

Remember the time in school when you were asked what you wanted to become once you grew up? And remember how everyone talked about either becoming a doctor or an engineer? Not many would have raised their hands in class, especially those belonging to the middle and upper classes, and proudly express an ambition of becoming farmers, despite the latter's invaluable contribution to the country and its economy.

However, slowly but surely, youngsters are taking an active interest in agriculture. Many have realised that if they can manage a farm on their own, they can actually earn a lot more than what their friends make in multinational companies.

Take for instance, the case of Nazrul Islam Badal. A 38-year-old mathematics graduate from a village in Gazipur, Nazrul has converted the land he inherited from his father into a wonderful date palm garden. Previously, Badal was involved in the telecommunication sector. After suffering a huge loss, he realised that it wasn't his true calling.

THE MILLENNIAL FARMERS

How agriculture is proving to be a promising career path for the youth

NILIMA JAHAN

"I was very curious about the date palm business. Once I realised that I could grow them here, I desperately started looking for more information online. I found farmers from Thailand who received a bumper yield and bought 2,000 plants from them with a bank loan in 2015," explains Badal.

Currently, Badal owns 105 large trees of 16 species of date palms in his garden. On an average, each tree contains 70 to 80 kilograms of premium date palms, of which each kg can be sold at Tk 2,000 – 2,500. Badal claims that in some cases his dates are sweeter than those of Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, Badal has also been selling plants and seeds of these date palms to interested parties. Depending on the age of the plants, each plant costs around Tk 2,000 – 10,000, while each seed is sold at Tk100. "Right now, I earn a profit of around Tk 6 lakhs per month. And I hope that within the next 10 years, my garden can serve the demand of the whole country," an ecstatic Badal states.

Young people like Badal are helping change the existing idea that agriculture is a last resort since it's a profession for lower income farmers. People are starting to look at agriculture as a profitable venture across Bangladesh.

Like Badal, 37-year-old Delwar Jahan, a Chittagong University graduate and a former journalist, also took up organic farming as a profession, along with his friends.

"Farmers in the country spend a lot on chemical fertilisers and pesticides. On top of that, they don't make much profit. Not only does that affect the environment but hurts them as well. My friends and I wanted to tackle these problems," recalls Delwar.

"From 2013, we started our organic farming project on a leased land in a village at Manikganj, where we have grown organic vegetables and raised chickens, cows, fishes, and a lot more on our own. Whenever we faced any problems, we sought help from the local

farmers," he says.

"At first, they thought that we were crazy. Why would we get into farming despite having degrees? But as time progressed, they understood the value of organic farming through our crops and started taking interest as well," adds Delwar.

"If someone creates an integrated farm, with livestock, fisheries, poultry, and crops, and if it can be maintained appropriately—for instance, if cow dung can be used as organic fertiliser and the leftover vegetables can be fed to the cow—it is possible to make profit," he adds.

Around 20 lakh youngsters enter the job sector in Bangladesh every year; however, we don't have the number of jobs to match the demand. According to experts, the agriculture sector could help change that scenario.

According to media and agriculture development activist Shykh Seraj, youth living in urban areas are steadily gaining an interest in agriculture. "A large number of them believe that if they invest their talent,



PHOTOS: COURTESY

hard work, and money in agriculture, they will get a good return, because agriculture has become commercially viable today," he adds.

According to Seraj, earlier, urban youth don't usually choose agro-based professions, because many of them wouldn't like to work in mud and water. Now, agriculture is more diverse and the pattern of it has also changed. "They can now grow crops in greenhouses, or under the shed," he adds.

There are different organisations supporting such developments as well. For example, the Department of Youth Development (DYD) is providing training to youth who are interested to build a career in integrated agriculture. According to Masuda Akhand, deputy director at the DYD, a total of 2, 86,572 young men and women from different districts and more than 16 lakh youth from different upazilas have received training on integrated agriculture since its inception.



EMPLOYMENT

According to Masuda, the rate of employment is high among people who take training in agriculture and the department even provides loans to these trainees at a minimal interest rate. One can avail Tk 60,000 at a time.

Similarly, Pali Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) has provided loans to 2.2 million small and medium agricultural enterprises. Among them are three lakh young entrepreneurs, who are engaged in new varieties of agricultural products and crop production.

Seraj believes that if we make agriculture the centre of the country's main development system, and go forward accordingly, we can lead a content life. "Just imagine, if we had 500 top-class agro scientists, they could maintain the world's food system. Then, the entire business model would be agro-based—research, development, seed development, smart technology development; and people wouldn't neglect agriculture as a profession," he says. ■

HUMAN RIGHTS

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath writes about a young woman, Esther Greenwood, experiencing the publishing industry on a summer internship, as well as life in New York City, for the first time. An aspiring poet, by the end of her time there, she is sliding into depression and unable to enjoy her experiences in the city. Once back home, she can't write or read or more worryingly, sleep.

