

Voices of Resistance: Gender, Citizenship, and Rights in Miyah Poetry

Manashi Misra¹

Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi, India

Abstract

The term Miyah has a specific meaning in Assam. Unlike in other parts of India, where it is used to address a gentleman in an honourable way, in Assam it is a pejorative term that refers to the community of Assamese Muslims of Bengali origin. This community is now reclaiming this identity through various forms of creative expression including poetry. The perpetual “other” in Assamese nationalist assertions, the Miyah until recently was accorded very little agency in the popular imagination. Miyah poetry emerged as a powerful mode of resisting injustice and suffering during the preparation of the National Register of Citizens in Assam (NRC), a complex and tedious bureaucratic exercise that could render a huge section of the population “undocumented migrants.” This is a genre of poetry that is resisting two kinds of power relationships – the hegemony of the Assamese language and the class hierarchy associated with the term Miyah in everyday usage. I argue that there is an explicit gender dimension of the word Miyah which has remained largely unexplored. The question of citizenship has different implications for men and women within the Miyah community, and it merits our attention to explore this difference through a feminist reading of Miyah poetry.

Keywords

“Miyah poetry,” gender in Assamese nationalism, National Register of Citizens, counter storytelling, identity and resistance

Introduction

The Miyah poetry movement in Assam, as pointed out by Azad et.al. (1), is “a grassroot aesthetic resistance movement” with emancipatory potential. This is

¹ **Manashi Misra** teaches Political Science at Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi. She completed a PhD on “Gender in Identity Formation: Locating Women in Post-colonial Politics of Assam” at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. Her papers “Revolutionaries as Political Women: Female Cadres of the United Liberation Front of Assam” (2022) and “Gender in National Identity Formation: The Case of Assamese Subnationalism” (2021) have appeared in *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* and *Journal of North East India Studies* respectively. She is currently working on exploring the gender dimension in Assamese folk traditions. Email: manashi.misra@zh.du.ac.in

also an attempt at “epistemic justice through counternarrative” (Dutta et.al. 59, Azad and Chakraborty 72). It started as an outlet for suffering and injustice that the people of the community had experienced especially during the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The connection between power and knowledge production translates into an artificial invisibility of dissent from within the oppressed groups (Hill Collins 251-56). Like all other oppressed groups in history, the Miyah community also experiences “epistemic violence” – “violence exerted through or against knowledge” (Dutta et.al., 60). Writing as a form of resistance is a struggle towards epistemic justice. This includes but is not limited to claiming the power to narrate one’s stories, recovery of historical memories, and revitalising language and culture hitherto considered “inferior” (Dutta et.al. 61-62). As the injustice against and dispossession of the Miyah community multiplied during the NRC updating process, there were efforts to create alternative spaces to reclaim identity and desires. Miyah poetry was one such effort. This is a form of “counter storytelling” through which the process of othering present in dominant narratives is exposed.

As Shalim M. Hussain has shown, Hafiz Ahmed’s powerful poem “Write down, I am a Miyah” brought Miyah poetry to a larger audience in 2016, although the term was first used a little later by Mohammed Reyaz (“Pitting Irony Against Aggression” 102). These are poems that seek to reclaim the “Miyah” identity, which has a specific context in the state of Assam in North-East India. Unlike in other parts of the country where Miyah is an honorific associated with a gentleman, in Assam it has a pejorative connotation used to identify Bengal-origin Assamese Muslims (Hussain 103). The class angle associated with this identity is quite striking – an educated person with fluency in the Assamese language would rarely be called a Miyah, whereas a Bengal-origin Assamese manual worker will always be a Miyah (quoted in Hazarika 205). The latter can invoke the kind of condescension not reserved for the former. As we shall see below, gender is also an important component of this construction, which has not yet received adequate academic attention.

The first section of this paper provides a brief overview of the Miyah community and their struggle for citizenship. The following section looks at the contemporary Miyah poetry movement and draws a comparison with the first-generation poems. Analyzing some of the most widely read and commented upon poems, I argue in the next section that the Miyah woman’s agency is invisible in these poems which are mostly written by male poets. She does make an appearance as a victim in some, but the Miyah is quintessentially a man. The last section looks at the poems of some women Miyah poets, and it is argued that for them poetry is the tool to express the “invisible.”

