

## Miyah Poetry: A New Form of Protest Poetry

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**Abstract:** *The influx of immigrants or the process of migration is something which has been going on since time immemorial, particularly in Assam from the bordering Nations. Migration is natural, considering the nature of boundary between Nations, which exists only in imagination. Migration takes place forced by circumstances or voluntarily, but the sense of belonging to the Land always follows which is followed by the issue of alienation or otherization. Such alienation results in protests in various forms. Miyah Poetry is such a kind of protest or resistance forming a new genre Miyah Poetry as a literary genre, is a recent bloom in 2016, in the backdrop of NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Bill. It serves as a tool of protest of poets or a community. The term “Miyah” meaning “gentleman” in Urdu has attained a negative connotation in Assamese and is used as a slur to mean “an illegal Muslim immigrant of Bengal origin” or a Bangladeshi. Miyah Poetry is about the expression of pain and suffering, intolerance and discrimination experienced by the community and the resultant anguish subdued within since decades. Miyah poetry talks about the issue of belonging, identity conflict and the topic of land following that identity. And in order to justify our points we have taken up a few Miyah Poems into account. This paper will focus on Miyah Poetry as a new kind of poetry, and the cause, the circumstances which have invoked the shaping of the type of poetry as a genre. The paper will also talk about the voices of protest, their cause and subject, and also other voices in support or against such poetry. The issue of freedom of poetry or resistance poetry in particular and how through poetry, the Miya poets express their belonging to “the Land”, express their anger against the discrimination, is important.*

**Keywords:** *Miyah Poetry, Nation, Identity, NRC*

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The voice of Miyah Poetry calls for attention on the suffering and intolerance towards the class or community of Miyahs, who are identified as immigrant or more particularly illegal immigrants. Before getting into the poetry discussion i.e., Miya Poetry, it's important to know who are writing such poetry and what is conceived in the poems written by such poets. But even before getting into this discussion it's important to understand some basics about the process of migration, when it has begun and what has induced or has promoted migration. Oxford Dictionary meaning of migration is “the movement of people to a new country or area in order to find work or better living”. Considering the truth in the meaning, migration is something which is natural to all living beings and is a process which has been in function since the very beginning of age. It is a global phenomenon and there can be push and pull factors responsible for migration of people from one place to another. But the type of migration in discussion something different, where in comes the concept of “land” and “belonging” which is again followed by “alienation” or “otherization”.

Migration in Assam has had a long history and can be traced back to the Mughal period and through the colonial period of undivided Assam when Sylhet was annexed with the state and the British established effective rule in Assam. Migration in Assam has been taking place from the dawn of history. The development of tea industry in Assam called for workers which imported laborers from Bihar and other provinces. The disinterest of the Assamese people to work as laborer in the tea gardens or to expand the land cultivation for the additional requirement of food for the large laborer population employed in the garden led the British to encourage Bengali Muslim peasants from present Bangladesh to move into lower Assam for putting virgin land under cultivation.

The influx of Muslim migrants continued throughout the entire nineteenth century. The Muslim cultivators mostly migrated from the densely populated Mymensingh and Rangpur district of East Bengal to Sylhet and Goalpara districts of earlier Assam. It was after 1900 that the major influx of Bengali Muslims had begun. As early as the 1920s and 30s, Bengali Muslim communities migrated to Assam under the aegis of the British rule so as to provide cheap laborer as a farmhands and cultivators, and she worked on the silt banks and the low-lying areas of the state where the indigenous Assamese would not venture. These are what in Assamese called “char chapori” where the immigrant Bengali Muslims started to settle as cultivators.

With the partition of the country the Hindus migrated to West Bengal, Assam add other neighboring states and they were rehabilitated under legal process. But another group of migrants (both Hindu and Muslim) entered Assam illegally. Again the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) led both Hindu and Muslim refugees

migrate to Assam from erstwhile Pakistan. After the Independence a large portion of refugees remains in Assam. Infiltration continued as before and the new flow was not of refugees, but as earlier, of migrants seeking land and employment.

