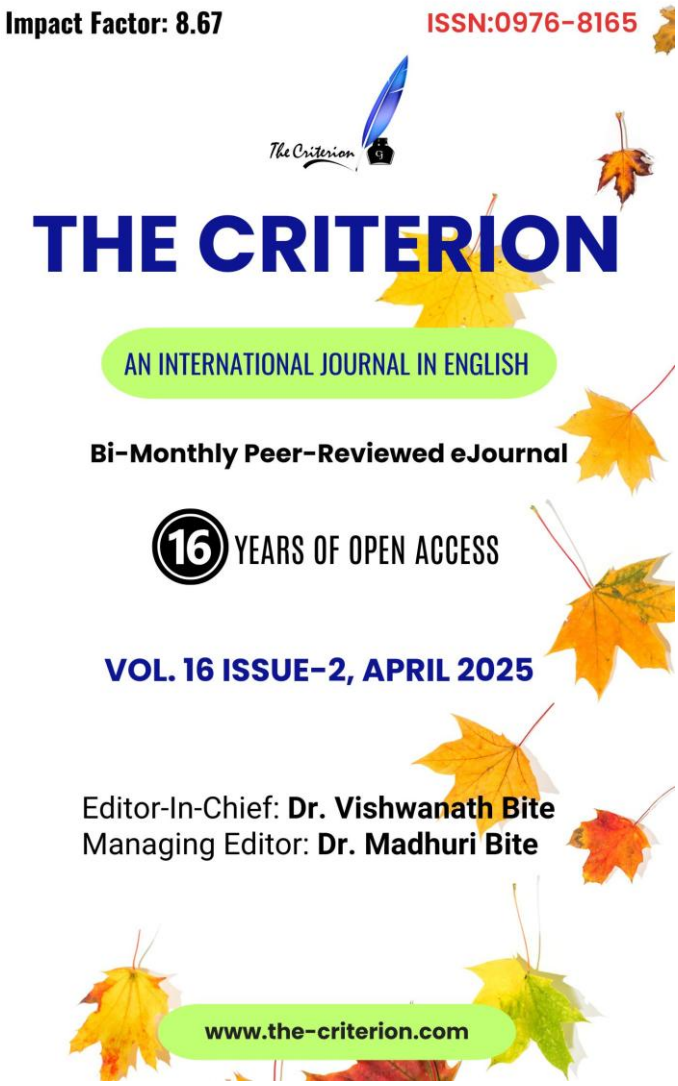

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Book Review

Title: *The Owl, the River and the Valley*

Author: Arupa Patangia Kalita

Translated by: Mitra Phukan

Publisher: Penguin Books

Pages: 338

Genre: Women's Writing

Reviewed by:
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The Owl, the River and the Valley is the latest collection of short stories by Assamese writer, Arupa Patangia Kalita, and has been translated into English by writer, columnist and translator, Mitra Phukan. The collection comprising a dozen stories by the Sahitya Akademi award-winning writer have never been published in English before and offer an enriching glimpse into Kalita's unflinchingly feminist and uniquely narrated stories of ordinary women from contemporary Assam. Kalita is perhaps best-known for her novel titled *The Story of Felanee* which is set against the backdrop of the language wars that erupted into violence in Assam of the late seventies. Many of her well-known stories such as *Ayengla of the Blue Hills, Suagmoni's Mother, the Storyteller* or *Arunima's Motherland* are feminist tellings about women caught in the snare of violence resulting from ethnic or communal strife and insurgency. However, while this collection continues with Kalita's fiercely feminist worldview, it offers stories about women from not just a more contemporary Assam but also situates violence not in the public world but mostly in the private, intimate spaces of one's home, and in the most personal of relationships. Similarly, the struggles are not necessarily against a political system

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or an overt ideology, but marked by the multiple, every day, quotidian battles women are compelled to fight, to achieve the most seemingly insignificant of victories.

The women we grow to champion, empathise with, at times pity, sometimes question, and even hate in Kalita's stories are women whose stories and battles are framed by their gender but located in a diverse social milieu and reflective of the heterogeneity of the people of Assam. Consequently, Kalita's feminist lens reflects an intersectional feminism where gender issues are complicated by class and caste, an internalisation of patriarchal ideology by women themselves, hierarchies of power, the sexuality of women and society's need to control and police women's bodies and so on. The stories are intriguingly titled – "The Woman Who Became an Owl," "The Afternoon Grandmother," "Ausi or Hausi" - to name just a few. On closer reading, one wonders if the quirky titles are intentional in their desire to draw the reader's attention to the act of naming, the power invested in it and its symbolism. "Rajmao: The Queen Mother," traces the journey of Komola whose motherhood confers on her the identity of being Purobi's mother, and it is in the attempt to fulfil her duties as a mother that she attains the grandiose name of Rajmao but only after paying a terrible price for it. "By the Clock" introduces us to Ghori-Koka-Aita and the tyranny of the grandfather's clock which becomes a metonym for the authoritarian presence of her husband. Further, the ticking of the clock is evocatively set against the stasis and benumbing routine life of Ghori-Aita whose days blend into each other in a foggy haze. "Daughter of the Dark Memsahib," similarly captures the essential nature of one of the darkest and best-kept secrets of Assam's tryst with British colonialism and the beginning of the tea industry - the exploitation and resultant plight of those women who languished in the oxymoronic existence of being a dark memsahib, women who were denied both filial ties and ties of matrimony by the man who fathered her children, women who often, unsurprisingly, belonged to marginalised communities such as the Adivasis. "The Woman Who Became an Owl" in many ways sums up a central stance many of Kalita's stories

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upholds, and that is the truth that a woman does whatever is necessary to resist and to survive, and sometimes survival might even necessitate a woman becoming an owl.

