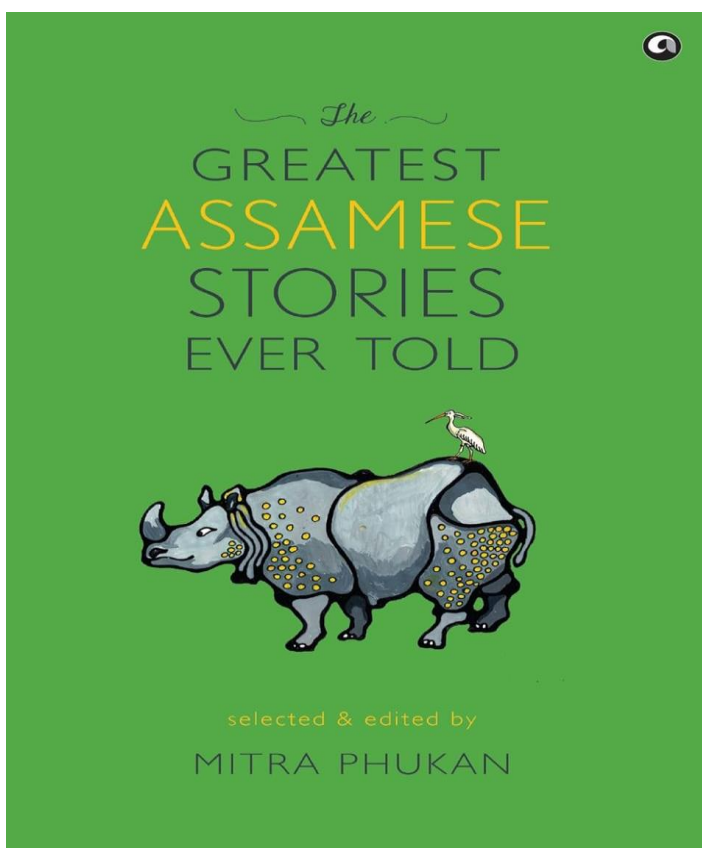


Mitra Phukon (ed.) 2021. *The Greatest Assamese Stories Ever Told*. New Delhi: ALEPH, 2021, i-xxiv +304 pp. ISBN 978-93-90652-93-8.



The book under review attempts to cover the journey of modern short stories written by Assamese authors over a century. There are twenty-five short stories on a variety of themes written by authors ranging from Roxoraj Lakhminath Bezbaroa to Moushumi Kandali. All the stories are translated from the original Assamese by various translators including the editor herself. These stories are diverse not just in terms of subject matter and temporal backgrounds but also in terms of their narrative styles.

Phukon, in her introduction to the collection, traces the origin of short-story writing in Assamese to the Jonaki Era – the time when the first Assamese magazine *Jonaki* was published. Assamese short-stories had their grooming next in the Awahon Age. However, most of the stories written in the subsequent era were published in special annual volumes during the Bihu and the Durga Puja. Besides, *Prantik*, a popular literary magazine also has been instrumental in providing a space for the contemporary short stories. The present collection is a very important literary endeavour which will take stories of Assam to a wider readership.

The first story of the collection, “Patmugi” presents the peculiarities of the human mind. It is a tale about love, passion, betrayal, and human weakness. The story centres around Patmugi. Deserted by her husband, she takes up a journey to the town to meet a lawyer to file a case. One of her distant uncles promises to accompany Patmugi and her mother. On the way he himself falls prey to Patmugi’s beauty and charm and starts behaving erratically. Understanding his predicaments, Patmugi plays with his emotions in a teasing way in order to test his character. In the second part of the story, the real narrator reveals himself to be an aspiring writer who attempted to write this story in the first-person narrative. So, there appears to be two narrators, the second narrator presenting the pseudo narrator of the story right at the beginning. An equally twisted narrative strategy is used by Debabrata Das, a writer writing seven decades after Lakhminath Bezbaroa. His story “A Night with Arpita” presents a tale which later is revealed to be a figment of his imagination. The narrator confesses his conscious blurring of fact and fiction and admits that the later part of the story was just a projection of his alter ego that nurtured his suppressed desire to be a hero. Both the stories project the inner dilemma of the writer personas who attempt to make up stories. In case of Patmugi, the author apprehends that his critics would reject the tale as a story proper, when in the latter story, the narrator’s friend dismisses his narrative as implausible.

A number of stories position women at the centre. They are found to be bold and paranoid at the same time. Aghoni, Damayanti, Moti’s mother, Sushila, are such women. Aghoni in Birinchi Kumar Barua’s “Aghoni Bai” presents the story of a three-generation-long journey against poverty and misery. She struggles as a young widow amidst the prying eyes of men, then as a bereaved mother of a wronged girl and finally as the grandmother of a cripple. The two other widows, Damayanti of Indira Goswami’s “Values” and Sushila of Nirupama Bargohain’s “The Victorious Woman” bravely fight against poverty and torture but give up at certain points. The ending of these two stories, however, presents two kinds of resolutions. While Sushila submits to destiny by accepting to be the mistress of a rich contractor, Damayanti overcomes her passive resignation to accept Pitambar Mahajan whose child she has conceived. She aborts the child on the pretext of her high caste Brahmin status which bars her to conceive the child of a Sudra. Moti’s mother, in Bhabendranath Saikia’s “Rats,” accepts prostitution as a means to conceive a child after her son Moti is killed in an accident. This predicament of valuing emotions over traditional morality brings her image very close to Bezbaroa’s Patmugi. While these women are doubly victimized by poverty and patriarchy, Rita Chowdhry’s “An Incomplete Story” presents a woman belonging to a high class being silenced and sidelined by the strict rules of a ‘Mouzadar’s house.’ The unnamed character becomes depressed after her father, the Mouzadar, breaks her marriage for receiving a book from her would-be husband and banishes her to a life of reclusion. Arupa Patangia Kalita’s “Close of the Day with Miss Havisham” is an acutely sensitive tale about a wife whose whole universe moves around her husband. Time closes down for her at the very moment when her much adored husband is taken out for medical treatment, and never returns.

