

Sayantana Pal Chowdhury Reviews Ketaki Datta's *One Year For Mourning*

Ketaki Datta's second novel *One Year for Mourning* has seen the bright sky over the world in December, 2014 when it has been published by Partridge Publishing House, USA. The 189-page long novel not only draws the attention of the reader from the beginning to the end for its narrative technique, but it introduces to the reader a number of faces who were once very familiar to the narrator herself. The death of the narrator's mother is the theme of the novel surrounding which the whole successive narration takes place. It is like throwing pebbles at the pond while sitting on the shore and masochistically enjoying the waves created by the sudden commotion. The narrator enjoys in the retelling of this narration, but she is very much conscious of her presence throughout the novel.

The narrator Mithi looks back to her past, which is full of desolation, betrayal and desperation. The only source of happiness she had at that time was in the family atmosphere of hers though she gets the family environment after her granny's death when she comes to her parents. The situations she had to go through were reflective to the young mind. Her Granny's death soon revealed the true nature of her maternal uncle, her shift from Calcutta to a 'hick town' of Hridaypur, her new

associations there, were all very impressive to her. The shift of places has less importance in the novel than her mental changes and sometimes mental challenges she had to face while going through these eventful days.

When her mother dies watering on her whole endeavour to keep her alive for more few years, she comments, "From the next morning, her physical presence would be a thing of the past." It is not only her *physical presence* becomes a thing of past but the narrator herself jumps into the oceanic memories of past all rooted in the single death. Her father's death rather seems to be less reflective though it is all of a sudden. Her attachment with her mother was deeper than any other relations after her granny.

The other relations she narrates here draw her attention because they were only from her mother's acquaintances. The extra-marital relationships in cases of Rani-Keshabbabu or Srijita-Dr. Tushar Sen seem quite fashionable in a modern town. Loneliness broods over these characters. Though married, they are not mentally or physically satisfied with their spouses.

Rani's case is quite different and carefully handled. Her character has been observed very closely. The narrator as if looks at her very sympathetically. The breach has been created in their relationship by the impotency of her husband and that mental distance between the two leads Rani to an extra-marital relationship, which can be termed as her mental abode which she finds in Keshabbabu. At last her coming back to her husband is not a respectful one, but an instance of a feminine isolation. A breach once created in a relationship can hardly be cemented up unless mutual love and respect for

each other supply much ingredient. She seems to lose her mental condition when she refuses to accept Nayanika as her daughter.

The deaths of the near and dear ones of the narrator stir her inward soul. The deaths of Lekha and Probir seem quite unnatural and Datta could have much scope to develop the plot of Probir's death. Poetic justice comes in his character so abruptly and so early that he could not get much scope to realize his faults he had committed with Lekha. Even Probir's death seems to be relief to the narrator because he was a threat against her virginity.

The translations of the Bengali terms in the brackets may seem unnecessary though helpful for a reader unknown of the language. The translation of the Bengali song *Jochhona korechhe aari* is marvellous and noteworthy. It is a proof enough for the novelist's craftsmanship in the area of translation.

Besides the translations, Datta has a poet in her inner soul that is very much reflected in her the poems fitted for the characters. The poem on Life and Living reflects the contrast between how one ought to live and how life actually comes to every individual practically. All the poems are philosophical and reflective.

The novel is in the form of a narration. There are many characters and each one is focused differently. The whole novel is from the viewpoint of the narrator. It is focused on how the narrator looks at the characters. As it is written in the first person narrative, the technique she uses gives less scope to indulge with the characters more elaborately. The events are narrated so minutely with every detail of trivial things and the whole narration from the beginning to the end flows so fast that there is only a

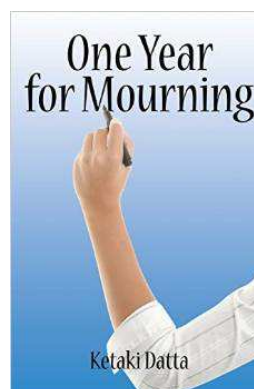
detail of narration of events. The narrative technique keeps the narrator away from the events making her only an observer. Only one exception is there, that is her mother's death. It stirs her world from within with which she spends the rest of her life.

The shifts of places and the changes of time would lead a modern reader to a world where these shifts could be kept aside to ponder over the mental condition of the narrator. From Calcutta to a hick town and then again to Calcutta, and the journeys through the many places in North and South Bengal give a contrast not only in the mentality of the narrator but the contrast between a metropolitan city and a country side also.

Time has been used by the novelist very meticulously. The frequent change of time from now to then and again then to now shows the novelist's playfulness with the modern aspect of time like Amitav Ghosh or V.S. Naipaul. But it is clear enough that the aim of the novelist is not to show these changes of time. What she points at is to enliven the narrator by supplying the memories. These are not the memories in which the narrator would like to live, but these are the memories, which to the narrator are most likely to be her own shadow. She is living in the void. A partner could have been possible in her life if she had accepted Amar. But she was not ready to compromise with her life. She loved Deabaditya who does not love her in return. On the other hand, Amar loved her, but she did not. But it cannot be said that she repented for not accepting Amar as her life partner. The only void she feels in her life is due to her mother's absence. Nothing can compensate for the loss. She gets relief in remembering the past. She is not living in the past; rather, she is living in the present by the process of

making the past a present to her. And one year for mourning is not the celebration of a vacuity or is not only to remember her mother, but it is more than living in the hollowness—the hollowness that is constituted by the arms of the mother and the daughter holding together making a circle of happy past memories. The memories of past are made happy not by events but by the presence of the two dearest and nearest persons, two counterparts, a mother and a daughter. This attracts the whole attention of the reader throughout the novel and no respite could be possible without ending it in a single breath.

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The author

Dr. Ketaki Datta is an Associate Professor of English, Bidhannagar College, Kolkata. She is a novelist, short story writer, critic and a translator. Her debut novel *A Bird Alone* has won rave reviews in India and abroad. Her poems have been published in anthologies published by Brian Wrixon, Canada.

One Year for Mourning is a novel, which contains her multilayered experience with life, immediately after her mother's demise owing to chronic renal failure. This novel is not biographical though it is replete with the facts of the author's life.

The reviewer

Sayantana Pal Chowdhury is an Asst. Teacher with Siliguri Baradakanta Vidyapith (HS) and writer. He has published many papers in national and international journals. He has attended many national and international conferences and seminars. His debut short story 'Progress' has been published in *New Asian Writing Short Story Anthology 2013*. His short story *Secret Taj* has been published in *The Criterion Journal* (December 2014).
