The Mysteries of the Human Psyche

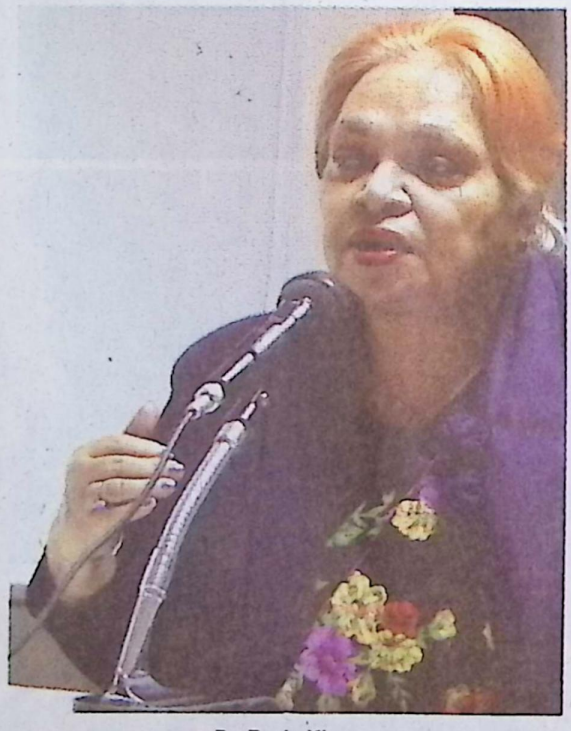
Lecture on George Eliot

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Unless one is a student of English literature or an ardent fan of Victorian writers, chances are that the name George Eliot will not particularly evoke unbridled enthusiasm. It may seem even a little outlandish to have a lecture on a writer so little known among ordinary readers. But George Eliot, a novelist of the 19th century, is far more relevant to our society and to today's world in general than one would think. A lecture on her last novel Daniel Deronda amply demonstrated this. Organised by the English Department of the Independent University of Bangladesh (IUB), the lecture on January 30, was given by writer, poet and former English and American Literature Professor of Dhaka University, Dr. Razia Khan whose PhD thesis was on George Eliot and her 'multi-dimensional vision' in Daniel Deronda.

With his usual wry wit, Professor Shawkat Hussain, Head of English and Modern Languages at IUB and a former student and colleague (at DU) of Khan's, introduced the speaker and related interesting anecdotes about her classes. Hussain described Khan as a 'terrific and inspirational teacher'. He recalled the first day of class, which was to be a lecture on William Blake, when she walked in and upon observing the conspicuous segregation of male and female students dryly commented that Blake would have been most dismayed at such separation of the sexes. The situation, he added jokingly, had not much changed since then, now that he himself is a teacher at the same university. Hossain listed Khan's numerous identities and accolades a writer of fiction and poetry in both English and Bangla (Anukalpa, Draupadi, He Mahajibon, Argus under Anaesthesia, Cruel April etc.), winner of the Bangla Academy award for Fiction in 1974 for her first novel, Bottolar Upannyash as well as the Ekushey Award for Education.

Professor Niaz Zaman, Advisor to IUB's English department, a writer and a long-time former colleague of the writer at DU, also spoke on the occasion.



Dr. Razia Khan

Dr. Razia Khan began her speech on the various dimensions of Daniel Deronda by saying that the pro-Judaic elements in the novel may seem a little anomalous in present circumstances with the conflicts in the Middle East, although it was written in context with the upheavals of the Jewish people at the time of George Eliot. Thus the novel is very much about ethnic identity and racial discrimination, highly relevant subjects in present times.

The title of the lecture 'Storm in the Psyche' explained Khan signified a marked intensification of psychological crisis in the novel's female protagonist Gwendolen Harleth. In fact it is Gwendolen's inner conflicts that predominate the novel although it is named after another character Daniel Deronda who acts as Gwendolene's saviour and ultimately, her conscience.

The story is about a young woman whose family's wealth has dwindled forcing her to toy with hard choices: to become a governess and live a modest life or to marry Grandcourt, a wealthy man of dubious character. Gwendolen, seduced by the thought of a life of glamour and luxury makes the devastating mistake of choosing the philandering Grandcourt.

Khan described Gwendolen as "an intelligent girl who gets embroiled in the egotistic snares of Grandcourt who is polished in manners, genteel by birth" but also an "inveterate sadist bent upon turning his paramours into mental wrecks." Khan pointed out the cult of the anti-hero and Grandcourt is certainly is one: "He first attracts his victims by putting on his best behaviour. His apparent disinterestedness makes him doubly attractive to his prey - especially to a woman bored with too many overtures from other males previously."

Soon after Gwendolen is lured into his trap through marriage, Grandcourt goes all out to break her spirit, to humiliate and abuse her. Gwendolen suffers terribly and almost has a nervous breakdown. But, pointed out Khan "there is a strong fibre in Gwendolen which can withstand the storms."