Ep102: The Thing About Lady Bertram's Shawl w/ Laboni Islam

Zan: [00:00:00] Welcome to The Thing About Austen, a podcast about Jane Austen's world. I'm Zan.

Diane: And I'm Diane. And this episode, we're talking about Lady Bertram's shawl.

We are thrilled to welcome today's guest. Poet and arts educator Laboni Islam. Laboni was born in Canada to Bangladeshi parents and she is a member of the League of Canadian Poets. She is the author of the chapbooks, Light Years from Baseline Press and Trimming the Wick from Ignition Press. She was also one of the creatives selected for the Reimagine Residence program at Jane Austen's house in Chawton, a program that sought to create new artworks inspired by Jane Austen's life, works, and legacy. Laboni's project culminated in a series of poems [00:01:00] inspired by Jane Austen's muslin shawl. An object she describes as a master key to the past. Welcome, Laboni!

Laboni: Thank you, Zan and Diane!

Zan: We are delighted to have you. So, the starting point for this is, obviously, we're in the latter half of Mansfield Park. Henry Crawford, he's pulling out all the stops to Wu Fany, and so this includes They're pushing for William to be promoted to lieutenant and Mrs. Norris, she's like, great. I love this promotion. It means that you're not going to schmooze off of Sir Thomas any longer, but she still is bragging to everyone that she has managed to give him a little something at a parting. You know, she's given him a little monetary gift to get this off the ground. And so we get this response from Lady Bertram.

Very true, sister, as you say. But poor things, they cannot help it. And you know it makes very little difference to Sir [00:02:00] Thomas. Fanny, William must not forget my shawl if he goes to the East Indies, and I shall give him a commission for anything else that is worth having. I wish he may go to the East Indies, that I might have my shawl. I think I'll have two shawls, Fanny.

Just, you know, add to the list while, while she's got you there.

Diane: So Laboni, when Lady Bertram asks for, for a shawl from the East Indies, what do you think she's envisioning and what kind of shawl might she be referring to?

Laboni: Yeah, I think this is actually the most animated Lady Bertram is in the entire novel. And I think, I think that's really interesting. I think it's really interesting to think about material culture.

in the context of historical connections, and that's really what sparked my curiosity. Jane Austen's life and writings coincided with the British East India Company's rule in India, as well as expanding trade in the East [00:03:00] Indies. Shawls were really popular in Britain in the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Many were made in India, then imported by the British East India Company. And some were designed to suit the British taste. So Lady Bertram may be imagining a fine wool cashmere shawl, which could add some warmth, style, colour, and pattern to her wardrobe. What's neat is that these shawls were traditionally and largely worn by Indian men, and then became fashion accessories for European women.

They were gorgeous, handmade. and expensive. And eventually, Britain made more affordable imitations by machine in places like Paisley, Scotland. And the motif that many people, myself included, know as Paisley takes its name from the town, but it's an old Persian or Indian motif that was appropriated and adapted by these European centers of [00:04:00] production.

So that's one possibility. A fine wool cashmere shawl, maybe patterned. Or maybe Lady Bertram is imagining a diaphanous muslin shawl made of fine cotton, which would provide little warmth, but would certainly add some style to her wardrobe. So those are my two thoughts.

Zan: Okay. So I think that the range of options, you know, the fact that there's a couple of different types of shawls that she could be referring to here are really, really interesting.

So your work, Laboni, has, has largely centered on the muslin shawls, right? That's what, that's the shawl that you were talking about. specifically referencing in your work. So can you walk us through a little bit of the process of making a muslin shawl? So what would this, what would have been involved in the creation?

What kind of labor would it require? And maybe the cost or value that we're talking about here?

Laboni: Yeah, absolutely. And so before the shawl comes the cloth, and there were many, many patient people with [00:05:00] specialized skills who participated in the process of making muslin. And the focus of my research and poetry project was Dhaka muslin specifically, so let's travel back in time to the late 18th century and go to the eastern part of Bengal, which is now Bangladesh.

And we'll begin with a plant, Phuti karpas, which is the local name for Dhaka cotton. And this plant grew along the banks of the Meghna River and was famous for its fine and silky fibers. Farmers, of course, would have grown, sown, and harvested the cotton, and they were typically two crops. One gathered in April May and another in September October.

