

## People

## Face to Face

## Selina Hossain: Rediscovering the past in the present

ONE OF THE FINEST among our contemporary novelists, Selina Hossain combines past and present and delicately sews them in her works to give them what she says a 'parallel reality' to understand and reflect upon the present through the mirrors of the past or vice versa and thereby rediscover the present. Born at Hazipur village in Laxmipur, Rajshahi on June 14, 1947 to A. K. Musharaf Hossain and Mariannessa Bakul, she has always been sensitive to the gender issue and her sentiments have found expression in the twenty-odd novels she has to her name. She is also a brilliant writer of children literature. Her works have so far been translated into Hindi, Marathi, Russian, French and English. Two of her novels - Japita Jiban and Nirantar Ghanadhandi - are incorporated into the syllabus of Rabindrabharati University and Jadavpur University.

Q: The very word 'feminist' conjures the image of a man-hater. Your concern for women's rights has always found expression in so many memorable characters that you have created. What would you like to know from you is how do you look at the issues and concerns of the feminists and where should women stand in their relation to men?

A: I strongly believe that the feminists should direct their efforts to facilitate development of women's personality. They should understand that hating men would not bring about any change for womenfolk. As a woman, I would like to win the dignity and respect to be able to work hand in hand with a man. Nature has made us man and woman and we should not forget that. If men think that their prosperity and development would come only through oppressing women then they are wrong. Women's emancipation is possible only when they would be economically solvent and psychologically strong to make decisions on their own.

My novels and short stories highlight women's status in our society and reflect their dreams and aspirations at different stages of life. In *Hangor Nadi Grenade*, for example, I have shown how a feeble old lady can make important decisions if she has a strong personality. Very often we talk of women's empowerment now. I feel the old lady of my novel can be illustrated as a case of women's empowerment for I believe one of the fundamental elements of being empowered is to have the moral strength to make important decisions. Think of the old mother of a deaf son in *Hangor Nadi Grenade* who wants to do something for the liberation struggle but she can neither send her son to the war nor contribute to it any other way. As it happens, two freedom fighters with Pakistani army hot on their heels take refuge in her house. To ensure their security, she decides without hesitation to hand over son to the army. As the marauders happily return with her son thinking they have got what they have been looking for, she lets the freedom fighters go and urges them to win freedom for the country. What I have tried to say through this incident is without strong personality women will never attain the power to make their own decisions and secondly formal education does not always make a person wise enough to make great sacrifices. Even an unlettered woman can make significant contributions to her family, to the society and to the nations.

You know that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman used the word *Barangana* to honour those women who were raped during our war of independence. But later on the connotation of the word changed to mean

something that would hurt the dignity of a woman. In my novel *Juddha* I have spoken about it. The two protagonists of the novel are lovers. During the war the lady is dishonoured by the marauding Pakistani force and her lover who participates in the war loses his leg. After the war when they reunite the lady says, "You have lost your leg in the war and I have been raped. Both of us have sacrificed for the liberation struggle of the country. So I consider myself a freedom fighter as well." If you read my novels carefully you will see they are replete with issues of women's self respect and dignity; and finally I have spoken about women's personality, the element, I think, makes a woman stand on her own in this

age. It seems that in Bengali novels, particularly those written by women, women do not have any personal life. How do you look at it as a woman writer yourself?

A: In my novel I have depicted the whole span of life of the protagonist - from teens to old age. If you mean sexual life by the expression 'personal life' then I would say the story did not permit me to do so or to put it in another way my story-line did not demand that. Coming to the point why woman writers never shed light on their personal life I would say our society is very sensitive to the issue. Taslima Nasreen wrote vividly about her childhood in her *Meyebela* where she wrote about the sexual life of her parents. Do you approve of it? Should we go against our cultural and

life but the Freudian biological essentialism, that is, all behaviour can be reduced to inborn sexual characteristics is pure nonsense. Will you be able to successfully write a 200-page novel on someone's sex life? For me, if I am convinced that my character's sex life needs to be highlighted for the sake of the story then I'm going to bring out her sex life to focus. If it does not and still I am interested to portray my character's sex life, where would you draw the line between pornography and literature.

