Reimagining Identities: Language, Form and Resistance in Miyah Poetry from Assam

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"Neither charuwa, nor pamua[11]
I am an Asomiya.
Of Assam's earth and air
I am an equal claimant."– Maulana Bande Ali

Miyah poetry stands out as one of the most popular emancipatory poetic movements in Modern India. Providing a powerful response to the humanitarian and identity crises fuelled by majoritarian politics in Assam, the poetic movement attempts to understand and address the pressing issues posed by the overwhelming ethno-linguistic conflict in the state and its serious implications in the form of forced eviction, displacement, and 'doubtful' citizenship. Rooted in the pre-partition conflict between the East Bengal (now Bangladesh) immigrants and the Assamese indigenes, the poetic movement presents a nuanced and persuasive revaluation of the migrant experiences through its experimental usage of forms, unique modes of expression, and unconventional linguistic structures. And, in doing so, it challenges preconceived notions, disrupts established narratives, and unveils the layers of complexity underlying the lived reality of the Miyahs, the peasant migrant community that migrated from East Bengal to the Indian state of Assam during the British Raj in India.

Similar to many Modernist and Postmodernist writers who broke free from old forms and techniques and abandoned traditional rhyme schemes to write in free verse, the Miyah poets use language, form, and words to bring to light different modes of representation and resistance shown by the migrant community over time. Challenging the dominant narratives of Assam, the poets put forth the voices of the marginalized 'other' and create a sense of increased visibility and

[11] Char-chapori: Flood-prone riverine islands of Assam.

personhood for those who were hitherto unseen and unheard. Their poetry celebrates the fragmented, subaltern imaginings (for example, by experimenting with words like char-*chapori*, *miyah*[12], or use of metonymy like *lungi*[13] that were originally directed as slangs to the migrant Muslim peasants in Assam).

In this article, I interrogate this domain of Miyah poetry and emphasize how, through the use of multiple languages, contemporary technology, and unusual/deviant imagery, the literary representations effectively promote a sense of intellectual activism that works towards the emancipation of the Miyah identity in Assam. I take into account select poems, studying them to understand how they create a counter-narrative to the existing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant metanarrative in the state. In essence, this article explores why such a poetic movement is essential in the current political scenario of Assam, which tries to create a strong insider-outsider divide and to deny the structural plurality of the state. In dong so, it establishes how the Miyah movement intends to act as a catalyst in restoring democratic rights by reiterating and reinforcing the multiplicity of ethnic, religious and linguistic identities that form the very crux of the Assamese society.

I approach the corpus of Miya poetry as an informed reader and critic. Trained in literary studies, I use the method of "discourse analysis" (Griffin 93) in understanding the poems through close reading as well as analysing the socio-political contexts in which the poems are written. Miya poetry has its origin in the politically volatile and religiously charged situation in Assam, which attracted national attention. The poems spread like wildfire in social media and debates and discussions have evolved over time and space. My subject position is that of an outsider, one belonging neither to the community

[12] Miyah: A slur used for Bengali Muslims settled in the riverine plains of Brahmaputra, in Assam.
[13] Lungi: a cloth wrapped around the waist with its two ends knotted together. This cloth is worn in different parts of India.

nor to the geo-cultural space of Assam but intensely interested in the socio-political issues that afflict the Muslim 'immigrant' community. As a female research scholar engaged in archival research in Assam and elsewhere in the country for the last four years or so, and as one who discusses the issue discursively with other scholars in the country, my approach is more theoretical and discursive than empirical. This work does not intend to speak for the subaltern, but tries to bring to the fore an additional perspective through a literary analysis that contributes to the ongoing process of formation and dissemination of knowledge, which categorically promotes the plurality of voices and multiplicity of representation in a postcolonial world.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first elucidates the history of the ethno-linguistic conflict in Assam and the rise of Miyah poetry; the second section talks about the use of language and form in the poetic movement; and the third and final section engages in the analysis of select poems that aims to understand the views, observations, and experiences of the community concerned.