Women cleaned the cotton fibre with their fingers, separating out plant fragments, like stalks and leaves. Then they combed the cotton, and this is my favourite part, they combed the cotton using the jawbone of a boile. which is a type of catfish. [00:06:00]

Zan: Nice.

Laboni: Yeah.

Zan: I did not see, I didn't see the catfish coming. I just, I just didn't see it coming.

Laboni: No, I did not see the catfish coming either when I was conducting this research. So imagine, if you will, the arc of this jawbone densely set with curved teeth. They combed the cotton with this, separating out more of those plant fragments as well as cotton fibers that were more loose and coarse. Then they ginned the cotton, took a small quantity of that combed cotton, placed it on a board often made of the wood of a chalta tree, and rolled an iron pin back and forth across it to separate the cotton fiber from the seeds.

Then if that wasn't enough, They bowed the cotton using a small bamboo bow strung with a cord of catgut or another material like muga silk. They [00:07:00] strummed that bow separating the lighter downy fibers from the heavier ones.

Zan: Wow.

Laboni: Yeah, and certainly that really downy fiber that would be used for very fine muslin.

So that downy fleece then was rolled around a lacquered reed, and wrapped with the skin of an eel, or sometimes chitolmach, which I think is knife fish. It's actually a fish that my mom loved to eat as a kid, and this protected the cotton fibers. and kept them clean during the spinning process. So we haven't even gotten to spinning yet.

Zan: Right, we just have the fibers, the raw kind of Right? Yeah. Okay. We just have

Laboni: the fibers. So then women, largely Hindu women, spun that cotton fiber to yarn by hand using an iron spindle, and humidity was both helpful and necessary. So spinning was best done in the early morning after sunrise or in [00:08:00] the late afternoon before sunset.

In general, avoiding the midday sun. And I found this beautiful detail that the finest yarn was spun before the sun made the dew disappear from the grass.

Zan: Oh, wow.

Laboni: Isn't that stunning?

Zan: That is.

Diane: It's not just the material that's being produced, but it's the time space factor is also very important to its creation as well.

Laboni: Absolutely.

Zan: Absolutely. Because that's a really finite period that you have the light to be able to do the work, the humidity to do the work, like that's, that's a very brief window.

Laboni: Yes. And then men were involved in preparing the yarn for weaving. It was a long process of soaking and drying in which the warp threads and weft threads were handled differently.

They also spent days preparing the looms, warp threads, end roll, reeds, and heddles. All before the weavers sat down to weaving, weaving was carried out

by both Hindus and Muslims, [00:09:00] and weaving took anywhere from about 10 days to six months, depending on the fineness of the muslin. So it was slow, slow fashion.

Zan: Yes. Yes. But it kind of gives you an idea of, of how, how intricate this fiber and material is. If, if it's taking it to six months to, to weave that, that's, that's incredibly, incredibly intricate. a fine detail that you have to be working with. Like, that's, I don't think I had put my, wrapped my head around six months.

Laboni: Absolutely. And again, you know, the length of time will depend on the, on the fineness. Right. There is that range. It's really extraordinary, the amount of patience required. And then they're not done. There's, because there's more, there's more after that. After weaving, there were additional steps like cleaning and steaming and bleaching, realigning threads that had shifted through that process.

removing knots, joining broken threads, and this one amazed [00:10:00] me, pulling out coarse threads, single threads. Wow. That were deemed too coarse for the fine muslin and replacing them.

Diane: So taking a thread out and then sort of meticulously weaving in a replacement?

Laboni: Yes.

Diane: Oh my goodness. Yeah.

Laboni: Yes, yes, removing spots and stains.

Beatling the muslin with smooth chank shells to give it a flat and lustrous look. Sometimes ironing, folding, and packing. And this is only the cloth, and then it had to be made into a shawl, right?

Zan: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Laboni: So this work was carried out by both Hindus and Muslims, largely men, and I'm listing off these steps so quickly, but each one required patience and skill of specialized workers.

Yeah, but so much care, so much care went into the making of this cloth before a shawl could even be made. And you had asked about cost, and the cost would

have depended on the fineness I [00:11:00] did find this quote, at the height of its fame, a yard of Dhaka muslin could fetch prices ranging from 50 to 400 pounds, equivalent to roughly 7, 000 to 56, 000 pounds today.