The struggle with the question of "Who is an Assamese?" culminated to turbulence in the form of language movements and conflict between the communities. Parallel to this arises another question of "Who is a Miyah?". Miyah is a colloquial term commonly used for Bengal origin Muslims in the North Eastern states of Assam. The term "Miyah" is an Urdu word and it is used by Muslims to mean "gentleman" in South East Asia but eventually the term has conceived a negative connotation in its used in Assam and is used as a term of abuse. The term targets to subjugate and otherise the Muslims originating from Bengal and has now turned into a pejorative term. This discrimination and looking down upon the Bengali Muslims, with a glance of otherization, led to the conferring of a derogatory meaning to the otherwise decent term "Miyah", wherein comes "Miyah Poetry". "Miyah poetry" is an outburst against all the sufferings and discrimination and it is a kind of reclaiming the Muslim identity by the Bengal origin Muslims of Assam. Their poetry reflects the pain, the prejudice and particularly seeks answers to the questions of belonging and citizenship. It echoes the fears of a community threatened by exclusion from NRC- the National Register of Citizens.

According to Salim M. Hussain, a translator and Miyah poet, says that the onset of writing literature by the people of the community can be traced back to the end of Assam agitation (1979-85) [taken from his presentation on \*Miyah Poetry: Translating protest in times of Xenophobia\* - from YouTube link-<https://youtu.be/M3rR7fg0vd4> (04/02/2020)]. The agitation first started as an agitation against outsiders from Assam, but as it progressed the narrative completely changed, and it became an anti-Bengal origin Muslim rhetoric.

The first strong resistance movement from within the community rose in 1983-85 forming the first wave of literature produced from their region. This was also because they were from the first generation of learners and if not financial capital, they definitely had social capital or the intellectual platform to showcase their voice. Therefore there was a continuation of waves. The large number of immigrants gave rise to an apprehension in the mind of the indigenous people of Assam that the immigrants might take over the economy, affect the demography of the state and so this community has become one of the fulcrums around which the Assamese politics revolve.

The recent political turmoil regarding Miyah Poetry started with a poem *Write down, I am Miyah* , written by Hafiz Ahmed, a Miyah poet and President of the Char Sapor Sahitya Parishad. The poem was written in 2016 which started the whole movement; reading a few lines,

"Write  
Write down  
I am a Miya  
My serial number in the NRC is 200543  
I have two children  
Another is coming next summer  
Will you hate him  
As you hate me?"

Salim M. Hussain said that the phrase, "Write down" was important and appropriate considering that "Write down" as a statement influenced many of the poets from the community who were already planning of writing down.

This question of if they are to be hated is serious as it throws light MD narrative of discrimination, looked down upon and hatred faced by the members of the community and therefore, the poet is apprehensive of the same attitude towards his unborn child. The poem also echoes the fears of a community threatened by exclusion from the NRC process which is going on in the backdrop.

Quoting from the poem,

"I am a Miya  
I turn waste, marshy lands  
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 !"

The poem drew attention the kind of livelihood the Miyahs led and asked for gratitude from the indigenous population for the services in cultivation and other domains.

Again quoting from the poem,

"I am a Miya

A citizen of a democratic, secular, republic

Without any rights

My mother a D voter,

Though her parents are Indian."

The concept of the D-voter is important because in a lot of cases, the parents and even the grandparents are citizens but a grandchild is tagged as an alien owing to the inability to provide proper documents.

The Miyah poetry in Assam gave rise much political agitation which resulted in FIR being lodged against 10 of the Miyah poets under sections of the Indian Penal Code that pertain to criminal conspiracy, promoting social enmity and insulting religion -for writing poetry.

Pranabjit Doloi, who is an Assam based journalist by profession, filed a complaint at Guwahati's Panbazar Police station. In his complaint, he has accused 10 people of indulging in activities "to defame the Assamese people as Xenophobic in the world". In Pranabjit's opinion, the Miyah poets were using poetry to hinder the ongoing process of National Register of Citizenship.

In addition to the protest in the form of poetry, the poems have elicited resentment and had been in target for some of these poems are written in dialects that belong to the communities. The Miyah poets were harassed with police complaints and where called threat two Assamese people and the security of the nation.

I quote from another poem, *Everyday on the calendar of Nellie*, which is in translation, and the original is written by Abdul Kalam Azad.

"I live with the strange dream

I cannot sleep"

"Everyday on my calendar stained in blood

You have seen blood all your life, I tell my heart

Why are you scared of blood?"

"Nearby uncle Fajal trembles like a leaf,

Uncle has fever,....."

"Aunty trembles like a leaf

What if the waters rise some more?

The wet calendar dries

I cannot sleep....

For one, just one night on this calendar,

Let me sleep."