A brief note on the Miyah community and their contested Citizenship

The Miyah community is one of the many heterogeneous Muslim communities living in Assam (Qadeer 110). Though there are other terms such as *charua*, *pomua*, and Bengali speaking Muslims of Assam to indicate this community, none of them offers an accurate description. The first term indicates the habitat of the community – the *char* and *chapori* (river bank). It is becoming less relevant as members of the Miyah community are no longer confined to the *chars* (Hussain “Changing the Narrative”). *Pomua* is no longer an acceptable term as it conveys that they are not permanent residents but stay for a specific duration on their farm or *paam* (Sabhapandit 176-183). Similarly, the term Bengali-speaking Muslims is misleading, as an overwhelming majority use Assamese as their mother tongue (Hussain “A Tribe”). The word Miyah thus appears to be the most acceptable determinant of identity, distinguishing them from the humiliating alternative of “Bangladeshis” or “Bangladeshi- Assamese.” This desire to reclaim the Miyah identity became more urgent after the publication of the updated National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019. The complicated colonial history of encouraging migration from undivided Bengal to settle in the *chars*² of Assam which resulted in restriction over the local people’s access to these areas for seasonal cultivation contributed to the “othering” of the Miyah in Assamese subnationalism (Baruah 5-6). In post-colonial Assam, this legacy of viewing the Miya as a settler, an insufficient Assamese who is always on the lookout to grab the land and economic opportunities of the “indigenous” people of the land (Das 91) continues. The hateful wrath with which an Assamese photographer was assaulting the dead body of a Miyah during a violent eviction drive in Darrang district of the state in 2021 is one horrific reminder of the deep distrust and suspicion reserved for this community.³

Such suspicion of the Miya community is at the root of citizenship debates and the demand for the NRC in Assam. After the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, a new clause (clause 6A) was added to the Citizenship Act specifically for the state of Assam. Unlike the rest of the country, Assam now receives a different cut-off date for immigrants who could become citizens. Those who entered Assam after January 1966 but before 25th March 1971 would

² Riverine islands created through silt deposits. *Chars* are produced by the fluvial geomorphology of the river. Some sediments coming down from the mountains cannot reach the mouth of the river. Before starting their downward movement these sediments have to rest for a while. When they assemble in large numbers these suspended sediments form the sandy islands. *Chars* are unstable, they are regularly born and reborn as they keep changing their location (Saikia 37).

³ Details of the incident can be read at <https://scroll.in/article/1006145/the-photographers-hateful-wrath-in-assam-is-not-an-isolated-crime-it-has-government-sanction>.

be considered Indian citizens after ten years. There was a gradation of citizenship implied in this process – the undisputed citizens who were residents of the state before 1966 and the “residual citizens” whose ambivalent identity question was to be solved through legal intervention (Roy 19).

In independent India, an NRC was prepared for the state of Assam alone in 1951. The partition of India and the creation of two independent nation-states – India and Pakistan – in 1947 necessitated this, even though the administrative and societal conditions were hardly conducive to such an exercise (Roy 40). In the mid-2000s, the possibility of updating the 1951 NRC for the state started receiving adequate attention. With judicial intervention, the process began in 2013, and the final list of the Assam NRC was published in August 2019. This list left out 1,906,657 people, which was an act of exclusion that did not necessarily render anyone a non-citizen as there is a provision of appeal in the Foreigners’ Tribunal (Dutta, 103-105). However, the process of encountering state machinery has proven to be an arduous task for an ordinary person (Saha 79-91). With the Indian Parliament introducing a new amendment into the Citizenship Act in 2019, the loss of citizenship became a reality for a large number of people in the state. According to the amendment, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians, and Parsees, but not Muslims, from the neighbouring states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan can avail citizenship of India with 2014 as the cut-off date. It may also be noted that schedule 1B of the CAA rules lists 20 documents that can be used to establish an applicant’s entry to India before December 31, 2014, to India. As an eminent lawyer puts it, NRC however does not adopt the same liberal approach for documentary evidence to establish one’s proof of residence (Jaisingh 10).