Zan: But at the same time, like that totally makes sense once you've explained the process and the work that goes into that, that, that this. In order, I mean, the value is just inherent in the material itself because there's so much work that went into that. Yeah, that's incredible. When you had, you had mentioned that, that this is just the process that went into the material itself to turn this into a shawl, would this be then embroidery that goes on top of it to give it detail?

Is that the kind of things that would finish it into a shawl?

Laboni: Absolutely. So it would have to be stitched, sometimes embroidered, uh, not always, and many, many more steps involved there.

Zan: Okay. So like, so like this is, this is very, [00:12:00] very detail oriented.

Diane: Yes. So, you know, we have this beautiful fabric, these beautiful shawls that are being made, and Lady Bertram, she clearly wants one, right?

These are very in, in fashion, and that ties into larger themes of empire and colonialism in Mansfield Park. Why do you think Lady Bertram is so insistent about having a shawl in the scene, and what does it tell us about either her character or the sort of larger narrative of the novel or the context of what is going on during this time?

Laboni: Yeah, this is such a great question, and I'm gonna kind of take us on a little side answer first. I'm sure you've both, you know, thought about this deeply too, because it's worth considering this scene. In the context of the whole novel, because Sir Thomas and his family are exceedingly wealthy. And again and again in Mansfield Park, we have these references [00:13:00] to Sir Thomas Bertram's estate affairs and business in Antigua.

Which raises the question, what is the source of Sir Thomas wealth? So I'm sure colonial plantations, I imagine sugar plantations. And the exploitation and enslavement of African people. And this passage that we're looking at today is the only time in the novel that the East Indies are mentioned. So Fanny's brother, William, has been promoted from midshipman to lieutenant.

With the assistance of Henry Crawford and his uncle Admiral Crawford of the Royal Navy. And what is this all telling us about Lady Bertram? And to me it

says she's interested in comfort, she's interested in convenience, and she's interested in fashion as a marker of status because she desires the more expensive, authentic Indian shawls and anything else that in her own words Is worth having.

And her understanding of the East Indies is both vague and [00:14:00] transactional. And she seems to care more about these shawls than her own children.

Zan: Yeah.

Diane: That's her in a nutshell. Yeah.

Zan: And you've, and you've put such a wonderful, fine point on it. The fact that she says it's with anything worth having. And then, and that right before that, she says basically money isn't an object, right?

She says none of this matters to Sir Thomas. And so, you know, you've already told us how much this might cost. She's saying, maybe two, who knows? Like the way that she's engaging with this as a transaction, as you, as you've so eloquently put it, is incredibly revealing in this context.

Laboni: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, so maybe I'll take us on a little side, side, another side journey, because there's this amazing description by Jane Austen of Lady Bertram, and here it goes.

To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. [00:15:00] She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting. Nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter when it did not put herself to inconvenience.

Guided in everything important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister. Wow.

Zan: Yeah. Yeah. She, she's not doing so great on the parenting scheme right there.

Laboni: No. No.

Diane: So I think we could add shawls to the, you know, pug again. It's like pug, shawls. Those are, those are the two things she expresses any kind of interest in.

Zan: Fashion is important. Yeah.

Diane: Yeah. Yeah.

Laboni: Mm hmm. Yes, yes in her in her desire hierarchy. Yes, you know, they're they're up there. Yeah. Yeah, and I was thinking to You know, Lady Bertram's understanding of the East [00:16:00] Indies would have to be equal to or less than Jane's own understanding. So Jane may have known more and chosen not to put it into the novel, and I found that interesting to mull over.

Diane: Yeah, because it is so vague, you know, what we get, what we get from Lady Bertram, which makes sense, right? Because her own knowledge is Vague at best.

Zan: Yes, she is vague at best . But yeah. 'cause the idea that the East Indies is just this like general space out there that she doesn't really know too much about.

I think I'm, I tracks with her knowledge base, but I think, I don't know. I, I would imagine that we are supposed to glean as readers that Austen is also aware of how vague she's being mm-hmm . About this thing. Because, because that is so built into her character. I think that this, this is, it's such a revealing scene, I think, about, about Lady Bertram because of the passage that you read and the kind of information that we're [00:17:00] getting here.