I

The first section sheds light on the history of conflict and marginalization in Assam. Here I define a "Miyah" and describes the nuances in connection with the term. I also outline the rise of Miyah poetry and its significance.

The word Miyah is derived from a fusion of the Bengali and Urdu languages. It originally meant a gentleman. Even in West Bengal and Bangladesh, Miyah is associated with gentleness and courtesy. The word Miyah was first used in a derogatory sense in British-ruled Assam and later on, in independent Assam, it almost became a slang. But who were these Miyahs? A large number of landless peasants[14] had migrated from East Bengal during the British

[14] landless peasants: East Bengal was an over-populated region and landless immigrant farmers, mostly Muslims, migrated to the region of Assam.

period to the riverine plains of the Brahmaputra in Assam, known as the chars, to cultivate these lands. Later, these peasants settled in the chars because the place offered vast stretches of untouched, uncultivated land and therefore better earning opportunities. Despite the fact that they were initially welcomed by the natives for augmenting crop production, these people were always considered different from the educated and economically well-off Bengali Hindu and Assamese communities living in the state. The hostility of the native Assamese towards migrants became more intense after the partition of the country into India and Pakistan in 1947 and later again in 1971, after the formation of Bangladesh. Migration in Assam increased after both these major historical events and altered the demographic landscape of the region. This resulted in conflicts like the Bongal-Kheda movement in the 1960s, the Bhasha Andolan[15] in 1961, and the Assam movement, which started in 1979 and continued till 1985. Given this prolonged history of conflict, the Bengali Muslim immigrants living in the char areas were always on the receiving end of hate. These char-dwellers were called *Miyahs* to mark their identities as Muslims and were often tagged as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Nayan Moni Kumar argues,

> In Assam, the Hindutva ideology finds its 'other' in the Bengal-origin Muslims by aligning its anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant discourses. In recent times, the community has been systematically represented as the "cultural other" from which the "greater Axamiya identity" and culture must be protected and must be kept separated, negating the socio-historical processes of accommodation and assimilation of Bengal origin Muslims. (Kumar 2022)

Immigration was initially welcomed in the labour short but land abundant state owing to economic reasons.

[15] 1960s Bongal-Kheda movement: A xenophobic movement that aimed at driving out Bengalis from Assam. It was a violent movement; Bhasha Andolan: An agitation against the imposition of Assamese in the Bengali speaking Barak Valley of Assam in 1961.

In the words of Selim. M. Hussain, "Miyah is a matrix within which fall descendants of people who migrated from Tangail, Pabna, Mymensingh, Dhaka and other districts of present-day Bangladesh" (qtd. in Daniyal 2019). Class politics also plays an important role in the process of discrimination and othering. According to Hussain, "It becomes significant to acknowledge that an educated Bengal-origin Assamese Muslim, who also speaks Assamese, might be able to camouflage their 'Miyahness'" (Daniyal 2019) but someone from a lower socio-economic background will not be able to do the same. For them the disparity would exist, especially in terms of the language/dialect they use. There are multiple historic representations of Miyahness but this genre of poetry started in 1939, with a poem "Charuar Katha" by Maulana Bande Ali. The genre revolutionised into a movement in 2016, with Hafiz Ahmed's poem, "Write Down I am a Miyah". The use of the word Miyah in Miyah poetry involves a politics of subversion where the aim is to challenge the oppressor with the same derogatory word that is used for the oppressed, by taking pride in it, and using it as a symbol of resistance and defiance.

II

In connection with the above section, which refers to the inter-ethnic and linguistic conflicts of Assam and describes the rise of the Miyah narrative, the second section focuses on how the Miyah poetry movement intends to connect language and form with revolution. Here I delineate the significance of specific words in specific contexts, the cultural value they carry, and how the Miyah poets try to subvert and deconstruct age-old culturally laden ideas associated with their identities. I also describe the importance of digital platforms that assist in reaching the larger world and enquire into the use of varied languages and experimental styles used by the Miyah poets that aid in establishing, substantiating, and revolutionising their narrative.