Rebelling through art: Origin of the Miyah poetry movement

The Miyah poetry movement is one among various other forms of cultural resistance emerging from within the community. Several organisations are offering free legal assistance, employment opportunities, and education to members of the Miyah community (Azad, 234). These are significant community-level steps that have been able to resist patriarchal practices like child marriage to a large extent. Resistance through poetry in such a context runs the risk of appearing superficial, as, after all, in the face of a real crisis such as impending detention for non-possession of documents, this would be of little use. However, as Azad et.al argue,

[P]oetry plays a crucial role in forging an identity for those who are stripped of one, reclaiming appropriate social descriptions for persons where the genocidal consequences of inappropriate description are far

too evident... and in reimagining forms of belonging and citizenship beyond what our current structures of communication deem possible. (2) More significantly, poetry provides the tool to imagine the state of equality and justice strived for by the “real” work of providing employment, education, healthcare, and legal aid. Thus, the social work of Miyah poets cannot be demarcated from their literary work. The influence of Negritude poetry on the Miyah poetry movement is well documented (Azad and Chakraborty 79-80). This is where a gendered intervention is required. Resistance poetry by women is a separate genre, as exemplified in the writings of poets such as Audre Lorde. Insisting that for the Black woman “poetry is not a luxury,” Lorde argued that unlike the white man, it is not rational thinking that predominates the world of the black mother, she achieves freedom through her feelings. A poet exists within each black mother, but patriarchal thinking is unable or unwilling to acknowledge this. Poetry thus is the bridge between feeling and thinking. Reclaiming identity through poetry is a way to go beyond the possible, to find those “untamed, unnamed longing for something different” (Lorde 101). The conventional ways teach the marginalised to deny these aspects of themselves. The alternative is to create another structure of resistance that would spread to all areas of the existence of the powerless (Lorde, 101-103). There is thus a conceivable parallel between the Miyah poetry movement and black feminist poetry. It is important to keep this framework in mind to counter the allegation that Miyah poetry is an elitist, urban-centric movement. While it is true that it was initiated by some educated youths who were privileged to study in premier academic institutions of the country (Ahmed, personal communication, June 15, 2024), like any other protest literature, Miyah poetry too did not remain confined to them.

Though Miyah poetry started as a genre to reclaim the identity of citizenship by one of the most marginalised groups of the country, this is not exclusively about protests. Some poems describe the relationship of the community with their environment, some poems provide astute political commentary (Sahoo 90). Miyah poetry, as Haris Qadeer (116) argues, can be categorised in the genre of protest poetry due to their concerns over “socio-economic marginalization, indifferent attitudes of the government, demonization, dehumanization of the community, violence, trauma and resistance.” For our purpose, however, the focus shall remain on the poems revolving around identity. The reason for choosing to do so is that the perpetual suffering and humiliation of the Miyahs combined with the “existential crisis looming over them” during the NRC process were the main reasons that led to the emergence of this genre as an art-based protest movement (Singh). As Dutta

et.al. (3) argue, Miyah poetry is “theory in the flesh,” where the Miyah person is a knowing and speaking subject rather than an object of study by others.

It is in this context of the “knowing subject” that the language of Miyah poetry deserves our attention. According to Shalim M. Hussain, this genre of poetry seeks to break barriers, including linguistic barriers (“A Tribe”). Miyah poets have written using their local dialect along with standard Assamese, Hindi, and English (Hussain “Pitting Irony”105). Another important feature of the Miyah poetry movement is that it resists the monolithic, homogeneous construction of the community. There are significant cultural diversities and complexities within the community which are largely ignored in the traditional system of knowledge production. Miyah poets emphasise the syncretic cultural traditions of their community through a revival of forgotten festivals and everyday objects. For instance, the curated Facebook page for Miyah poetry is called *Itamugur* – a traditional tool of agriculture used to “break soils to dust before preparing the field for sowing” (Das 93-94), which is now fast disappearing.

It may be noted that much before it emerged as a genre of protest poetry, poets were writing about the community’s right to be known as “Assamese.” There was little attempt to reclaim the Miya identity. For instance, Maulana Bande Ali’s “Charuar Ukti” (1939) is largely considered to be the first Miyah poem, though it never uses the word “Miyah” (Hussain 103). According to some accounts (Hossain 2020, Mitra 2022), Assamese literary giant Atul Chandra Hazarika used a pseudonym to challenge the prevalent discrimination against the Miyah community. Insisting on the unconditional assimilation of the community into the Assamese society, the poet writes:

I am not a charuwa, not a pamua
 We have also become Asomiya
 Of Assam’s land and air, of Assam’s language
 We have become equal claimants. (lines 26-29)

Similarly, Khabir Ahmed wrote the poem “I Beg to State That” in 1985, after the end of the Assam movement. This poem was a tribute to the dead during the Nellie massacre that took place on February 18, 1983. On that day a mob comprising of Tiwa, Koch, and Hira⁴ people surrounded 14 villages inhabited by Miyahs and killed more than 1800 people – primarily children, women, and elderly – in a span of a few hours. Relief camps were set up for the survivors in

⁴ Tiwas are also known as Lalung. They are a plains tribe in Assam. Koch and Hira are two Scheduled Caste Assamese groups (Pisharoty 90).

a place called Nellie, from where the name of the massacre was derived (Pisharoty 90-116).

