

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Title:** *A Bird Alone*,  
**Author:** Ketaki Dutta,  
**Publisher:** Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2008.  
**148 pp.**

**Reviewer:** Pinaki Roy  
**Assistant Professor of English,**  
**Malda College, Rabindra Avenue,**  
**Rathbari More,**  
**District: Malda – 732 101**

The ash-grey cover-jacket and the title of Ketaki Dutta's debut novel are self-revealing of the storyline. In spite of the usage of the singular vowel 'a' in the title, there are, in fact, two *transcenders* in the novel – Anita and Chandana: the former desperately trying to transcend the monotony and senilities of an advanced life, while the latter tries to carve a niche in the big unfriendly world, coming out of the protection of 'didu' – that is, Anita – who, as an activist, had recovered her in her infancy from a northern Indian hothouse. Both of these women, for whom the world appears in shades of (ash) grey – are 'birds' in the symbolic sense – they yearn to soar high above the uncaring and cruel society, and yet they discover their loneliness at the end of the novel. In spite of having children who are self-sufficient and well-settled in the worldly sense of the terms, a 'caretaker' whom she had rescued and has had kept at her own lodging, and a grandson born abroad and sent to India to study at Sikkim and thereafter Kolkata schools, Anita ends at the conclusion of the novel where she begins – gruesomely segregated and alienated. On the other hand, to wade off her lonesome feelings, Chandana had hopelessly fallen in love with the married Arunesh, who impregnates her and leaves the hapless girl in the lurch. In between, the long letter of Merlin Premdas, who expires miserably alone at an old-age-home in the twelfth chapter of the novel, offers an 'epistolary autobiography of Anita's friend who had had hankered after love and attention throughout her life. Everytime Anita refers to the longish letter, managing time out of her daily chores, her sense of her own alienated existence returns to haunt her.

Anita and Chandana seem to be two 'everywomen' – denizens of the Eliotian Wasteland of modern civilisation where the typist-girl does not care to notice that her 'lover' has left after uniting with her. One of them lives at Darjeeling, while the other teaches at a school in the state of Sikkim – a decision which initially infuriates her 'didu' – where she at first successfully fights against the amorous attentions of the lascivious co-teacher Khaitan, and thereafter gives herself in to the scheming Arunesh. The twelve chapters of the novel are dominated by letters – the letters of Premdas – to begin with – those written by Anita's foreign-settled daughter Nina to her mother, that written by Mayuri to Chandana in the third chapter, and so on. Datta uses lucid English to construct the novel in a manner, which, in spite of the predominantly epistolary character of the publication, is

sure to hold the attention of readers throughout. The septuagenarians and octogenarians, in particular, will be able to find in Datta's debut novel a realistic depiction of their own plights. The youngsters, on the other hand, may find a befitting warning about what the modern civilisation would do to them once they reached old age.

Finally, one cannot help recalling different publications and stylistic features of several authors after completing Datta's enticing novel. First of all, one of the central messages of self-revelatory *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez comes to the mind for obvious reasons. Ernest Hemingway may have quoted the famous line – 'No man is an island' – from John Donne's "Meditation Number 17" (*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1624) at the beginning of his *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), but Datta's novel does show precisely what Donne had negated: in modern world, every individual is compartmentalised within her/his own self. In her masterly though somewhat symbolic portrayal of the *Gorkhaland Unrest* of the 1980s, Ketaki Datta undoubtedly parallels Kiran Desai's depiction of the same in her *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Virginia Woolf, referred to in the novel, seems to have crept in through the author's identifiable usage of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Readers are sure to be reminded of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith of Woolf's 1925 *Mrs. Dalloway* as they flip between Anita's and Chandana's experiences. In *The Namesake* (2003), Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the debilitating influence of the West on the cultures and demeanours of the immigrants from southeastern Asia. It is as a precautionary measure against this that Nina sends her child, Duke, to India. The novel is perceptively of an epistolary character. May one recall, as predecessors, Gabriel-Joseph de La Vergne's *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669), Aphra Behn's *Love letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Wilkie Collin's *The Moonstone* (1868), Katharine Taylor's *Address Unknown* (1938), Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982), and (the more recent) Meg Cabot's *The Boy Next Door* (2002). Datta has given a brilliant demonstration of her having mastered this special style of novel writing. Finally, the existentialist crises Anita and Chandana face at the conclusion of *A Bird Alone* are sure to remind us of the Norwegian metaphysician Peter Wessel Zapffe's *The Last Messiah* (1933) and Thomas Wartenberg's *Existentialism* (2008), in both of which such crises have been explored in details. Wartenberg refers to instances of literary existential crises too.