

## Rumpa Das Reviews Ketaki Datta's *One Year for Mourning*

### Mnemosyne's favourite child: Reading Ketaki Datta's *One Year for Mourning*

Mnemosyne, the Titaness and the daughter of Gaia and Uranus, gave birth to the nine Muses following her union with Zeus. Among the Muses was Terpsichore, the Muse of dance. Kathakali, a stylized Indian dance form that originated in Kerala is best known for its ornate couture, elaborate make up, dramatized evocation of human emotions that have been almost tropified, detailed gestures and the accompaniment of music, playback and often percussion. Ketaki Datta's protagonist is named Kathakali (endearingly called Mithi or 'sweet' by her family members), and what happens in course of this 187-page novel is as if a recital of the human-drama in Kathakali's life, complimented by her poetic effusions of all nuances of human emotions in retrospect. Mnemosyne as if situates the novelist in the layers of Kathakali's psyche and helps her unwrap the folds of time to reveal one layer of rich emotional experience after another. The novel, published by Partridge, in many ways recalls the subtle recording of the mindscape that was evident in her debut novel, *A Bird Alone* (2009) but transcends the flight of the bird in being both acutely personal as well as liberatingly universal in appeal.

The novel has as prologue lines from T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding* that reminds readers of the inexorability of the end mingling with the beginning. As Eliot had put it, ' . . . the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time'. And so the novel starts where it ends, the death of the mother in the super-speciality hospital of a small town in North Bengal and the chapter-heading hauntingly echoes the stillness of the final sleep – 'No More'. The novelist accepts the challenge to start her novel from a vacuous nihilism that symbolically has the power to overwhelm all traces of human efforts and activity, all traces of human life. But the emptiness and sense of profound loss that initiates the novel's journey is more than offset by the chapters that roll next, and the poignantly moving scenes of human lives it unfolds. The protagonist Mithi's mother – beautiful, talented and all that mothers are usually blessed with – meets her end at the comparatively 'unjustified age of 67' (p.14) Mithi's trauma, her efforts to come to terms with this turbulent phase of her life after an equally arduous and prolonged effort when she had patiently nursed her mother through her difficult days of undergoing dialysis, and the final hours of a breathless wait – when the mind knew that her mother is living on borrowed time, yet the heart screams an agonising No! to the brain's realisation – all are sensitively but graphically plotted by the meticulous author.

The next chapters – Our days in the past, Youth in Blossom, Wayward Love – delineate Mithi's growing up as well as her displacement from Calcutta, the first place she knew as home to a small town in North Bengal where her parents and her younger brother lived. Once she settles down (does she ever settle down?), Mithi's life becomes a whirligig of varied emotions, new experiences that are to leave an indelible mark on her sensibility