The poet here “begs” to state that he is an “Assamese Asamiya,” and asks the people of Assam if they have decided how to address him – as Miyah, Assamese, or Neo Assamese.⁵ This is an invocation of the Miyah identity much before the emergence of Miyah poetry as a genre of protest literature. In one of his earlier poems “A Charuwa Youth vs. the People” (2000) Hafiz Ahmed writes:

Milord
yes, we are brothers
He and I
Brothers from the same family
Yet Kokai is so bent
on being king
that he disapproves
Blood relations
milord
contrary to his claims
I am not his stepbrother. (lines 1-11)

The feeling of hurt at being rejected by the Assamese community – the “elder brother” – is unmistakable (Qadeer, 116) in these lines:

He has eavesdropped too often
On the whispers
Of friends and foes
And muddled his own head.
This might be why
He repeatedly declares me illegitimate. (lines 15-20)

Unlike them, the new generation of poets does not “beg” or appeal, nor do they wait for the “Assamese”⁶ to define their identity. They thus turn Miyah poetry into a form of resistance by accepting their identity, being Miyah is now a matter of pride, and the Miyah dialect is one of the ways through which this pride can be expressed. Ahmed’s poem “Write Down I am a Miyah” is not an expression of hurt at the discrimination meted out to the community. The poet writes:

I am a Miya
I turn waste, marshy lands

⁵ One of the most formidable figures of Assamese art and literature and the founder of the IPTA movement in Assam, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala termed these Bengali origin peasants *Na Asomiya* (neo-Assamese) and welcomed them in to the fold of Assamese nationality in the 1940s.

⁶ the essence of Assamese identity over the years has changed from language to indigeneity without arriving at a conclusive definition.

To green paddy fields
 To feed you
 I carry bricks
 To build your buildings
 Drive your car
 For your comfort
 Clean your drain
 To keep you healthy.
 I have always been
 In your service
 And yet
 You are dissatisfied!
 Write down
 I am a Miya,
 A citizen of a democratic, secular, Republic
 Without any rights. (lines 11-28)

The poetic diction adopted by the poet is exceptional. All the other three poems mentioned above do not claim equal citizenship rights, nor are they so forthcoming about the contribution of the Miyah community to society. Shalim M. Hussain's "Nana I have Written" carries forward this tone of assertion:

Nana I have written attested countersigned
 And been verified by a public notary
 That I am a Miyah
 Now see me rise
 From flood-waters
 Float over landslides
 March through sand and marsh and snakes
 Break the earth's will draw trenches with spades
 Crawl through fields of rice and diarrhoea and sugarcane
 And a 10% literacy rate. (lines 1-10)

The last two lines of the poem unequivocally declare: *I am Miyah/I am proud* (lines 36-37). In his poem "I am yet a Miyah" Shahjahan Ali Ahmed offers a glimpse of the history of the hardship faced by the community:

Mine is the story of
 A burning bone-crunching sun
 My manhood the cautionary tale
 Of bent shoulders
 And the pricking of salted thorns
 Mine is the story of

“Grow more food”, man-eaters
Cholera, diarrhea
And a fragrant revolution scattered by
My fathers
In a forest of thorns
Mine is a story of heroes. (lines 1-12)

These lines resonate with those from Khabir Ahmed’s poem:

I have flattened the red hills
Chopped forests into cities, rolled earth into bricks
From bricks built monuments
Laid stones on the earth, burnt my body black with peat
Swam rivers, stood on the bank
And dammed floods
Irrigated crops with my blood and sweat
And with the plough of my fathers, etched on the earth. (lines 37-44)

However, unlike Shahjahan Ali, Ahmed however focuses on the Assamese identity, whereas Ali is assertive that “I am yet a Miyah.” The pride of being a Miyah is also unmistakable in Abdur Rahim’s poem “Don’t Insult Me as a Miyah”:

I ashamed to Introduce myself
As Miyah no more. (Qadeer 115)

Similarly, in his poem “In the Name of My Dead Mother,” Ashraf Hussain moves far away from the position of appeal palpable in some of the poems discussed above:

they say, rein it in man
No. I won’t rein it in.
in the name of my mother who died
in a detention camp, I swear
That this voice in my throat will grow louder
And someday rustle the folds in your ears. (lines 25-30)

Kazi Neel’s “That Land Is Mine, I Am Not of That Land” is a poignant tale of the persistent marginalisation of the Miyah community:

The land where a cap is radicalism
A Miyah sub-human
Every charuwa a Bangladeshi
where earth is weighed and sold to Tatas, Birlas and Ambanis
that land is mine
I am not of that land. (lines 13-18)

In this poem also, the poet's pain is obvious, but instead of trying to prove his allegiance to the land (Assam) he focuses on the diverse discrimination faced by the community there.

Thus, the new genre of Miyah poetry is an "assertion of the self" (Singh 35), not unlike the "chamar pop" genre of music taking root in rural Punjab. In the latter, the term "Chamar" (a casteist slur) is being reclaimed by Punjabi Dalit singers with confidence. They want to own their past, their heroes, and abusive labels about their identity with pride; and demonstrate these to the larger world (Singh 35-36). As we have seen above, Miyah poets have recently been similarly assertive about their past and present.

Gender in Miyah poetry

The emerging confident self of the Miyah is undoubtedly a welcome phenomenon, but the gender dimension of this self has not yet received adequate attention. The genre of Miyah poetry has been quite successful in exhibiting the class dimension in constructing the Miyah identity while suppressing the fact that this is an identity derived at the intersection of class and gender. The following incident is relevant to explain this point.

In his essay "Changing the Narrative" (2016), Shalim M Hussain recalls an incident of students (presumably all male) of his college going out and chasing away "Bangladeshis" from the footpaths of Guwahati. These otherwise mild-mannered students were trying to assert their masculinity by "beating, cursing and spitting" on hapless pavement dwellers. This cannot be taken as a spontaneous act, given the historical context in which "chasing away the foreigner" has always been a marker of masculine assertion in the state. Ahom General Lachit Borphukon provided the foundation for muscular Assamese nationalism as the commander of the Ahom force that had staved off the mighty Mughals in the historic Battle of Saraighat (Sharma 176). Juxtaposing this reverence for Lachit with the laments of early nationalists such as Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (1885-1967) at the loss of valour of the Assamese race makes it obvious that the lament is also for the loss of masculinity. To rescue the race, a brave, masculine figure like Lachit was indispensable. For Raichoudhury, the "outsider"/immigrant was a masculine aggressor, who had caused large scale sufferings of locals especially "innocent women." The portrayal of this imminent danger to the honour of innocent Assamese women by "these animals" or "much feared criminals" of Bengal; and the imploration to Assamese (Hindu) men to protect the honour of "their" women is reflective of what Tanika Sarkar terms as anxiety over emasculation. Such anxiety can be overcome only with violent reactions, which thus become a source and evidence of manliness (2875). The

migrant is thus reduced to a “deviant” body that needs disciplining, as we see in the violent actions of the college students mentioned above.

The gender aspect of the Miyah identity is obvious in Saba Hussain’s book *Contemporary Muslim Girlhoods in India*. As Hussain argues, there is a perceived way of looking at Miyah women (and girls) among the “ethnic Assamese” (Baruah xvii) population. In Hussain’s study conducted in various schools of Central Assam, this perception was obvious in the remarks of teachers about female Muslim students. Their attire, conduct in and outside of the classroom – all distinguish them from the normative Assamese identity. The Miyah woman thus is pathologised as different (66-68). In school, she is often seen as lacking in “merit,” and she also does not have the “correct” Assamese accent to claim the identity of a *khiblonjia*. Such construction consequently juxtaposes normative, middle class Assamese femininity against the less than ideal femininity of the Miyah woman. As Saba Hussain shows, school teachers think it is “very important” for Miyah girls to learn the Assamese language well, as in their future role as mothers they will be responsible to pass it on to their children (76). In the same book, Hussain also points at the specific vulnerability experienced by school-going Miyah girls along with the class and ethnic stereotypes. This leads to unwarranted concerns over familial honour, which in turn justifies stringent surveillance of girls and restriction over their mobility (86-87).