Words evoke specific contexts and have the ability to change perceptions about situations and people. In her book the *The Politics*

of Emotions (2004), Sara Ahmed's reading of emotion emerges from a Derridean philosophy of language where words are repeated and the effect of their repetition detaches the use of the word from the contexts in which the word originally emerged. The hidden material and historical contexts of emotions and the repetition of certain words that carry traces of them, Ahmed argues, allow signs, such as the word "Paki," to accumulate cultural meaning and value. Ahmed further states,

> The effect of their repetition is to generate bodily affects that carry the emotional value that emerges from their specific contexts. These signs stick to bodies, shaping them, generating the material effects that they name. As they are repeated, emotions accumulate value, producing affect through reiteration. And, it is the repetition of words that carry traces of context that prevents them from acquiring new meaning and value. (Ahmed 2004, 91-92)

The very word Miyah is also laden with cultural value in the Assamese context, to the extent that the original meaning of the word, i.e., gentleman, is lost and is replaced by a completely opposite idea of a dangerous human who is filthy, despicable, and disrespectable. In Assam the word Miyah evokes the context of migration, demographic change, and cultural conflict. The word brings back memories of a history that is not pleasant for the Assamese native and becomes associated with emotions of hatred and fear. Hate sticks to the word Miyah and the people representing the Miyah identity. The work of the Miyah poets thereby remains significant on the one hand and extremely difficult on the other because the poets are not only invested with the responsibility of creating larger visibility for the community but also challenging certain stereotypical perceptions about themselves.
An emancipatory movement like the Black Rights Movement[16],

[16] A civil rights movement in The United States of America to abolish racial discrimination in the country. The social movement continued from 1954 to 1968.

Miyah poetry intends to narrate the tale of grief and suffering by using language and form as tools or modes of resistance. In addition, it is important to understand that the Miyah poets do not portray a desire for inclusion through assimilating with the majority. Their aim is to attain political plurality that respects individual identities and values difference in cultural and ideological perspectives.

Furthermore, there is an experimentation with form as there is no definite syntax or rhyme scheme in these poems. The Miyah poets emphasise matter over manner; their aim is to provide a cultural and social commentary through expanding the existing literary boundaries. This experimental form not only reflects the views of the self but also engages the other(s) [the indigenes] through a way of carefully crafted technique of representation and resistance, creating more memorable, deep, and lasting impact. It aims at subverting structures that perpetuate segregation and contribute to the othering of the Miyah community.

Some poems are constituted of unusual and powerful images, and some, lacking a consistent structure, place all emphasis on the content of the poem. One of the major aims of the poems is to convey the stories of their suffering, dehumanization, and subsequent empowerment. These poems are both simple and complex in terms of style. While some poems use specific objects grounded in the very cultural milieu of the place, as symbols of both marginalization and protest, others take a more simplistic approach towards resistance. Poets like Hussain Ahmed emphasize the use of the char chapori dialect over any other language in writing their poems, with the primary objective to write back to the oppressors. However, due to a strong connection between identity politics and language in Assam, the shift from Assamese to the char chapori dialect in literature has produced substantial criticism and counteraction. For example, Hiren Gohain, a well-known litterateur in the state, has criticized the poets for not using standard Assamese in their poems.