Q: Going through your novels one would be greeted with experiences aplenty. What I am trying to say is you portray different strata of life and do not restrict yourself to the portrayal of the Dhaka-based middle-

class sensibility. To be more specific, you set your story on a wider canvas, which is epic in nature.

A: Not that I deliberately avoid middle-class sensibility. It is there in one or two of my short stories and one of my novels is on the middle class. But I truly believe that life in all its riches and variety exists in our rural Bengal where 90 per cent of our total population resides.

Q: Parallelism if that can be said was there in great Indian epics such as *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana*. In contemporary Bangla literature Sunil Gangopadhyaya and Shamaresh Basu adopted parallel storytelling brilliantly in their novels. And Salman Rushdie also did a brilliant use of it, particularly in *The Satanic Verses*.

A: You are right. In *Neel Mayurer Jauban* I set the story in the tenth century in the time of *Charyapad*. I tried to capture the time when Bangla language was at its embryonic stage. But the way the story has been told it does not take long for the readers to understand that under the veil I am also trying to recreate our language movement of 1952. The protagonist of the novel is a poet who writes in his mother tongue, Bangla, the language of the marginalised people that has no access to the court. The court language Sanskrit is now a dead language whereas the language of the untouchables in the tenth century is the modern Bangla. When the king asks the poet Kanupa to compose poems on him he refuses to do so, saying that he would only write about the dreams of his own people in his poetry.

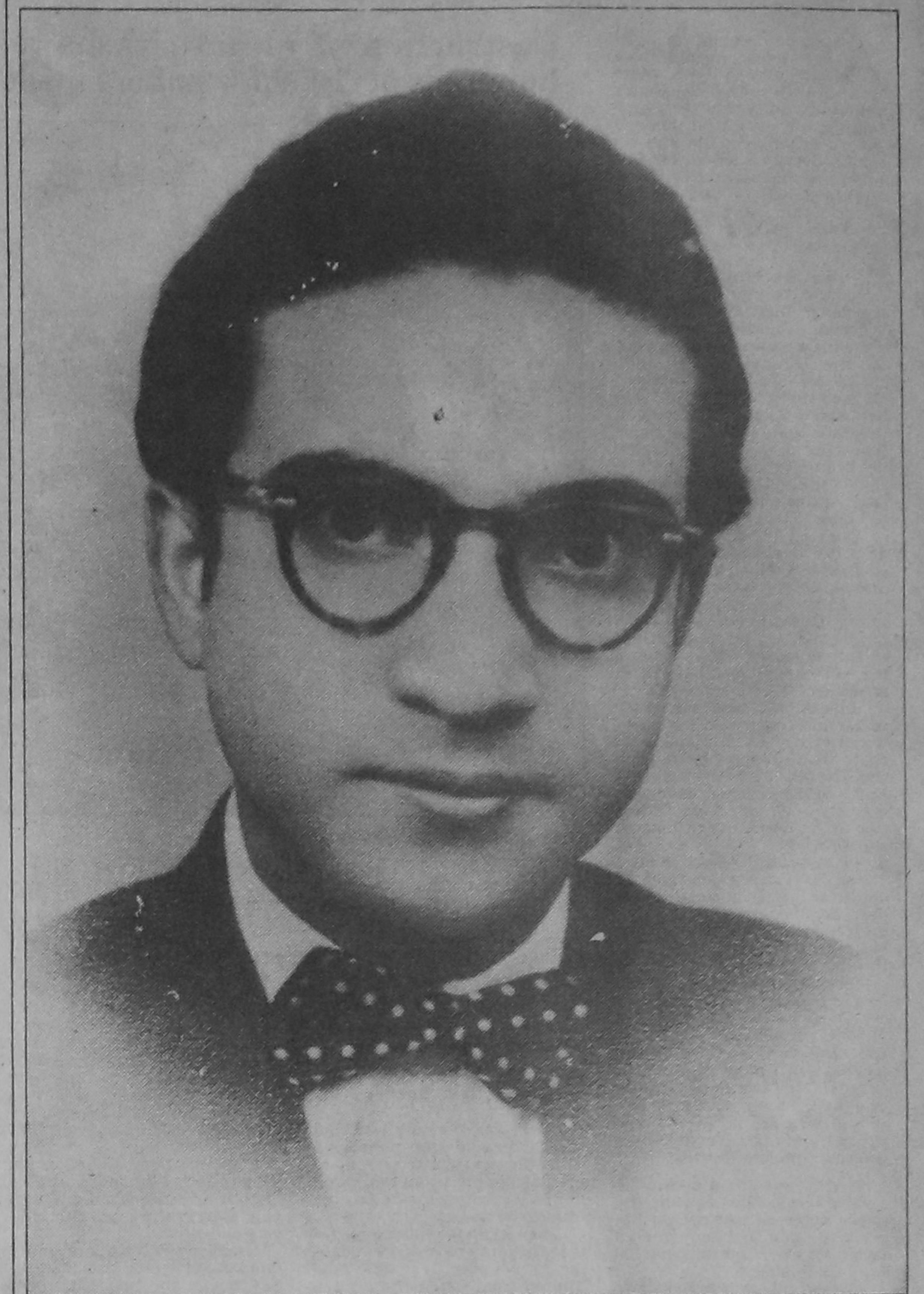
Q: Can this be termed allegorical?