In such a social context, how does one deploy a gendered reading of Miyah poetry? I now subject some of the most widely read and commented upon Miyah poems to feminist scrutiny. I argue that the Miyah woman’s agency is invisible in these poems which are mostly written by male poets. She does make an appearance as a victim in some, but the Miyah is quintessentially a man.

Hafiz Ahmed’s “Write down I am a Miyah” mentions the invisible labour of women in building lives in the village and in the city:”

write
 I am a Miya
 I turn waste, marshy lands
 to green paddy fields
 to feed you
 I carry bricks
 to build your buildings. (lines 10-16)

Both Men and women are engaged in such work. The beginning of the poem – write/write down/I am a Miya (lines 1-3) – does not give away the gender of the Miyah. Shalim M. Hussain’s “Nana, I Have Written” also mentions about a Miyah who is proud of the identity, and despite 10% literacy rate in the community, is

an achiever. Emboldened by the constitutionally guaranteed rights (“*See me bold by my side the Constitution*” line 16), the Miyah now belongs with equal ease to places of technological innovation and high consumerism (“*See me suited in Silicon Valley suited at McDonalds*” line 24). Miyahs have now earned gold medals in PhD studies, but the trauma of enslavement or bride trafficking still haunts them. This is the life story of Salma, Aman, Abdul, Bahaton Nessa, or Gulam (lines 25-30). As it is evident, the Miyah here is not a masculine figure. However, the next stanza (lines 29-37) while describing the achievements of a proud Miyah gives him a decisively gendered identity. The Miyah is now successful enough to “*catch a plane get a visa catch a bullet train.../ catch a rocket/wear a lungi to space*” (lines 29-33). The lungi, as it is well known, is a garment worn by men. The high-flying Miyah is thus presumably male.

Chan Miya’s poem “I Don’t Know My Name Today” is a poignant reminder of the traumatic experiences that a large number of people had to experience during the updating of the NRC. He writes:

I don’t know my name today
its lost in misspellings, taunts, jeers
and the quagmire of your office papers, closets, cabinets. (lines 1-3)

Importantly, this is an experience of many Miyah women too. The gendered nature of citizenship is well-documented in feminist theories (Roy, Dutt et.al.). Exclusion from the NRC is also a gendered experience as seen in the work of Abdul K. Azad (2022) and Trisha Sabhapandit and Padmini Baruah (2021). The loss of name due to misspelling, insufficient documentary records combined with low literacy levels is a traumatic reality for many Miyah women. Chan Miya thus aptly describes this gendered reality in these lines: “I have lived many names, many lives/ but none of my own” (lines 8-9). However, he imagines it to be an essentially male experience as the nameless Miyah in his poetry has nothing now “but an old lungi, a half-ripe beard/and a photocopied sheet of the ‘66 voters’ list/ with my grandfather’s name burnt in it” (lines 18-20).

Most Miyah women whose names were excluded from the draft and eventually the final NRC, found it difficult to arrange the documents to establish their legacy. This poem justifiably questions exclusion from citizenship despite the possession of all the necessary documents (the 1966 voters’ list with grandfather’s name), but does not give any space to the possibility that accessibility to these very documents is a gendered process. The poet urges:

Yes, I have no name today
but don’t dangle before my eyes the name you have given me
don’t call me a Bangladeshi
I don’t need your barbs

don't condescend with Neo-Assamese
 give me nothing
 But what I own. (lines 21-27)

This is a powerful assertion of one's rightful identity, especially amid slurs of "foreigners." Yet, the experience of the Miyah woman is different. How does one claim a name when an exclusion from the NRC meant an increase in domestic abuse, loss of marital prospects or targeting of married daughters in their marital homes (Azad 138-42)? This gap in recording women's experiences in the Miyah poetry movement or the attempt to generalise the experience of men as universal for the community makes these poems a gendered exercise.

Hafiz Ahmed's poem "A Charua Youth vs. the People" imagines "Assam as a family", where the elder brother (the ethnic Assamese community) denies blood ties and declares the Miyah Muslim an "illegitimate" child. Undoubtedly, this poem makes powerful reference to the citizenship debates in Assam where the Miyah Muslims are never equivalent to the *khillonjia* Assamese or the son of the soil (Qadeer 116). At the same time, the metaphor of the land as mother and "illegitimate" children must be subjected to feminist scrutiny. This is a term not to be used lightly – given the legal gender discrimination associated with it. For instance, the Hindu Succession Act 1956 does not recognise the biological relationship between the father and the child born out of wedlock for intestate succession (Yadav). There is an indirect endorsement of the belief that it is the mother's "immorality" that is responsible for birth outside of marriage, and hence women's sexuality must be controlled through patriarchal marriage (Yadav). It is also important to note that illegitimacy is a status based on the superiority of heterosexual marriage over other forms of intimate relationships leading to childbirth.