Angshuman Choudhury and Suraj Gogoi argue that the criticism against Miyah poetry comes from a place of bias whereby the politics of majoritarianism and cultural superiority comes into play. In addition to that is the fear lurking in the psyche of the majority groups who wants to keep its power intact by hegemonizing these linguistic and cultural spaces. Choudhury and Gogoi claim,

> So, it is the politicisation and the visibilisation of the Miyah language that the ethno national majority in Assam fears. It is the act of giving the Miyah language prime agency in the "Assamese national discourse" that unsettles the dominant majority psyche of cultural hegemony. No wonder today's Assamese dailies are flushed with alarmist, and rather bizarre, headlines such as this: "'Miyah Poetry' is the blueprint for destruction of the Assamese language. (Choudhury and Gogoi 2019)

But besides the local (char chapori) dialect, a handful of Miyah poems have been written in Assamese, Hindi, and English. The use of different languages for Miyah poetry has also worked favourably for the poets. For instance, the political pressure on the Miyah poets for not using the char-chapori dialect (which stands for their uniqueness) might have been a challenge to the very mode of resistance initially used by them, yet when the poems were published in different languages, they became accessible to a large number of people, granting the movement national as well as global attention.

The Miyah poets have also extensively used modern technology, especially blogposts and social media platforms like Facebook, to reach wider audiences and make their causes known and heard. The popular blog Sunflower Collective in their special feature on Miyah poetry curate and publish specific poems that aid in catalysing the movement in different global quarters. Itamugur is a Facebook page run by Miyah poets that showcases different issues related to the people living in the chars. It focuses on migration as well as environmental concerns like floods, which affect the everyday landscape. The posts are often individual tales of pain that also

represent the difficulties faced by the community collectively. In addition, there is a collection of Miyah poems, *Traster Shikar Bakor*, edited by Abhishek Jha, which was translated into Bengali and published in 2019.

The use of digital and print media platforms not only accelerates access to large numbers locally and globally but also aligns with the modern way of life where a large section of the world takes recourse to social media to tell their stories. This also ensures that the struggles of the Miyah community are not relegated to the background vis-à-vis other conflicts or political turbulence in the state, but that the focus of these digital platforms consolidates around the voices of the Miyah people, making the social media page one of the most radical space of possibility and hope towards rebuilding and restoring Miyah identities.

III

There are a number of Miyah poems that identify the struggles within the community, but what is intriguing is the diversity of their expressions and the myriad methods the poets employ to write back to their oppressors. This section deals with select Miyah poems and analyses how these poems have depicted Miyah lives and their contributions to the state. In addition, it highlights the ways in which the Miyah poets have reappropriated various symbols that represent them and tried to "divest these symbols of their negative connotations" (qtd in Das 2016)

In a poem by Abdul Kalam Azad, "Everyday on the Calendar is the day of Nellie," some of the most graphic images of the Nellie massacre are described. Some lines of the poem are as follows, "An unusual fear surrounds my existence/ I can't sleep at nights/ Blood oozes from the dates in the calendar. Blood is all I have seen in my life, still it shakes me to the core" (Azad 2019, 40). The poem is a first-person narration and describes the fear in the poet's mind. The

line, “Blood oozes from the dates of the calendar” consists of a deviant or fantastic image that has often been the tool for modernist artists like surrealists. It also suggests how fear has become an intrinsic part of the poet’s identity as a Miyah living in Assam, and there is no escape from it. These lines are characterised by an unstructured stream of verbalized thoughts.

In another poem by Abdur Rahim, translated as “Don’t curse me anymore by calling me a Miyah,” Rahim asserts, “I do not feel ashamed to be called a Miyah anymore!” (Rahim 2019, 30). He reclaims his identity. In the same poem, he further states that he has “not forgotten 83’, 94’, 2012’ and 14.” He thus attempts to reclaim the history of oppression the Miyahs have faced, (83 is infamous for the Nellie Massacre, 94 for the Bodo-militant’s attack over Muslim settlers; 2012 also saw a conflict between the Bodos and the Bengali Muslims; and 2014 is known for another instance of ethnic violence). The Miyah refuses to shut his mouth anymore. He refuses to be defined by narratives of other people. He raises his voice against the violence and precarity that surrounds his existence in the state. The use of dates or numbers is important because these dates speak of the alternative narrative that the Miyah poets try to throw light upon. Numbers become important pointers or symbols in this case, holding onto a history of suffering and abuse.