and character. Her English Literature teacher, Prof. Banerjee, her father – the amiable doctor, committed to his cause and to his feline pets, her mother's friend, Rani auntie – the Cleopatra of the hick-town, even the quaint river Tarangini that serenely swept the flanks of the town – all had a tremendous impact on the impressionable mind of the poetically-oriented Mithi, as Kathakali was called. Her brother, Tubu, flits across the pages of the narrative in swift, boyish treads, matching the graceful steps of her mother who exists throughout the novel like the unmistakable aura of warmth and affection that's synonymous with maternal care. But along with the mother who is the chief moving force of the main plot, there exists Rani, the incorrigibly romantic aesthete who seems to gush out of her cloistered existence as a doctor's wife. Rani's story – of unrequited love, suppressed genius, and irrepressible passion is almost fore-doomed to conform to societal duress and patriarchal mores. Mithi, naïve, innocent, eager to grow is drawn alongside Rani, sensual, intense and eager to drink life to the lees. However, there is no attempt on the part of the author to judge either, though as a woman-writer, her allegiances are naturally with her protagonists. One cannot but agree with Keats, albeit in a different generic paradigm, that one really hates poetry [or any kind of literature!] that has a palpable design upon us. Datta deftly weaves her plot with different subplots with effortless ease, and her novel becomes an arena for girl-women like Mithi, and grown-up women such as her grandmother, Mithi's mother, her kitty party friends, Rani, Lekha-di, Anushree or even the Frenchwoman Michele to play out the different shades of a woman's being. Virginia Woolf, a formative influence on her writings, (as the novelist had happily exclaimed in a *tete à tete*) had remarked in *A Room of One's Own*, ' . . . we think back through our mother if we are women'. Indeed, Mithi's personality is conditioned and customised by her mother who instils in her daughter her exquisite tastes in music and literature, superb communication skills that make her the cynosure of eyes in that hick-town they inhabited, and her fortitude and strength of character that helps her retain her selfhood while facing the vicissitudes of life. Rani's mother too stands by her daughter like rock, when rejected by her husband, the impotent self-important doctor, she goes back to her maternal home to give birth to her love-child with her music –teacher, Keshab babu. Lekha-di and her sister, Tulu di who chose the life of a spinster to take care of an ailing mother too are strong women who are fighters in life, and death comes not as a victor but as merely a pause in their struggle.

In fact, one of the themes of the novel is undoubtedly death, and its different ramifications. The novel records a number of deaths – beginning with Mithi's mother and ending with her father's, with Lekha di's death, her wayward husband Prabir da's death and a number of symbolic deaths placed in between. For all of Rani's Epicurean passion to live and love, she meets disapproval, disgrace and dejection. Throttling her desires to feel – as a woman, as a wife, and even as a mother, Rani's resignation to herself to lead the life of Mrs Roy is in many ways a death-in-life situation. Her inner being dies while leaving her love-child in the orphanage to return to her marital home, yet she lives a non-life only to conform to the stereotypical expectations of her as a married woman. Lekha di's husband deserts her for another woman, and she dies

untreated, unattended, on the cold floors of the Calcutta Medical College Hospital much to the relief of her husband, but death to her is also a relief. Mithi's father's death on the wedding day of Tubu is really, as the chapter-heading claims, A Bolt from the Blue, but he too is a warrior in life who sublimates over death. Having handled humiliation and ignominy after a life-long commitment to the noble profession of medicine, Mithi's father had struggled to reconcile himself to the combined onslaught of scheming humans and perverse situations. His death that comes at a dramatic juncture, however, posits him as a winner who finishes his race and then gives himself up. Mithi's mother's death, after a sustained struggle, both by the mother-daughter duo, is the most important experience in Mithi's life that orients her to a new assessment of life. The mourning that is referred to in the title follows this particular death but it raises more questions than it answers.

To a query regarding the title of the novel, the author had responded that she had issues with the religious obsequies and rituals that prescribed a period of compulsory mourning for a year after the death of a relative. In the novel, Mithi is curtly informed by her brother and his wife that since she had taken care of the ailing mother in the final days of her life, she has to stay in the room she shared with her mother 'to commemorate the moments she spent'. Stunned by the mindless cruelty inflicted upon her at this delicate juncture, Mithi's heartfelt anguish is articulated in block capitals as she writes, 'ONE YEAR FOR CELEBRATING THE VACUITY, ONE YEAR FOR REMEMBERING HER . . .' while the throbbing pain filters forth in tears that seep through the words. The novelist asked this reviewer whether one year is enough time to weep away the tragic loss of a mother, of a parent, of a near and dear one? The angst that was reflected in the query is also immanent in the writings of Urvashi Butalia, one of the literary luminaries, Datta claims to be influenced by. Rituals and customs have a strange way of making inroads in human consciousness and an equally strange rationale of their own. While the pull of the umbilical chord may be severed at childbirth, no plausible time-span, if at all it may, can reasonably let a son or daughter tide over the loss of a mother, or father. Time, one must admit, is relative and doesnot always heal.