It may be noted that one of the main objections to the Miyah poetry movement coming from the ethnic-Assamese community was its alleged portrayal of the latter as "xenophobic." The gender element in this allegation is striking. Let us take the example of a first information report (FIR) filed against ten Miyah poets and activists in Assam in July 2019. In the FIR, one poem – Kazi Neel's "That Land is Mine, I am not of that Land" – was specifically pointed out for depicting Assamese society in the "wrong light." The main objection was that Neel accused the land (Assam and Assamese people) of "gang-raping his sister," even though there was no record of such violence against Miyah women (Hussain "Pitting Irony"106). At the same time, the urgency to protect Assamese women's "honour" from Miyahs was evident in the backlashes generated in Assamese popular media at the aftermath of the sexual assault of two minor girls in Kokrajhar district (Das and Chakraborty). As noted above, in the writings of

early Assamese nationalists such as Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, the protection of the “honour of the innocent women” was an important reason to oppose migration from then east Bengal. In both these parlances thus the Miyah woman is reduced to the shadow of her male counterpart.

As Miyah poets justifiably express their anger and helplessness at their mothers “becoming a D voter” (Hafiz Ahmed), “sisters giving birth in detention centers” (Ashraful Hussain) and becoming victims of sexual abuse (Kazi Neel), the Miyah woman is rendered into “an occasion and not the protagonist” (Spivak 259) of the poems. To borrow from Spivak, “she is the feminine subject rather than the female individualist” (259) of resistance poetry.

It is when we turn to the poetry of women Miyah poets that we see a determined challenge to this construct. Writing poetry (or any form of writing) is an act of resistance for Miyah women. Low literacy level combined with limited access to technology⁷ makes it difficult for them to pen their thoughts and publish them on social media, the chosen platform for Miyah poetry. Their number may be small, but some Miyah women like Rehna Sultan have taken the courageous step of giving voice to their anguish. In their poems, they write about social ills such as child marriage or domestic violence. These are themes that have received scattered attention in the genre. For instance, one of her poems titled “Our Ma” captures the inequality that exists between men and women within the household. She writes:

We call our ma “tumi” and our baba “anne”
 When I was younger I remember my mother
 bowing before baba like the poor masses
 our ma wanted nothing from baba
 other than to talk to him
 but baba obviously never had the time
 and every time he had the same answer –
 do you think I have nothing better to do?
 why should I talk rubbish with you?
 baba was bigger than God
 And we saluted his shadow
 Ma was like an ant or a lesser human
 Just like the other children our age. (Translated by Shalim M Hussain,
 lines 1-3, 8-13, 19-22)

⁷ According to Oxfam India Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide only 32% women in India own a mobile phone compared to over 60% men.

Another female poet, Heena Al Haya expresses the sense of loss felt by women in the following words:

For a long time I have not looked at myself
I look for myself in an old mirror
I see someone who looks so hazy
A human form
But that is not me. (Parveez 234)

In “A Poem Written in Blood,” Sabina Yasmin remembered those women who are unseen, whose labour is unappreciated and whose needs are hardly recognised:

This poem is for those women
Who collect dry leaves even when ill
To cook food for a coward male....
Who do not know the language of protest
Using their language of protest
A poem will be written. (Parveez 235)

These poems are significant because they turn the gaze inward to look at the double oppression of the Miyah woman by the state and the community. There is an explicit attempt to render the invisible labour of women visible in all the three poems mentioned above. It is a decisively feminist argument that housework is “actual work that produces and reproduces labour power.” All the poets mentioned above thus elevate domestic work to more than “personal services” and reveal its exploitative nature (Federici 6-7). This sense of insistence in women’s work is crucial for another reason. As Sanjib Sahoo (95) argues, the city or the urban centre imagined in Miyah poems is the utopia from which the community is largely alienated. This is the city that the Miyah workers have built, and now they claim to be part of it. This claim over the city is more visible in the poetry of male poets (for instance, Rezwana Hussain’s “Our Revolution,” Siraj Khan’s “My son has learnt to cuss like the city”). Women poets, on the other hand, are concerned more with belongingness, the rural-urban divide is irrelevant to them. There is also a significant tendency to invisibilise women’s work. A question that arises is: Where are the Miyah women who also helped build the city, who also helped in running the household of people inhabiting the city?