Selim Hussain, a poet, performer and researcher in Jamia Milia University, located in Delhi, India, in his poem, “No no, I am a Miyah: Dedicated to Hafiz Ahmed,” describes his hopes that Miyahs disrupt stereotypes by going to universities and getting gold medals. He wishes that they would be called by their individual names and not categorized under a common identity. The metonymic assertion ‘My lungi in space’ is made with the hope that someday there will be a Miyah astronaut. This is a paradoxical image, a combination of intellect and emotion, that T.S Eliot would call “the association of sensibility” (Eliot 283) and is laden with a very powerful meaning. By talking about the lungi in space as a Miyah astronaut, Hussain

frees the lungi of any sense of shame or derogatoriness that might be associated with it, using the phrase instead to symbolise Miyah progress and achievements. Hussein himself states that Miyah identity is built on self-identification but the markers of this identity are not chosen. He asserts,

> "For example, the lungi as a symbol of the Miyah community has been forced on us: we haven't chosen it. But as writers I believe it is our responsibility to take the lungi and other similar symbols, divest them of their negative connotations and give them new meanings." (Das 2016)

Through such assertions, Miyah poetry evokes Patricia Collins's concept of intellectual activism coupled with artistic activism, whereby resistance equals affirmative action to subvert negative connotations or projections, which helps in the formation of a decolonial narrative against the largely overwhelming metanarrative (Collins 2013). Through these lines, and the use of such metonymic symbols, Hussain asserts his subaltern identity as a force.

In a poem called 'Our Revolution' the poet Rezwan Hussain writes,

> Patiently we will continue to build/Your mansions, roads, bridges/Patiently we will keep pulling your tired, fat/Sweaty bodies in cycle rickshaws/We will polish your marble floors/Until they sparkle/Beat your dirty clothes/Until they are white/We will plump you up with fresh fruits and vegetables/And when you come visiting us in Tapajuli char/We will offer you not just milk/But also fresh cream. (Hossain 2017, 17)

These lines underscore the economic contribution of the Miyahs to the Assamese society. This is an appeal on their part to the readers that they be recognised by these efforts and not merely reduced to their religious identities. It also particularizes them in a positive sense by elucidating their contributions in the making of the history of the state. In the same poem, Rejwan Hussain further claims, "Our revolution will not need guns/ it will not need dynamites/ It won't be

televised/ It won't be published/ No rallies will be walked/ But our revolution would burn you to ashes" (Hossain 2017, 17). In these extremely powerful lines, which immediately evoke strong emotions, Hussain talks about the revolution that this poetic movement would bring. The revolution of Miyah poetry would burn away existing systems of oppression and discrimination that the Miyahs have been subjected to. It would, through a poetic rebellion, make known to the world that Miyah identity has the power and will to fight back for their rights. The Miyah poets have often justified their violence of language as used in this poem by stating that it is a counter through language to challenge the state's unethical mechanisms of violence through cruelty, oppression and genocide. In their logic, the violent language therefore is essential to balance the violent injustice.

Women have had a very limited representation in Miyah Poetry. This omission may be attributed to reasons including lack of education amongst Miyah women. Despite their limited representation, some women have expressed their anxieties through poetry. The poems describe the pain and social discrimination faced by the Miyah people in general without throwing much light on the experiences of Miyah women in particular, notwithstanding the hierarchies in the patriarchal social order that may subject Miyah women to graver discriminations in comparison to men and different experiences due to their double subjugation under patriarchy and ethno-religious tensions. In one such poem, "My Mother," by Rehana Sultana, the poet describes, "I was dropped on your lap my mother/ Just as my father, grandfather, great-grandfather/ And yet you detest me, my mother/ For who I am/ Yes, I was dropped on your lap as a cursed Miyah, my mother" (Sultana 2017, 16). In these lines, she asserts that in circumstances of state-sanctioned oppression and violence, her identity itself becomes an act of violence; it is a curse; it is that which dehumanizes, subsequently justifying a denial of basic rights.

