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Maria-Ana Tupan*

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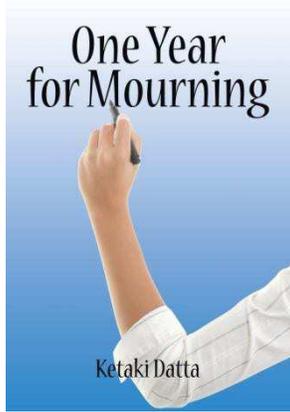
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# **A Compelling Saga, Poignant yet not Maudlin**

## **A Review of *One Year for Mourning***

### **A Novel by Ketaki Datta**



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*Reviewed by*  
*Arnab Bhattacharya*  
*Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata*

The mother-daughter relationship is certainly one of the most intriguing of human relationships. Carl Gustav Jung has written extensively on the mother archetype, and also on the mother-complex in the daughter. According to Jung, the ways in which this mother-complex can operate in a daughter can be classified into four major categories namely, i) hypertrophy of the maternal element, ii) overdevelopment of Eros, iii) identity with the mother, and iv) resistance to the mother. But, as life always overleaps the theoretician's best endeavour and the scientist's sharpest acumen, the categories mentioned above are neither exhaustive nor definitive. To a woman, her mother is very often more than an individual; very often she stands for her home, her lost childhood, a part of her life all of which become part of a memory that she can no longer live.

Ketaki Datta's second novel *One Year for Mourning* is a testament of the mother-daughter relationship that eludes standard categorizations of relationship, and plumbs the depths of a human bonding that reaches down to the roots of existence. The novel weaves memories of a bereaved daughter who is passing through a phase of ritualistic mourning which is prescribed in Hindu

scriptures. The novelist deploys the flashback technique and harks back to her early childhood and adolescence, and also her early youth. The novel limns her memories that come flooding back to her. Her quiet yet colourful life in the hick town called Hridaypur, the family picnics by the side of the river Tarangini, kitty parties at her home, frequent visitors to their residence, her relationship with her father who was a professionally committed physician in a government hospital, and also with her sibling Tubu---everything gets vibrantly portrayed in expertly crafted lyrical prose. The details are painstakingly registered, and moments of emotional exuberance or turmoil have been enlivened without being sentimentalized or over-sensitized. These speak volumes for the author's restraint when the issue is speaking about oneself. In an intra-diegetic narration replete with autobiographical elements (the novel is one such), the authorial self of the narrator always has to try a fall with her real-life self. In this battle of one-upmanship, the authorial self has to edge past its contestant if the novel has to succeed. Datta, the narrator, has here caressed the Datta, the daughter, but has never allowed the latter to get the better

of her. Kudos to Datta for this feat in tight-rope walking!

Reception Aesthetics would have us believe that a text is 'produced' more by the reader than by the author. Roland Barthes in *The Semiotic Challenge* has so ardently pre-empted the 'textual analysis' over 'structural analysis', emphasizing 'the avenues of meaning' sought out by the reader. In Datta's novel, an imaginative reader may well find his 'avenues' meandering through the hick town, mingling with the people whom Datta reminisces on, and get a feel of a lost time laden with an aroma of bitter-sweet memories that intoxicate and engross. One feels suddenly stalked by a time in which people like the narrator's mother and narrator herself show great devotion to music and sitar, in which parched-souled, disconsolate women like Rani aunty and Srijita aunty get helplessly locked in dull, loveless marriage ties, and self-defeatingly seek soccours in extramarital affairs, and in which a dedicated doctor like the narrator's father is hounded out of his residence and is forced to sell his much-adored X-ray machine. The words with which Datta depicts these characters and narrates the incidents of their plights and trials serve to relocate the reader in a different temporal order altogether. It is not the hassling, hustling time of the hypercompetitive and ruthlessly professional world of the new millennium, but one in which passion mattered in relationships as well as in professions.

The virtuosity of Datta's prose and narrative voice lies in its unassuming and unabashed simplicity, giving a 'speaking from the heart' feeling which is never easy to emulate. The way she verbalizes her own angst and mortification at her unreciprocated love for Debaditya argues an intimate style of writing which is poignant yet not maudlin. When Debaditya declines the narrator's telephonic invitation to the nearest coffee-joint, she so describes her hurt sentiments: "I hung up, keeping the receiver on the cradle and felt the ground my feet shake. I came down the stairs calmly, with dejected steps, never to tiptoe up to his place again" (p-126). We feel the tremor within the narrator's heart, but the surface narrative registers only ripples of that. This is masterly. And then, the passages which describe the narrator's unbelievably strenuous service to her terminally ailing mother are heart-wrenching in the truest sense.

But, on some occasions the narration seems to flag somewhat, especially when the narrator rather unselfconsciously tends to be judgmental. While talking about Rani aunty's physical intimacy with the Keshab Babu, her sitar teacher, Datta uses terms like 'lascivious'. These jar, because Datta's tone towards Rani aunty has all along been sympathetic, and also because the plain calumny of a character in such raucously cruel terms does not quite argue artistic finesse. But these foibles apart, the novel is greatly moving.

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**Arnab Bhattacharya** is a senior resource person of postgraduate diploma course in Translation Studies at Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, West Bengal, and a panelled book reviewer of *The Telegraph* for more than 15 years. His previous publications include *Of Ghosts and Other Perils* (Orient Blackswan, 2013), an English translation of hilarious stories by the nineteenth-century Bengali author Troilokyonath Mukhopadhyay and *Writing the Body: Studies in the Self-images of Women in Indian English Poetry* (Common Ground, 2014), an edited volume on the discourse of the body in Indian English poetry by women. *The Politics and Reception of Rabindranath Tagore's Drama: The Bard on the Stage* (Routledge, 2015), co-edited with Mala Renganathan, is his most recent editorial venture.

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