While it is true that male Miyah poets far outnumber their female counterparts, their limited oeuvre has not received much attention even from within the community. For instance, the July 2022 issue of *nether Quarterly* published a collection of Miyah poems. In the scarcity of anthologies of Miyah poems, this collection has special significance. However, only one woman poet – Rehna Sultana – is included in a total of ten poets. We cannot ascertain if this is

intentional, but there appears to be an understanding that Miyah women's voices do not yet need a separate platform. Scholar Wahida Parveez acknowledges that "within the community there is significant visible discrimination against women. Even the women Miya poets face a lot of social pressure, which prevents them from writing about many issues" (personal communication, June 24, 2024). At the same time, she also feels that this overlooking of women poets is not intentional, "it is a portrayal of society as it exists."

Sultana's poem "My Mother" which is part of this collection, is a desperate cry to ensure equal recognition for the Miyah community in the state of Assam. In her beautifully written verse, Sultana depicts an androcentric notion of the community. She writes:

Yes, I was dropped on your lap as a cursed Miya, my mother
you can't trust me
because I have somehow grown this beard
somehow slipped into a lungi. (lines 5-8)

The beard and the lungi become the essential markers of "Miyahness," which overlook the other gendered determination of the Miyah woman. As we notice in Saba Hussain's arguments, the Miyah girl is termed as different on the basis of other markers which make them different from "Assamese" girls.

The reaction of the community towards the experience of male and female poets has been vastly different. Even when she was subjected to vicious forms of sexual harassment on social media, seeking legal redress was not an easy option for poet Rehna Sultana. The obvious asymmetry of power between the state police forces and ordinary citizens like Sultana was a reason for not filing complaints of sexual harassment, but she was also worried about the patriarchal codes of "honour" as "in her village where her parents live, getting embroiled in 'police cases' was always made out to be *a statement on a woman's character*, not the perpetrator's" (Dasgupta, emphasis added).

This sense of community honour and women's responsibility toward it has been subjected to much feminist enquiry (Kumar 160-81). Hasina Ahmed who was initially recognised as a Miyah poet chose to dissociate herself from the movement. She emphasised that her primary identity is that of an "Assamese" and she could never support any attempt to embarrass the community. Ahmed's position was severely criticised on social media. She was accused of siding with the "Assamese" at the cost of her own Miyah community (Hossain 61). Ahmed's identity thus was determined by the community, her opinions as an individual had little value for her critics.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have offered a gendered analysis of the Miyah poetry movement. A closer scrutiny of the term “Miyah” reveals it to be an identity framed at the intersection of class and gender. Given that the second wave of the Miyah poetry movement began at a time of crisis over citizenship, it is important to take note of the gender dimension of the identity. The experience of the Miyah woman is different both at her interaction with the state and at the level of the community. It is this expression of difference that makes Miyah women’s poetry unique.

As I have argued, Miyah poets are primarily concerned with the alienation of the community from the ethnic-Assamese populace and the question of citizenship. Most of them however are reluctant to look at the gendered construct of these aspects. It is only when we access poems of women poets from the community that we get a glimpse of gendered power dynamics in the household and the suffering of women due to both state and community patriarchy.

There is more to the Miyah woman than the popular and state perception of reducing her to a victim of oppressive practices such as child marriage.⁸ There are women like Manjuwara Mullah who founded a collective of women artisans called *Amrapari* (We Can!) during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown “to create sustainable livelihood.” It is also a mode of fighting back community patriarchy, poverty, and state violence by providing women a platform for emotional support (Dutta et.al.). Such initiatives along with poetry and other art forms deserve our attention to both understand and truly empower the Miyah woman in particular and the community in general.

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⁸ In early 2023, the Government of Assam started a brutal crackdown on child marriages under the Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) and the Prevention of Child Marriages Act (PCMA). This step was ostensibly taken after the release of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data, where it was found that 32% girls in Assam were married off before they reached the age of 18 as against the national average of 25. For various factors – primarily due to abysmal poverty in char areas – among the Miyah Muslim community prevalence of child marriage is higher.

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