This idea that she is just so not clued in that she can just be like, I'm going to throw pounds at this potential shawl or two if he goes to this general area in the world that is part of, you know, Britain's empire. It's, it's knowledge of the world is, is, uh, Not very precise.

Diane: Well, it's very much, I think, demonstrating that she doesn't want this object as sort of an appreciation for the place that it comes from.

It really is just sort of like, it's a status symbol, right? It's just like, Oh, look at me. I have this thing.

Zan: Well, and it is, like you said, Diane, it is very clearly for her just a status symbol. And I think it's also interesting that she herself, Lady Bertram, she

doesn't leave Mansfield. Right? Like, so, so she's not even like going into London society to show this off.

This is purely because she knows that it's the thing that she's supposed to want. Um, and [00:18:00] again, I think that says a lot about, again, what the East India Company is doing and the way that it's making goods accessible to people in England and how much they take for granted the resources, both in terms of like the textile, but the labor and the, and the, the goods from this, this place that they have colonized.

Laboni: Yeah. And the human stories behind the making of such a shawl, that's not, that's not part of her worldview, I imagine.

Zan: Yeah. Well, and so much of that is, is even lost because when you talk about, about how you were so detailed in the kind of process of making. This, this textile, the fact that that process is something that they tried to kind of industrialize and mechanize in England, but that, but the actual handcraft of it was actually largely lost in some ways, um, because, because it was being taken for granted so deeply that it was, that it was kind of appropriated and then just [00:19:00] removed.

It's kind of, I love that you talk about it in terms of stories that way, because it's the human element. But I think also, I think this transitions into your own project. So, your project that you worked on was called Jane Austen's Shawl, A Possible History. And it's truly a powerful collection of poems that imagines the networks of a single textile from its creation in one cultural moment and in one specific culture and country, and then how it is used in another country and culture.

So could you share with us a little bit more about how you went about the research and how you wanted to represent? This kind of convergence of the textile with the literature.

Laboni: Thank you for spending time with the poems. And I just have to say thank you to the team at Jane Austen's house for creating the Reimagine Resident program with the support of the Art Fund.

It really was a joy. And how did I go [00:20:00] about the research? So this muslin shawl, it is Indian cloth believed to be embroidered by Jane Austen. It was made in the late 18th or early 19th century. And through poetry, I wanted to trace one possible history from a cotton plant growing beside a river in Bengal all the way to Jane's world.

And I started with a trip to both the library and herbarium. at Kew Gardens. I was curious about Dhaka Cotton and its nearest relatives. I did a lot of reading and then Harry Smith, a curator at the Herbarium, gathered specimens for me to look at. Oh, wow. Which was so special. That is cool. I could not believe that I was looking at Then I visited Jane Austen's house in Chawton, I [00:21:00] stared at that muslin shawl on display, I took photographs, made notes and small sketches.

Over Zoom, I connected with Saiful Islam, who is the founder and managing director of the Bengal Muslin Project. So, starting in 2014, Saiful brought together a dynamic team of farmers, photographers, researchers, scientists, weavers, and more, on a mission to tell the story of Bengal muslin from a Bangladeshi perspective.

He very kindly screened his documentary, Legend of the Loom, and mailed me a copy of his book, Muslin, Our Story, so I did more reading. I revisited Northanger Abbey, where the word muslin appears a dozen times. Jane wrote the novel in the late 1790s, when muslin was all the rage in Britain. I [00:22:00] also kind of read across.

Different types of texts, some of Gilbert White's writings, just to curate the environmental detail that would be true to the time and area. And then when it came to drafting the poems, I had so much information, it felt like weaving many threads. It really did feel like weaving. Mm hmm. So I had some guiding questions.

Some of which we've already talked about today. What was the story of the cotton plant, known locally as Phuti Karpas? How did Dhaka muslin contribute to British fashion, culture, and economy? How did Britain contribute to the unraveling of the Bengal muslin industry? That was a very important one for me.

And how did all of this connect with Jane's shawl and fictional worlds? So there's a series of [00:23:00] poems that move through time and across geographies, like Dhaka, Steventon, and Chawton. And together, I really wanted the poems to feel like a journey.