A: This is neither allegorical nor metaphorical. I am sewing the past into the present. To put it in another way, creating a parallel flow of the past and the present where both are very much alive, corresponding to each other in a meaningful way. When the tyrant king sets Kanupa's house on fire an obnoxious odour of burning corpse emanates from there. The protagonist of the novel, meanwhile, dreams on about a time when his mother tongue would be the court language. This is a dream that the nation carried through centuries. And my novel ends there. I write about a history that does not end in the past rather it is a moving history continuously shaping the present. I want to look at my tradition putting it into a proper perspective. For me without placing the past into the frame of the present, renewal of tradition would never be possible.

Q: Myths and legends play a significant role in shaping the stories you tell.

A: I search for my inspiration in the abundance of myths and legends of Bengal. They provide me the variety I look for to get out of the typical middle-class sensibility. I always want to set my story in a wider canvas and myths and legends are excellent epic elements that give that opportunity to go about my story the way I want them to be plus I don't want to bore my readers with the worn-out middle-class stories. Not that middle-class cannot be a subject for a grand narrative but not at this moment. If I feel one day that the middle-class is going through radical changes and has come out of muggy mind set an epic would be written about them.

## When I was a Teenager



## In conversation with Atiqul Haq Chowdhury

ATIQUUL HAQ CHOWDHURY is a litterateur, a producer and a playwright and a towering presence in our cultural arena. He has also tried his hand at directing and caused a few ripples. Ever popular television dramas like *Babar Kolom Kothay* got him to where he is now. His screenplays from his stories and translations of Tolstoy and other global figures were milestones in his versatile career. Atiqul Haq was into these things from his childhood days and as he told us in a trip down memory lane, those days had their charm even on a retired man.

Atiqul Haq Chowdhury was born in the district of Barisal in 1933, a time when Bangladesh was non-existent on the world map. Needless to say, life in those times was different from the present day Bangladesh.

Young Atiq was a lucky child in a family that had art and culture in its veins. Anything to do with the subject would be encouraged

those dramas always surprised him - in the acts Atiq noticed that they did not have sandals on their feet making him think that queens and specially women were not given much importance! He enlightened himself further one day when he saw one of the performers (playing the role of the king) in normal clothing, bathing quite unceremoniously on the banks of a river.

Atiqul Haq Chowdhury began getting seriously into the Bengali language first through letter writing. He learnt the art from his mother and became so good at it that many of their relatives used to ask him to write their letters for them. Later on letter writing gave way to dramas and young Atiq wrote the first Bangla drama for the then Pakistan Television (PTV) called 'Nepotter Nayika'. One incident that he remembers vividly was when he had written a letter to his father at home at a time when there was turmoil in the family. It was a long fifteen-page letter and offered sug-

member supporting a particular side.

"My father used to subscribe to several important periodicals of those days like the

'Mashik Bahumati', 'Probashi' and the 'Bharatbarsha'. This was because he wanted to look at present issues from different angles so that a neutral view of things could be formed. For me the reading habit was directed at detective novels which, at first, I used to read secretly. Then one day my father found out and told me, to my surprise, that it was alright to read stories like these."

