

# 'Society is evolving; we have to evolve with it'

Renowned novelist **Selina Hossain**, after retiring as the director of the Bangla Academy, has recently been reappointed as its chairperson. In a conversation with **Emran Mahfuz** of **The Daily Star**, she talks about the academy, the Ekushey Book Fair, society, culture and more.

*You retired as a director of the Bangla Academy, then returned as its chairperson. How do you feel about this transition?*

Bangla Academy is quite close to my heart. I am very delighted today. I joined the institution on July 2, 1970. Around the same time, I also got an interview call from the Public Service Commission to join the MC College in Sylhet. There, the salary would have been Tk 450. But I was waiting to get an offer from the Bangla Academy, which I did. As a research assistant, my salary was Tk 250, but the financial aspect was not a concern for me.

I have always tried to embody my beloved Bangla Academy. I developed my literary perspective after joining this institution. It became my preferred outlet for literary exercises, where I got a lot of opportunities to spend time writing and editing. This is how the academy gave me a sense of fulfilment.

**How long have you been with the Bangla Academy?**

Before retiring in 2004, I had worked there for 34 years. After receiving my postgraduate degree from Rajshahi University in 1968, I arrived in Dhaka the following year. I saw a newspaper advertisement and applied for the job at the academy.

**Bangla Academy was founded with an objective to intellectually develop and uplift the nation. To what extent do you think this objective has been fulfilled?**

Since its inception in 1955, the Bangla Academy has been working with this objective in mind. The academy's first initiative was the dictionary project. Once that was completed, Muhammad Shahidullah edited the *Ancholik Bhashar Abhidhan* (dictionary of regional dialects). He compiled words from different districts in it, which helped open up brand new avenues. Subsequent generations are now getting the opportunity of expanding their linguistic knowledge with these dictionaries.

When I was at Bangla Academy previously, I assumed the responsibility of editing Nazrul's work, with Prof Anisuzzaman working as the chief editor. Later on, I took on the responsibility of publishing the science encyclopaedia and biographical



dictionary (*Charitabhidhan*).

*A lot of literary works were published during your tenure, but the flow seems to have slowed down since then. Many legendary works still remain unpublished. What could be the reason behind this?*

Many did not follow in my footsteps at Bangla Academy. In my years at the compilation sub committee, I would never have allowed the funding to be returned to the ministry in June. My view was that the fund was allocated so that our writers, researchers and publishers could benefit from it. So why should it go back to the ministry? Hence, I would work all year round at formidable speed to ensure that the fund was used up before June. However, many do not hold the same point of view now, which is why the flow of publication has slowed down.

**The Bangla Academy Awards generate a lot of interest as well as controversy. What is the authors selection criteria for the awards?**

A committee is formed and nomination forms are sent to 30-35 people. They each nominate individuals and from there, the committee decides on its picks. The committee only elects deserving nominees from within the sphere of art and literature, and their choices are ubiquitously accepted by the academy. Bangla Academy is more than

a mere building; it is made up of people working together who are spiritually and intellectually connected.

**A part of the Bangla Academy works dedicatedly for the Ekushey Book Fair for two to three months. Do you think relieving them of this task would ensure a higher amount of research and development from them—and for the academy, by extension?**

No, a month or two is not that significant a length of time. The Ekushey Book Fair is a crucial part of our history and tradition, which we must put effort into. Individuals dedicated to the book fair belong to the relevant department, so they are merely fulfilling their duty. This does not hamper the academy's overall work. In fact, it inspires all of us and is a great way of ushering in new readers.

**The book fair has strong ties with the month of February, but last year we could not maintain this synchronicity. What are your thoughts about organising the Ekushey Book Fair in February?**

I am absolutely in favour of the book fair being held in February. But it is also a challenge to maintain health guidelines and hold the book fair amid the Covid pandemic. Besides, the need for the public to abide by health guidelines is not something that can be, or should be, ignored.

**Last year, publishers participated in the Ekushey Book Fair and incurred losses. They asked for compensation, but the state's response was lukewarm. What are your thoughts on this?**

Support from the state in this regard would have been ideal, and it is something which needs to increase in the future. The book fair is an essential part of the nation's art and literature sphere. It is the state's responsibility to support such initiatives, and it would have pleased me if they had done so last year.

**During this online era, e-books are in vogue and the number of printed magazines and books are going down as well. What has been your observation regarding this?**

We are seeing a variation among readers. It is inevitable, because different steps are being taken in different directions and as a whole, society is advancing. We

▲ Selina Hossain

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**Bangla Academy is more than a mere building; it is made up of people working together who are spiritually and intellectually connected.**

have to evolve to keep up with it.

**Every year, you publish your own books. Have their sales increased or decreased?**

The sales have increased a lot. I am happy with the readership of my books.

**Libraries play a vital role in creating new readers. For the last 10 or 15 years, there has been a demand for higher salaries for librarians. Instead, the budget allocated for them has been curtailed.**

Libraries not only create readers; they also enrich their minds. Supporting libraries is part of the government's moral duties. This can create a place for dispensing social values among the people, and avid readers can influence those around them to also take up reading. Thus, funds for libraries should not be curtailed, but should be distributed freely by the state in order to cultivate readers.