The Miyah poems represent a variety of emotions and

sensibilities. With the use of different languages, unconventional forms and techniques, and the use of multiple perspectives, the Miyah poets continue fighting for a new, emancipated identity. Their attempt is to subvert the existing power structures so as to reinforce their histories and elucidate their own contributions in the economic development of the Assamese society. They write from an insider's perspective who are often perceived as outsiders. It is important to acknowledge the existence as well as the power of these subaltern voices that have the capability to change the course of history. Like many other poetic movements, Miyah poetry has also faced criticism in certain quarters. The underrepresentation of women of the Miyah community in their poetry and their experiences as doubly subjugated individuals in a patriarchal society warrant more attention and representation. The ethics of use of violence in language also becomes a contested issue in some of the poems. Although Miyah poetry has faced its own share of criticism, it cannot be denied that it is one of the most sustained poetic rebellion movements in contemporary South Asia.

Conclusion

A pertinent question that arises in connection with the Miyah movement is why only poetry is chosen as the medium of resistance. It can be argued that poetry often is a viable as well as radical form of protest and has significantly remained so for many years. Poems are generally shorter than other literary forms, sometimes easier to read, and often more easily accessible to people through digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and personal blogs. Moreover, poetry evokes strong emotions through its colloquial language and use of rhetorical devices. But it is equally important to acknowledge that the Miyah Movement is not anymore limited to written-word poetry and has broadened its scope by the inclusion of oral and audio-visual forms. In their article, Abdul Kalam Azad, Divya Nadkami and Bunders- Aelen argue,

> Contributors of the Movement have made films, posters and postcards, and sometimes staged performances and oral recitals. The Movement has demonstrated the ways in which art can enable people to reflect critically on their communities and articulate the complex everyday socio-political realities that affect their lives. (Azad Nadkarni Bunders Aelen 2022, 4)

Through these various mediums, the Miyah poetry movement creates solidarity between differently oppressed and exploited groups. The poems engage with emotional experiences of marginalization, othering, and violence, which are complex yet lucid and identifiable in their expressions and ideas. The Miyah movement is invested in reconstructing a form of citizenship that respects and understands difference and does not discriminate on the basis of ethnic and religious affiliations. Since this movement is deeply invested in contestation around citizenship, and in the light of the recent NRC and the CAA[17] movements, the significance of contemporary Miyah poetry is paramount. The Miyah poets position themselves at the junction of multiple social identities that are constructed through complex categorisation locating them in hybrid positions of marginalization and subjugation, but also empowerment. In a similar vein, the poet, Selim. M. Hussein talks about the identity of the Miyah poets. He asserts that

> Our ancestors moved to Assam with little else but just clothes on their back. Even before the borders were drawn, we began losing touch with Bengal. We are not a diasporic community with a nostalgic attachment to our place of

[17] NRC and CAA: NRC stands for the National Register of Citizens. The purpose of this document is to recognise the legal citizens of India while identifying and deporting the illegal immigrants. It was implemented in Assam in 2013. The CAA or the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed in the Indian parliament in 2019 and it provided Indian citizenships to persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh who arrived in India by 2014. The eligible minorities were listed as Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians and Parsis. It does not grant eligibility to Muslims from these countries.

> origin. We have no standing monuments, no venerable ancestors, nothing. This might sound bleak but I consider it quite liberating because minus the baggage of chauvinism and jingoism, we have the freedom to be as hybrid as we want to. (Das 2016)

It is important to read and understand such narratives as opening avenues hitherto unknown and unexplored. It has to be acknowledged that Miyah poetry has the ability to bring about change in perspectives and ideologies. It has the ability to humanize the problem through its call for empathy. It opens up the space to think, locate, read, and evaluate texts that represent truth and to reconfigure history using different but equally important interpretations of plurality and multiplicity. Like other modernist writings, Miyah poetry offers a way to cope with crisis by orienting the sense of loss into a fruitful means of resistance.

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