# Ali Naushahi finds parallels between her Bradford upbringing and Jane Austen’s legacy



Growing up as the daughter of an imam in Bradford, Ali Naushahi’s early life was shaped by the pillars of a conservative British-Pakistani community. Residing in a spacious Victorian terrace owned by the local mosque, she experienced the abrupt shift of losing that cherished home following her father's replacement. This transition, fraught with dislocation and emotional upheaval, echoes the tumultuous shifts experienced in Jane Austen’s own life. Decades later, Naushahi finds herself directing the BBC series *Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius*, where she is reminded of her formative experiences and the parallels between her journey and that of the 18th-century novelist.

Naushahi’s reflections reveal the intricate web of shared realities that span the centuries. Both women grappled with economic instability and familial dynamics shaped by the flux of their circumstances. Austen’s family, too, faced upheaval after her father left his post as a clergyman, forcing them into progressively precarious living situations. This historical link sheds light on the fundamental vulnerabilities of families navigating financial adversities, regardless of their cultural backdrops. Austen’s keen observations about the precariousness of women’s lives resonate deeply with Naushahi, who recalls her own upbringing within a framework where socio-economic factors shaped the trajectories of many women around her.

Her teenage encounters with Austen's novels unveiled not just rich narratives but also survival strategies employed by women in a world that constrained their agency. Naushahi drew inspiration from Austen's characters, who navigated societal expectations with resilience, and she saw reflections of her struggles in the world Austen depicted. The stories of women making calculated choices within limited options echo the realities faced by many in her community, where early marriages often curtailed the aspirations of young girls.

Despite the obstacles presented by her conservative upbringing, Naushahi's father championed education for women. This advocacy stood in stark contrast to the prevailing attitudes in her community, where teachers often demonstrated low expectations for young Pakistani girls. Naushahi remembers the sting of condescension directed at her and her peers, a sentiment that ignited her determination to defy stereotypes. Her pursuit of education and a career in the creative industry, an arena where few like her were represented, serves as a testament to the resolve instilled in her by Austen’s work.

As a filmmaker, Naushahi has returned to Austen’s legacy with renewed insight, identifying the subtle critiques and feminist undertones woven throughout the narratives. Such observations are not mere academic analyses but are rooted in a profound understanding of class, gender, and power dynamics that persist in both Austen's time and contemporary society. Reflecting on her process, Naushahi acknowledges how Austen's exploration of domestic lives—and the choices women make within them—can be both radical and profound.

Naushahi's personal journey is steeped in storytelling, a passion ignited in her childhood as she orchestrated impromptu performances for her siblings. This early love for narrative has evolved into a commitment to bring to life the stories of women—both historical and contemporary—who navigate societal constraints with wit and grace. Drawing parallels between her grandmother’s bold decision not to remarry after widowhood and Austen's characters like Eliza, Naushahi exemplifies how women can reclaim their lives despite the confines imposed upon them.

Current adaptations of Austen's work, particularly in contexts like Pakistan, highlight the enduring relevance of her themes. The Jane Austen Society of Pakistan, a burgeoning community of enthusiasts, mirrors this connection by celebrating the author's insights into marriage, societal pressures, and class struggles. Founded by Laaleen Sukhera, this society employs discussions and events to explore Austen's continuing significance in modern Pakistani culture, demonstrating that Austen's observations are not simply relics of the past but resonate with the realities faced by women today.

As Naushahi reflects on Jane Austen’s contributions from the lens of her own experiences, she recognises that these narratives continue to inspire women navigating the complexities of their lives. Reclaiming her own voice through Austen’s work serves as both homage and empowerment, aligning her story with Austen's enduring legacy of female resilience. Marking Austen’s 250th birthday transcends mere celebration; it is an acknowledgment of a shared struggle that links women across generations and geographies—a struggle that Naushahi, with her deep-rooted connections to both her Pakistani heritage and Austen's timeless tales, feels profoundly.