**You have written novels on the Language Movement and the Liberation War. How far do you think we have advanced in terms of socio-cultural aspects?**

We have come a long way. This advancement has enriched our world of art, literature and culture, and we have secured a distinct position in the global arena. The Bengali nation and Bangla speakers have also advanced accordingly.

**During your tenure, three volumes of Abul Mansur Ahmad's complete works were published. What is your evaluation of his literature?**

I liked Abul Mansur Ahmad's work very much. I was awestruck by how, through his writing, he transformed the natural state of society into a transparent and surreal space of knowledge, which aided our generation in bettering itself.

**Whenever we discuss culture, people often point their fingers at women's attire. Does this mean that only women embody culture in their attire? Why is no one equally concerned about men's attire?**

No, this is not right. Men and women need to uphold our culture collaboratively. We have to keep in mind that society will not advance by any individual's efforts alone.

*This interview has been translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.*

## If I am not for sale, what am I?



DEBRA EFROYMSON

Debra EFROYMSON is the executive director of the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh, and author of 'Beyond Apologies: Defining and Achieving an Economics of Wellbeing.'

RECENTLY, I was chatting with a young friend. She mentioned that, with all the Covid lockdowns (she is in a country much harder hit than Bangladesh), she has learnt to do business online, selling herself as a yoga and meditation instructor. As the conversation continued, she explained that she was making more money doing online work than she previously had working for a major corporation, despite now putting in far fewer hours. "Everyone should learn to do this," she told me. "People think they need jobs, but this is actually a better way to make money." The trick, she explained, was to "learn to commodify yourself."

I confess, I was horrified. The idea that a bright young woman with many skills and talents would see herself as an object to be sold online was dispiriting and dehumanising. I also found her confidence that others could learn to do the same, and make good money that way, a bit delusional—her failure to recognise just how extremely exceptional she is.

Both issues are a problem. It is a problem that we assume that virtually everyone has a tiny entrepreneur inside of them, just waiting for an opportunity to reveal themselves.

It is also a problem that people, especially the youth, must now find ways to market themselves, not in terms of finding a regular job—which is growing ever harder in the gig economy—but in becoming something to sell online, like any other product.

More recently, I spoke with a young Bangladeshi man. I knew he enjoyed body-building; I assumed it was a passion of his. Well, perhaps it is, but as he explained, there are also possibilities of "selling himself" online as a fitness instructor. Like my other young friend, he saw no hope in the job market; the only way to earn money is to find a way to turn yourself into a desirable commodity.

Although it was an awfully long time ago, when I try to remember how I felt about the job market when I was in university or in my early 20s, it feels like the difference is huge and cannot simply be explained by my having been in the US rather than Bangladesh. After all, there, too, people are turning to other ways to earn a living, leaving traditional jobs.

Then again, perhaps the difference isn't as great as I would like to believe. I am from a generation that still believed in getting hired. We felt free to pursue degrees in the liberal arts or science—not just accounting and business. But—at least as women—we did feel the need, or at least the pressure, to package ourselves into something sufficiently attractive to appeal to both potential bosses and spouses. Our self-worth, as women, was too often defined by our outward appearance, not our inward traits, skills, talents, intelligence or abilities.

So yes, as a society, we have failed our young people in terms of creating job opportunities for them. Clearly many of them are finding ways to earn money in new ways by offering goods or services online. Perhaps all of this is natural and inevitable, especially in a world where we don't work to address inequality, where we fail to address the way that the very rich siphon off most of the wealth, and thus much of the population must struggle to get by.

But we also continue to fail our young people by sending the message that who you are is less important than how you look.

And when the need to earn money

becomes an occasion for seeing yourself as something to offer up for sale, I cannot help but feel that our humanity is being chipped away.

**Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh**  
College Education Development Project (CEDP)  
Govt. Debendra College, Manikganj  
[www.debendracollege.gov.bd](http://www.debendracollege.gov.bd)

Memo No. CEDP/GDC/2021-22/1157/167

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### Corrigendum of e-Tender Notice

Original 04/2020-2021

Revised 04/2021-2022

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of following package which is published in 13-02-2022 is revised as follows:

Sl. No.	Tender ID No.	Name of supply	Original		Revised	
			Last date and time of tender security submission	Tender closing date & time	Last date and time of tender security submission	Tender closing date & time
1.	658530	Renovation and Refurbishment with equipment of Central Auditorium at Govt. Debendra College, Manikganj	28-Feb-2022 13:00	28-Feb-2022 14:00	Same as Original	Same as Original
2.	659269	Procurement of Fan, sound system and other electronic equipment for classroom, seminar, laboratories and online classroom studio at Govt. Debendra College, Manikganj	28-Feb-2022 13:00	28-Feb-2022 14:00	28-Mar-2022 13:00	28-Mar-2022 14:00

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copy will be accepted.

To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.

The fees for downloading the e-Tender (658530) documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered banks' branches up to 27-Feb-2022 16:00 and e-Tender (ID No. 659269) documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered bank's branches up to 27-Mar-2022 16:00.

Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk ([helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd](mailto:helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)).

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