Kalita in fact reiterates that resistance for any woman lies in the very act of survival which may entail many a compromise. So, in "Maloti's Dream," the indefatigable mother picks up and plods on in the face of mounting challenges to keep the dream alive of seeing her daughter become an engineer. But when the reality of poverty compounded by systemic corruption compels the daughter to choose a more pragmatic path, there isn't any expression of regret. But poverty is never glossed over and Reboti's frantic and frenzied search for "The Yellow Flip-Flops" becomes suggestive of the million micro-aggressions, humiliations and complete apathy that the poor daily navigate through. Women in Kalita's stories are survivors, but the paths they choose or are compelled to choose to survive are never valourised. At times they do so by choosing to live in denial as "Anita's Journey Through Life" suggests, but mostly women are depicted as resourceful and pragmatic, who do what is necessary, without much sentimentalism, unlike what is commonly believed and reiterated about women. But in many of the stories such as "Rajmao: The Queen Mother," "Maloti's Dream," "Ausi or Hausi," and "The Water Is with Child," one witnesses the empowering bond of sisterhood at work, of women leaning on each other, extending support emotionally or materially, or simply accepting each other unconditionally. While "Ausi or Hausi" elaborates the power of that sisterhood, "Tangle," shockingly reveals the inverse and the unimaginable horrors women damaged by internalisation of patriarchal ideas and stereotypes can unleash on each other.

Patriarchal society often portrays marriage and motherhood as the defining moments of a woman's life. Kalita subtly but radically subverts the prevalence of this worldview by repeatedly positing childbirth almost as a footnote in many stories. At times the birth of the child is portrayed as something the mother is almost caught unawares by or as one of the many accidents of her life. Similarly, the loss of a husband, isn't necessarily viewed as a tragedy but

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rather as a liberating moment in a woman's life who is finally able to unshackle herself from the many expectations and lead an unfettered life on her own terms, often discovering or rediscovering herself. But Kalita's viewpoint is rarely simplistic. So, if Ghori-Koka-Aita in "By the Clock," is finally able to finish reading a novel she had to set aside for decades, only after her husband's passing; Renuka Barua's freedom to live life on her terms in "The Reigns" is tellingly undercut by her adoption of the very same mentality underlying the actions of her husband which she once struggled against. Patriarchal society also polices, and contradictorily, commodifies women's bodies. Stories such as "Rajmao," and "The Woman Who Became an Owl," not only centre the discourse on contemporary issues such as surrogacy and sexuality, but also disturbingly interrogate how a woman's labour in fulfilling gendered expectations is completely unacknowledged and invisibilised but is microscopically examined and publicly condemned if societally sanctioned lines are ever breached.

The Owl, the River and the Valley resonates with many such contemporary issues and the ways in which they impact and impinge upon women's lives. Literature from Assam and the northeast has always reflected environmental concerns and has advocated an Anthropocene outlook. The merits of such an outlook are tangentially touched upon in stories such as "The Afternoon Grandmother," but forms a central preoccupation in "The Water Is with Child," a story located in the river island of Majuli, which depicts how women are the ones who possibly pay the biggest price when environmental concerns become snared in politics, conflicting ideologies and policy paralysis. The variety of concerns that Arupa Patangia Kalita explores in this collection of short stories brings alive the life and concerns reflective of contemporary Assam with a rare sensibility and complexity. The radical bravery of Kalita's stories is further accentuated by her exceptional narratorial strategies evocative of Assam's rich oral tradition of literature. Further, Kalita pays homage to the numerous folktales such as the tale of the Kite's Daughter or that of the Matsyakanya in many of her stories and intimates the readers of the

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coexistence of the real with the fabulous in everyday life in Assam. This excellent collection of stories of course would not be available for us to read and enjoy without Mitra Phukan's very sensitive and skilful translation. It has been suggested that translations shouldn't necessarily read fluently in the target language to ensure that the reader is compelled to immerse himself or herself in the culture of the original work. Phukan's translation does read smoothly but at the same time enough thoughtful strategies of translation can be seen at work such as the retention of the often complex and convoluted sentence structure of conversational Assamese, of leaving certain words or phrases untranslated, or that of weaving in an explanation of an object, a ritual, or a relationship that would facilitate a more culturally immersive reading experience for the reader. For example, the work 'rickshaw' is intentionally spelt as "riksha' to retain how it is phonetically pronounced by most people in Assam. Phukan is a well-known writer herself but remarkably, as a translator, one witnesses an unquestioning upholding of Kalita's style and worldview, and that must not have been an easy task. One only needs to read a story such as "Daughter of the Dark Memsahib" to realise the remarkable prowess of Arupa Patangia Kalita's storytelling and the excellent translation abilities of Mitra Phukan. *The Owl, the River and the Valley* is a collection of short stories for not just somebody with an interest in writing from Assam or the northeast but for anybody who loves literature, because this one compares with not just the best available in Indian writing but that in the world.

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