Plath herself interned at *Mademoiselle* magazine in the summer of 1953 before her final year of college. Two months later, back home in Massachusetts, she attempted suicide for the first time. Plath's early struggles with her writing career and mental health issues are closely mirrored in *The Bell Jar*. Indeed, the more you learn of Plath's life, the more you want to go back and reread the novel as well as her poetry, also highly autobiographical.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, while not autobiographical but as intensely personal, is an intimate portrait of two families living on the windswept Yorkshire moors and their tales of love and revenge across generations. The novel was called both "pagan" and "repellent" by critics at the time. Even today, readers and academics find it difficult to grasp that Heathcliff, the brooding, tortured, romantic anti-hero with his obsessive desire for Catherine Earnshaw, was

primary audience is a body of young, misguided women who uncritically—even pathologically—consume Plath's writing with no awareness of how they harm the author's reputation in the process," writes Janet Badia, an academic who explores this narrative in her 2011 novel, *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*.

Early writers such as Brontë had changed what was possible for a woman to write in those days, beyond what women until then had traditionally written. Today, while women writers are ubiquitous and no longer need to resort to using pseudonyms, many are still relegated to a niche female-only audience. When the main protagonist is a female and talks about her experiences, the story is often maligned as "chick lit". The same distinction does not seem to apply to male writers, however, whose works are seemingly always for a universal readership.

For instance, Plath is extra-literar(ily) judged in her reviews on the basis of her mental health issues, suicide attempts, and her marriage. However, men such as Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, and prominent male writers such as Joseph Conrad and William Makepeace Thackeray's works are judged independently of their personalities. In *Villette*, Emily's older sister Charlotte writes this in a nutshell: "He judged her

LITERATURE BY WOMEN—FOR WOMEN OR FOR ALL?

Women writers writing about women have long been marginalised into a niche female-only readership

MALIHA KHAN

written by a woman who had never herself taken a lover in her short life.

At the time Brontë was writing, it was difficult for a woman to be published, let alone taken seriously as a writer. In 1847, she published *Wuthering Heights* under the pseudonym Ellis Bell. Unlike Plath, whose life was subsequently under the spotlight because of her marriage to Ted Hughes and the many poems she turned out before she died, Emily Brontë was a complete mystery. Little is known of her beyond her one novel and her elder (and more famous) sister Charlotte's accounts of her. Despite this, *Wuthering Heights* remains a much-read, much-loved classic in the English-speaking world, inspiring songs and numerous TV and film adaptations.

While *Wuthering Heights* was deemed unusual for a woman writer having a well-written male protagonist, *The Bell Jar* on the other hand, which centered around a female protagonist, was largely dismissed by (male) critics as catering to a female readership alone. Plath's readers, too, have been marginalised. "If one is to believe the narrative told by literary and popular culture, Plath's



An undated file photo of American author Sylvia Plath

as a woman, not as an artist; it was a branding judgment."

Undoubtedly, women readers in particular have taken to both these novels, one with strong female characters (*Wuthering Heights*) and the other an intensely personal look into a woman's life experiences (*The Bell Jar*). Both writers died young, unknowing of their legacy among women readers and defined by their sole novel (though both also wrote poetry).

In more recent times, Toronto-based writer Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*, published earlier this year, is autobiographical—about a woman writer in her late 30s who decides not to have children and takes the reader through her thought process. While



A portrait of Emily Brontë by her brother, Branwell Brontë.

eager to write it, she had her doubts. "Like, am I really going to do this? And why? It's such a huge, monumental, essence-of-life topic. We all have mothers. Why is this chick-lit?" she said in an interview to *The Guardian* in May. Women writing about women and their personal experiences as the sole focus of the story, from the time of Plath, have been treated this way.

The perception that women writers are preoccupied with gender, for one, and on their life experiences, as Plath did, persists. Back in 1929, Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, had denounced this prevalence of "masculine values" which made "football and sport 'important', the buying of clothes 'trivial'." Woolf further observes, "This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room."

In the literary world, women writers are also lumped together solely on the basis of their gender meaning their work does not stand alone on individual literary merit but is lumped together as representative of a 'group'. Only women writers such as Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*), JK Rowling (the *Harry Potter* series), and Agatha Christie's mystery novels, are not tarred with the same brush. Science fiction, fantasy, and crime are apparently "important" issues, and not "women's" issues and so, have universal appeal.

This year's Man Booker longlist, released in July, had a number of women writers who also wrote about women.

Sally Rooney's *Conversation with Friends*, for example, "about a young woman navigating young love in a politicised context" was referred to by the judges of the prize as one which "transforms what might have been a flimsy subject into something that demands a lot of the reader". The other two Booker-nominated works by women writers with female protagonists are both fantasy-oriented. In the history of the prize, only three winners have been women but none of the novels have had a lead female protagonist.

Encouragingly, more recently, writers such as Arundhati Roy in her semi-autobiographical *The God of Small Things*, have garnered much acclaim. The tale of the decline of an Indian family resembles partly her own family childhood. While Roy's subsequent work has been mostly non-fiction, her latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, is also autobiographical, this time, of her adult life.

Another much acclaimed writer of the present day, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, perhaps sums up the issue best when she said in an interview about her third novel *Americanah*:

"Don't we all in the end write about love? All literature is about love. When men do it, it's a political comment on human relations. When women do it, it's just a love story. So, although I wanted to do much more than a love story, a part of me wants to push back against the idea that love stories are not important. I wanted to use a love story to talk about other things. But really in the end, it's just a love story." ■