Zan: Yeah, I think that that comes through so beautifully in the poetry as well. I think, I think it's so very clear that We're in one moment while where there's that fine detail of the textile and then we're back into and then we're in a drawing room and like that, that shifting that happens throughout the poetry is so in a, in a beautiful way. It's kind of jarring where you can see how we've, how we've

gone from one culture to another where, where something is lost in that, in that movement from one space to another.

And I think that to articulate that in, in the poetry. as a reflection of the process is, is quite profound.

Laboni: Oh, thank you. And I will say this is something that I love about poetry, and [00:24:00] I think it's part of why I'm drawn to poetry, is that you can put two images or two pieces of information beside one another that, that are actually very far apart. In terms of time and place, and suddenly there's this electricity or something that passes between them. And I love that.

Zan: And that's so beautifully expressed. I think that that visually makes so much sense to me, that you can, that you, that you juxtapose these things and that that's, that's the magic of it is, is to be able to put those things together. And I think that that's, that's why those, the collection that you've, you've come up with creates such a strong narrative is that they are all. sparking off of each other.

Laboni: I was thinking about that a lot. And the opening poem includes an imagined scene with Jane wearing the muslin shawl. And then we transition to the cotton [00:25:00] plant.

Phuti karpas. It really deserved its own poem. I was determined to give it its own poem. Then we see a spinner who is spinning fiber to yarn, followed by a few poems where we see what's happening in different places in England, alongside what's happening in Dhaka around the same. And this is where some of that content around Britain's contribution to the unravelling of the Bengal Muslim industry comes in.

Because Britain took protectionist measures, placing tariffs on the cloth that was being imported from India. And at the same time, machine made yarn and muslin was being prepared to flood Bengal. And, you know, for the purpose of the conversation, I'm [00:26:00] summarizing, but These were some of the major contributing factors.

So when writing the poems, I really wanted to curate and include those details that bring everything to life. So what clothing, tools, and supports did Jane likely have while writing? So perhaps she had her muslin shawl, a goose quill, a portable writing box made of mahogany. And then I wanted to present The Bengal creatives with equal vibrancy.

So what clothing, tools, and supports did the spinners and weavers likely have? Perhaps a sari, an iron spindle, and a bamboo work basket for the spinners, for example. And overall, I wanted to make the people of Bengal visible, wanted to make their labor visible. The [00:27:00] farmers, the spinners, the weavers, all the muslin makers, they were known in their communities. But unnamed in history, and I wanted to celebrate their dedication, their patience, skill, and their creative work. And I think another consideration in the back of my mind is I wanted to flatten any creative hierarchies that may exist in people's minds, that relegate textile work to craft, and really, really celebrate this creativity.

Zan: Well, and, and, and you had mentioned in the process that there, there are men and women and people across cultures all working on this. And so again, to make sure that we don't flatten that or silo that work into something that is like, Oh, it's just a textile or something like that, that this, is art. This is craft.

Laboni: Yes. Yes. Yes. It really was an ecosystem of talented and skilled people. [00:28:00] And I was interested in what a poem might do in the space of a museum because it can act as an intervention in a way and present a different narrative. And my hope was that visitors would enjoy Jane Austen's muslin shawl on their own terms, maybe read or listen to the poems, then look at the shawl again and understand it differently.

Diane: Yeah. That's lovely.

Laboni, thank you so, so much for taking the time to come on and talk with us about the subject. We appreciate it so much. Where can our listeners learn more about these wonderful poems that you have written and read them, find them, learn more about this project that you worked on?

Laboni: Yes, the poems and a short article about my process. Are both available at the Jane Austen's house website. [00:29:00] So find them there.

Diane: Great. And we will have a link to that in our show notes. So for anybody who is interested, please go check them out.

Laboni: And I will say there are audio recordings too, so if you are a person who prefers or needs to listen, then the audio is available.

Diane: Thank you so much for, for joining us.

Zan: Thank you.

Laboni: Thank you, Zan and Diane, so much just for your work and curiosity.

Diane: Thank you again to Laboni Islam for joining us for this episode. You can find us on Instagram @thethingaboutausten and on Twitter at @Austen_Things. You can also check out our website www.thethingaboutausten.Com and email us at thethingaboutausten@gmail.com

Zan: stay tuned for next episode when we'll be talking about elegant extracts.

Diane: Thanks for listening! [00:30:00] Bye!