older societies, Austen's work still holds true in modern times, where no matter what a woman achieves, if she cannot secure a husband, all her achievements are in vain.”

Place in world literature

On Austen's place in world literature, Shivram offers an insightful view. “And really, who cares as long as there are people who will read her stories and enjoy them—not because they are feel-good stories, but because they connect with you intrinsically at some level. She explores hurt so beautifully, regret so beautifully, and captures what it means to live in a small community where second chances are rare, where you are labelled and judged so easily. And in such a society, she creates these amazing characters who have lived on with us.”

Modern world

If Jane Austen were writing today, she would find ample material in the complexities and contradictions of modern life, especially the pressures and inequalities that women still face. “She would brutally attack the limitations that society still puts on women. From unreal beauty standards to high expectations, she would definitely challenge the hypocrisy that women still face in the modern world. To name a few issues, Austen would aggressively talk about persistent inequality of the sexes, gender pay gap and under-representation in leadership opportunities,” Devanshi avers.

Apart from gender, Vesmir says Austen would have a lot to say about society at large. “She had a sharp eye for social performance, so I imagine she would be fascinated by social media and the culture of curated identities. I also feel she would enjoy satirising modern dating culture. Dating apps, situationships, and ghosting are not so different from the misunderstandings and reputational games that once played out in Regency ballrooms.”

Lessons for today

Even centuries later, Jane Austen continues to offer insights that feel relevant, particularly when it comes to self-awareness and personal growth. “One thing that people can learn from Austen is reflecting on oneself and navigating their personal growth. Austen's characters and plots were multilayered and complex, teaching us how to balance our emotions. And if there is one last thing that we can learn from Jane Austen, it is that the first impression can be misleading; take Mr. Collins, for example,” Devanshi reflects.

Echoing similar sentiment, Vesmir suggests, “One of Austen's most powerful lessons is the importance of self-knowledge. Many of her characters begin with strong opinions but must confront their own biases before they grow. Her novels also highlight simple but important virtues such as good judgment, kindness, and emotional restraint. To me, Austen reminds us that true character reveals itself slowly through actions, choices, and empathy.”

Enduring legacy

At 251, Jane Austen endures not because she belongs to the past, but because she continues to illuminate the present. Her novels are not relics of another era; they are living texts—ones that continue to speak, question, and resonate across cultures, generations, and time itself.