What were some of the things he used to do in his leisure time as a teenager? Well, in the 1950's it was fashion to get dressed in new, starched outfits with a pair of shiny shoes and stride to the cinemas; a pair of goggles and wristwatch made the complete man. Among some of his habits he recalls how he used to clean copper coins, not seen nowadays, by grinding them

## By A Maher

and practiced by the head of the family. The elder Chowdhury was a travelling man, being posted to several districts as a District Registrar so the boy travelled a bit too. His first touch with cultural life came when a gramophone was introduced into the Chowdhury household. Family life became more exciting, noisy and musical after that. Many traditional *natoks* (dramas) were played on the gramophone and Atiq did his part by memorising the famous "Sirajuddowla" drama. The new gramophone had an interesting incident as well. One day the maidservant was found fanning the box with a hand fan, insisting that the man shouting from inside would be feeling hot in the small space!

Young Atiq was also exposed to theaters and *Jatras* (moving drama troupes) at an early age. He was first amazed at the performances of the "kings" in the *Jatras*, their regal clothes and authoritative voice almost had him believe they were in some way related to real kings. But the queen in

gestions on how the problems could be overcome. After reading it his father was so impressed that he called his son and told him to write more letters like those and incorporate them in dramas so that the society could take them as a lesson. He was also a thinking type using his imagination to keep pen sketches of his female cousins; these recorded some of their minute mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. Many dramas were also written from real life accounts of his time with his cousins.

Haq's family was a liberal one considering the time he grew up in. He was encouraged to learn from his environment and get exposed to all the things that a teenager needed to grow up. There were many instances where all the members of the family engaged in absorbing debate on various issues, especially when returning home from the cinemas. The family used to discuss the roles of the actors and actresses and whether their role-playing was justified on screen, each

under his heels and making them glitter. Considered pretty abject practice for today's teenagers!

The present Atiqul Haq Chowdhury is an advocate of the present teenagers - but with a modicum of prudence.

"I don't believe in giving advice to the teenagers. What I mean is, it is useless to advise them to follow the examples of other accomplished men or women from another generation. Each teenager is unique in himself/herself and must develop as a human being in line with today's society. They DO have to be left alone sometimes. The parents are at fault in many cases - if they tell their wards not to do something while they do it themselves, then it is useless. Take for example the habit of watching obscene videos or channels. Another very important aspect is the respect; there is a degree of respect for every age, and many still do not recognise that teenagers are a breed of their own. With a respect of their own."

## By Ziaul Karim

world governed by the laws set by the male patriarchy. Take for example my novel *Padashabda* where a daughter raising her voice against her father who embodies the ideologies and contradictions of the ruling male patriarchy. To me feminism does not essentially mean hating men, it is rather a woman's periscope to look at the world she lives in. And I strongly believe that unless women work closely with their male counterparts, the society would not be rid of sexual inequality.

Q: In Bengali literary tradition, it has been observed that the literature produced by women writers has not really acquired women-centred perspective which, feminists say, is mainly because women unconsciously internalise sexist attitudes and desires. In your novel *Hangor Nadi Grenade* you had the opportunity where you are portraying the life a woman from her adolescence to old

moral ethos?

Q: Are you hinting at a situation where writers will never go against the persisting values even if they do not approve of them?

A: In my view as a writer one should have respect for the values of his/her society for it is ultimately the society to which a writer is committed to. Coming back to personal life, I would say sex is part and parcel of our

I always want to set my story in a wider canvas and myths and legends are excellent epic elements that give that opportunity to go about my story the way I want them to be plus I don't want to bore my readers with the worn-out middle-class stories. Not that middle-class cannot be a subject for a grand narrative but not at this moment.



In *Hangor Nadi Grenade*, for example, I have shown how a feeble old lady can make important decisions if she has a strong personality. Very often we talk of women's empowerment now. I feel the old lady of my novel can be illustrated as a case of women's empowerment for I believe one of the fundamental elements of being empowered is to have the moral strength to make important decisions.

So if you want to feel that vastness of life you have to go to the villages. On the contrary, a middle-class life is for me dull and drab. Also as I want to trace the life in all its variety and colour, I look for my subject in rural characters and setting. I go about the past in its modern parallel. If I had approached the past as past my novels would have turned into historical ones. No one has ever branded my novels as historical. I only select those elements of the past to which I can punctuate the present and see them in a new dimension. My novel *Kalketu-o-Fullora* is based on the long mediaeval nar-