The poem brings to the surface, the horror, the sorrow and the terror which the people of the community usually live with as he makes an appeal towards the end of the poem what is the end of the poem for him to be given "just one night" of peaceful sleep. The fear after aunty who is trembling, worrying about the rise of water while the uncle is suffering from high fever, is important. Points towards the geographical region where the community resides i.e., the "char chapori", the char- the river banks and chapori- the river islands, and the process of eventually submerging and again rising up which is a usual process with their place of habitat.

From the poem,

*Someone Walks By* - Kazi Neel

"Someone walks by the peak of the night....

My hands shake, my feet tremble,

Someone taps on the bamboo wall

A voice slips in the air-

'Rahim Ka! Open

The door. It's Amlan'....

"Only again can give

You are mouthful to eat, they say.

....., every mouth

Is stuffed with new slogans.

....  
The boots come trampling in the countryside  
A sister cries mother o'mother  
A brother's corpse is found"

Again this poem holds the sorrow, horror and sentiments that could be best caught through poetry and very vividly.

Miyah Poetry can be read as confessional poetry. It is a confession, both on the personal and community level. The poems confess the hardships, discrimination and prejudice undergone by individuals of the community and by the community as a whole. The idea of reclaiming the Identity of a Miyah in a new sense shrugging off the pejorative meaning which remained entangled in the term since decades, and taking pride in the identity is reflected in the poems.

In a poem *My Mother* by Rehna Sultana (dated 1 May, 2016)

"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.  
You can't trust me  
Because I have somehow grown this beard,  
Somehow slipped into a lungi,  
I am tired, tired of introducing myself  
To you.  
I bear all your insults and still shout,  
Mother! I am yours!"

The poem profoundly expresses the idea of belonging, of the Miyahs to the Land of Assam. The plea which echoes in the poem by Rehna Sultana is important. The plea is to the mother (mother in the form of Land, land where they are living). The poem also gives insight into the traditional cultural attire 'lungi' and the facial hair, which have become the stereotypically accepted identity of a Miyah.

Regarding the use of dialects by the Miyah poets and the protest that follows, Githa Hariharan, who is an Indian writer based in New Delhi, says,

"At the heart of this country's diversity, at the heart of this country's culture, is the fact of multilingualism."

Hariharan says that at times like this, we have to begin with expressing solidarity with these poets,

"We have to say- Write. Speak. We are with you."

She also mentions "multiple axes" of Chauvinism at play, aside from being religion and caste based, it is language based as well.

Again quoting from her speech,

" We have to resist all attempts to exclude our people from citizenship and as part of this resistance, we must insist on our diversity of language, community level cultures, on freedom of speech and other constitutional rights."

Underlining the poetry, culture critic and poet Ashok Vajpayi, who is also a recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award in 1994, says, "First of all, this is good poetry". He added, "The poems are good and the protest is also strong. It is our double responsibility to defend both the poetry and the cause. When Miya poets use their own mother tongue to express their feelings and the circumstances of their community, they validate the multi-lingual and multi-religious democracy that India is."

Vajpayi underscored, "A lot of othering is going on in a massive way. These are the new "others". Literature has been insisting all through that this is a false dichotomy, a dichotomy between us and them", "There is really no difference. The language of Earth is the same everywhere. That's what they say pleading for and I think we should stand by them. Not only as poets and lovers of poetry but as human beings, as Indians because what they have done has brought to the table of judgement how strong is Indian civilization, Indian tradition and Indian Constitution."

As Vajpayi says, these people are speaking the language of the Earth. Earth is greater than the state. Earth is greater than a democracy and is bigger than religion as well. The existence of Earth to prior to all three of them. And the love and affection of this Earth is visible in this poetry.

Quoting from Salim M. Hussain's *Nana I have written*,

"Read confusion when the bullies call me Bangladeshi  
And tell my revolutionary heart  
But I am a Miyah."

" Wear a lungi  
And there where no one can hear you scream,  
Thunder  
I am Miyah  
I am proud".

Quoting from another poem which is by Abdul Kalam Azad,  
"The land is mine  
I am not of that land."

The idea of alienation, otherization and the sense of belonging can be seen to be explicitly exposed in both the poems.

In conclusion, I want to draw the attention towards Miyah Poetry as a type of poetry which is a new bloom in 2016 and has a cause and magnitude to voice what it intends to. Miyah Poetry can be seen to be falling parallel to the other groups of protest poetry, such as Dalit Poetry, LGBTQ+ Poetry, Afro-American Poetry and they converge at a point, where all of them, talk about discrimination and prejudice, justice and seek acceptance and freedom, while taking pride in their identity.

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