There are stories which capture intimate moments of human emotions and passions. Yeshe Dorje Thongchi’s “Journey,” Shilabhadra’s “Sweet Acacia,” Mahim Bora’s “Kathanibari

Ghat,” Saurav Kumar Chaliha’s “The Restless Electrons,” Kuladhar Saikia’s “The Journey,” and some other stories come under this category. Dorje Thongchi portrays the predicament of a son, a government officer, who, after spending holidays in his village, is returning to the workplace. His aged father accompanies to see him off at the railway station. The father carries his luggage as the son’s sophisticated status and lack of stamina makes him dependent on others. The son appreciates his father’s large heartedness when the father asks for a pair of old shoes, adamantly rejecting the son’s offer for new ones. “Sweet Acacia” dissects an old man’s hidden memory of a youthful desire, while he is forgetful about his present. “Kathanibari Ghat” depicts the impressions of a youth who, attracted to a married woman’s beauty, soon finds that she has just been widowed. “The Restless Electrons” and “The Journey” divulge different facets of emotions and tangled human relationships.

Imran Hussain’s “Bak: The Water Spirit,” Mousumi Kandali’s “A Tale of Thirdness,” and Purobi Barmudoi’s “The Hunt” take emotions at some other planes. “Bak: The Water Spirit” intermixes myth, superstition, and human desire in an intricate thread and presents the pathetic fate of an orphaned child born out of wedlock. The child drowns himself in a river in order to meet his supposed father, the water spirit. “A Tale of Thirdness” brings in the concept of motherhood as an emotional rather than a physical condition. The story centres around a man, most probably belonging to the LGBTQ group, with the desire to mother a child. “The Hunt” juxtaposes the frenzied passion of hunting of a group of pleasure seekers with the apprehension of a hired hunter and his wife. The treatment of the non-human entities in the story reveals the ecological concerns of the author.

Issues of partition, immigration, insurgency, war, and violence appear in a number of stories which project Assam as a site of geo-political crises. Homen Bargohain’s “Looking for Ismael Sheikh” presents the narrative of immigration of two kinds. The narrator meets a prostitute, a Brahmin immigrant from Bangladesh while searching for Ismael Sheikh, a Muslim immigrant, and the father of three children who met their death during the eviction. Both had their own valid reasons for migration, the first as the victim of communal violence and the second, as the victim of abject poverty. Haunted by their parallel stories, the narrator, too feels victimised under a system that programmes such inhuman moves. Syed Abdul Malik’s “Mistaken Identity” and Birendranath Bhattacharjya’s “Miyah Mansur” revisit the same theme of homelessness, statelessness, and crisis of identity. The stories underscore the need for a humanitarian approach which will transcend the communal divisions. Issues of border and migration appear in “Miyah Mansur” as well as in Anuradha Sharma Pujari’s “No Man’s Land.” “The Captive,” “The Green Serpent,” “He Returns,” and “Blood on the Floor” highlight the issue of insurgency in Assam, addressing it from diverse points of view. Harekrishna Deka’s “The Captive” presents the relationship between a kidnapper (insurgent) and his hostage. Written from the hostage’s point of view, the story presents the intimate bond that these ‘enemies’ develop between them. The rescue of the ‘hostage’ resulting in the death of the captor turns out to be ironical as the captive feels immensely at a loss.

Dhruvajyoti Borah’s “The Green Serpent” presents the psycho-emotive responses of a rape victim and the rapist after years of oblivion. Both of them meet as strangers in a refreshers

course for college teachers, but shrink from each other at the moment of discovery about their past. Manoj Goswami's "He Returns" presents the diverse opinions of people at the possible return of an insurgent. The varied effects of his return after many years work together to create a mixed upshot. Apurba Sarma's "Blood on the Floor" presents the pitiable condition of the family members of an insurgent from the point of view of his elder brother who frets at his frequent home visits. The closing paragraph shows him having an anxiety attack caused by a phone call the content of which remains a mystery. These four stories are told against the background of ULFA and Bodo insurgency. Manikuntala Bhattacharjya's "Providence" looks at violence from the perspectives of two soldiers traumatised by war.

The collection is a landmark work of translation of Assamese literature that projects the quotidian life of common individuals some of whom are caught in the maelstrom of the history of Assam. Assam in her multifaceted forms appears in these stories. The volume contributes to the better understanding of the place and its people and informs us of the rich tradition of Assamese short stories.

**Preetinicha Barman**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Email: preetinichabarman@gmail.com