Austen’s quiet yet persistent influence is a reminder that the battles around autonomy, identity, and agency are not only historical but are ongoing. Naushahi’s personal journey underscores how literature can serve as a bridge across cultures, illuminating shared experiences that unite women worldwide.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[3]](https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2017/07/austen-in-south-asia/622360/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[6]](https://www.khaleejtimes.com/wknd/keeping-jane-austen-alive-in-pakistan)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[3]](https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2017/07/austen-in-south-asia/622360/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features/paks-austen-society-fights-prejudice-with-a-lot-of-pride/articleshow/59722177.cms), [[5]](https://dailytimes.com.pk/316935/austens-relevance-in-pakistan/), [[7]](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/jane-austen-s-world-and-life-still-relevant-for-south-asian-women-pakistani-author-interview-118072400241_1.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[3]](https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2017/07/austen-in-south-asia/622360/), [[4]](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features/paks-austen-society-fights-prejudice-with-a-lot-of-pride/articleshow/59722177.cms)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[5]](https://dailytimes.com.pk/316935/austens-relevance-in-pakistan/), [[6]](https://www.khaleejtimes.com/wknd/keeping-jane-austen-alive-in-pakistan)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi), [[7]](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/jane-austen-s-world-and-life-still-relevant-for-south-asian-women-pakistani-author-interview-118072400241_1.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/30/jane-austen-muslim-tv-director-bradford-ali-naushahi> - Ali Naushahi, a British-Pakistani director, reflects on her upbringing in Bradford and how Jane Austen's novels resonated with her experiences. Drawing parallels between Austen's family dynamics and her own, Naushahi highlights themes of economic vulnerability and the limited agency of women. She discusses the survival tactics women employed in Austen's era and how these strategies mirror her own experiences. The article also touches upon the shared experiences of women in conservative communities and the enduring relevance of Austen's work in addressing issues of class, gender, and power.
3. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2017/07/austen-in-south-asia/622360/> - This article explores the influence of Jane Austen's works in South Asia, particularly in India and Pakistan. It features personal accounts from readers who found resonance in Austen's novels, noting similarities between societal expectations in Austen's time and those in South Asian cultures. The piece highlights how themes of marriage, social status, and women's autonomy in Austen's stories parallel the experiences of women in these regions. It also discusses the popularity of Austen's works and their adaptations in South Asian media.
4. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features/paks-austen-society-fights-prejudice-with-a-lot-of-pride/articleshow/59722177.cms> - The article discusses the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan (JASP), a group of Austen enthusiasts who celebrate the author's work through events like costume tea parties and discussions. Founded by Laaleen Sukhera, the society has grown to nearly 1,500 members from 45 countries. Members draw parallels between Austen's themes of marriage, class, and societal expectations and contemporary Pakistani society. The article highlights the society's efforts to challenge prejudice and promote Austen's relevance in modern times.
5. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/316935/austens-relevance-in-pakistan/> - This piece examines the relevance of Jane Austen's themes in contemporary Pakistan, focusing on issues of status, wealth, and class snobbery. It discusses how Austen's social commentary resonates in Pakistan, particularly in the context of marriage and women's financial security. The article also touches upon the anthology 'Austenistan,' which adapts Austen's stories to modern-day Pakistan, highlighting the enduring nature of her work in addressing societal issues.
6. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/wknd/keeping-jane-austen-alive-in-pakistan> - The article profiles the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan (JASP), a group dedicated to celebrating Austen's work through various activities, including meet-ups and discussions. The society, predominantly composed of women professionals, engages in candid conversations about Austen's themes and their relevance in contemporary Pakistani society. The piece highlights the society's role in keeping Austen's legacy alive and fostering a community of like-minded individuals.
7. <https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/jane-austen-s-world-and-life-still-relevant-for-south-asian-women-pakistani-author-interview-118072400241_1.html> - In this interview, Pakistani author Laaleen Sukhera discusses the enduring relevance of Jane Austen's work for South Asian women. She reflects on how Austen's themes of marriage, societal expectations, and women's autonomy resonate with contemporary issues in Pakistan. Sukhera also talks about her anthology 'Austenistan,' which adapts Austen's stories to modern-day Pakistan, and how Austen's life and work continue to provide solace and kinship to women facing personal upheavals.