The novel is in many ways a bildungsroman. Mithis of the world, called by any name-Kathakali, Michele, Rani, or Tulu, grow up within the pent-up patriarchal walls in much the same way that the novelist has scrupulously plotted. And so, in an interesting handling of time that reminds one of the Bergsonian perception of time, Mithi's narrative is intertwined with Rani's without any apparent breaks or compartmentalisations and Rani's paramour ,Gautam da's sheer inability to respond to the exigencies of situation is matched with the impotence of her husband, Dr Bharat Roy, ' a physician of much renown' in the hick town. In the multiple layers of narrative lie folds of memory and remembrance. The deft handling of time, where past and present, of Mithi's story and of Rani's story exist like the warp and woof of a fabric, bears testimony to the collective unconscious of an individual which throws up so many differently-hued layers into relief. But like an expert danseuse or a painter, the novelist succeeds in synchronising the diverse materials into a beautiful tapestry of life. The

novel, as the novelist confided, was engendered by a personal tragedy, and the sense of loss, disorientation and failure of find a sliver of solace in the face of humungous grief are writ large on the narrative canvas. Neither Calcutta, nor Hridaypur –the small cosy town nestled in North Bengal, nor the misty mountain slopes of the town where Mithi is first employed can offer her a shelter. The only secure bower of bliss that she enjoys is her proximity to her mother, be it in the comfortable confines of their home at Hridaypur (which, in Bengali, means Heart-town) , or the sea-resort the family visits or while her mother is undergoing dialysis at the hospital in Calcutta. Mithi is forever denied the felicity of having a room of her own, except when she is enforced to spend a solitary mother-less year in the same room she shared with her angel, her mum.

The narrative style is simple as all elemental emotions are. As the plot and subplots intertwine smoothly, the characters too emerge out of the text as flesh-and-blood individuals. The dialogues are fraught with feelings and dramatic moments are interspersed with moments of exquisite depiction, either of nature or of natural feelings. Some moments stand out eternalised – the moment when the turbulent love of Rani and Gautam da find fulfilment or the moment when Mithi comes to learn of her mother's demise. Such moments are what make ordinary drab lives so mystical, magical, intensely personal yet decidedly universal as well. A romantic herself, Datta's language is evocative just as her poetry is. Like her creator, Mithi is a poet at heart and her account of the experiences that enrich her life are dotted with poetry that has potential to enrich the lives of the readers. Lines such as 'Passion has stings,/ Despair too' and 'Sometimes I feel/ Dreams are a must/To live a life/Meaningful, divine' reverberate in the mind, and keep haunting the readers. *One Year For Mourning* captivates the heart while reading and leaves the reader in a daze after the actual reading experience, wondering whether s/he isn't too, like Mithi, - 'the lonely bird/In all its escapades (?)'

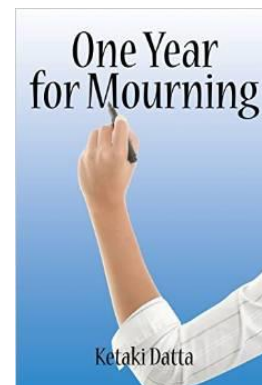
Title: One Year for Mourning

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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.

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### ***The reviewer***

**Rumpa Das** (b.1970) did her graduation and post-graduation from Jadavpur University, Kolkata and Ph. D from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. Her doctoral dissertation entitled *Feminism and Motherhood: Some Major Nineteenth Century Profiles* charts the interface of feminism and motherhood in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Shelley and Felicia Hemans. She has about thirty-five articles in various national and international books and journals, in addition to five forthcoming ones. She has spoken in twenty-two state-level, national and international seminars and conferences. She writes poetry, short stories and reviews. Her areas of interest are Romanticism, Post-colonialism and Media Studies. She is Associate Professor and Head, Dept. of English, Maheshtala College, Kolkata.

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