An Afternoon with a Difference

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Spring is unmistakably in the air and that always gives one something to rejoice about– but the Department of English, University of Dhaka had other reasons as well to be in a festive mood. It celebrated on March 09, 2014 the International Women's Day and felicitated Prof Dr Niaz Zaman for her outstanding service to the Department and her personal achievements. The programme format was quite unconventional—the formal speeches of the occasion were interspersed with readings and performances; the chair of the occasion Professor Emeritus Dr Serajul Islam Choudhury, along with the Dean of the Faculty Prof Sadrul Amin, Special Guest Dr Anisuzzaman, Professor Emeritus and Chief Guest Pro-VC Prof Nasreen Ahmad graciously sat not on the dais but in the front row. The traditional crest given on such occasions was substituted by a more aesthetically-pleasing handcrafted artifact bearing a plaque of appreciation. Prof Dr Nasreen Ahmad, the Chief Guest of the event, the first ever-female Pro-VC (Academic), of the University of Dhaka presented the gift to Prof Zaman. For the guests seated in the auditorium it was truly a moment to savour – on the stage were Prof Ahmad and Prof. Zaman, both academics, both accomplished women, both with distinctions that one could be genuinely proud of.

The programme consisted of readings from assorted women's writings with the aim to show the unique range of experiences, emotions and perspectives that women bring into their texts. There was also a presentation on 'Women in Education and Literature in Bangladesh' by Department of English that opened with a preamble narrated by Rumana Siddique played along with scenes of Satyajit Ray's film on Tagore's urbane heroine Charulata seen surveying the world beyond her doorstep through her opera glasses. The presentation looked at important figures belonging to the colonial era, the era from the partition to 1971 and the contemporary scene. The piece was dedicated, amid warm applause, to women, from colonial, early- feminist Sarala Devi to academic and litterateur Niaz Zaman, who have paved the way for women to follow, and inspired them to excel in education and literature.

It is not often that one gets a chance to experience a stage production in English, in Dhaka. The Department of English gave a delightful treat by having Bushra Mahzabeen and Towhidul Islam Khan perform as Elizabeth and Darcy in the proposal scene from the Jane Austen classic *Pride and Prejudice* that celebrated its bicentenary in 2013. Bushra and Towhid gave a heart-warming performance as a couple in love marred by one's pride and the other's prejudice. There was also a performance from Nasreen Mustafa's *Lilaboti*, the story of the gifted Sinhalese princess who earns the displeasure of her father-in-law and has her tongue sliced as punishment. Arpita Haque looking resplendent in a marigold orange sari rendered a sensitive performance, conveying Lilaboti's conviction in herself and her obeisance to patriarchal pressure, with poise and forbearance. The programme was rounded off with a scene from Prof Niaz Zaman's one-act play *In Celebration of Women*, which had Dravida Huda playing the role of Nayan, a mother who invites women—famous personages from literature and real life—to come and join her daughter's naming ceremony. Nayan is determined that the daughter she has named Sultana shall learn from women and together they will prove that women are more than singers of songs and tellers of tales.

Both faculty members and students read from various texts and various genres including excerpts from Mary Wollstonecraft, Isabelle Allende, Emily Brontë, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, Maya Angelou, Barbara Kingsolver, Alice Munro, Toru Dutt, Germaine Greer and Hélène Cixous. The audience were particularly captivated by Prof Kaiser Haq's reading read from Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. Prof. Rebecca Haque and Ms