American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation

Expert Opinion Article

# Activist Literature and Protest Aesthetics in Miya Poetry: A Rereading of *Betel Nut City*

**Binoy Varakil***

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College Devagiri, Kozhikode. Kerala

Shalim M. Hussein, one of the founding poets of Miya poetry, vividly captures the turbulence, chaos, and anxiety of life in Assam and its surrounding regions—Dispur, the Brahmaputra's coastal plains, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, and West Bengal. His seminal anthology Betel Nut City (Red Leaf Foundation for Poetry, 2019) addresses the political and social marginalization of minorities in the region.

The term Miya, once meaning "a Muslim gentleman," has shifted into a slur used to label Bengali-origin Muslims in Northeast India as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Miya poets—including Hafiz Ahmed, Khabir Ahmed, Rehna Sultana, Kazi Neel, and Abdul Kalam Azad—work to reclaim the term, reasserting their identities as Assamese and Indian.

This paper examines selected poems from *Betel Nut City* through the lens of activist literature, drawing upon Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Angela Davis's *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*. It argues that Hussein's work is a form of "combat literature" (Fanon 222) and poetic activism, confronting the systemic exclusion of Miya communities while reshaping the aesthetics of resistance.

The Miya community consists largely of Bengali-origin Muslims who migrated to Assam's riverine char regions during British colonial rule. Speaking Bengali or a distinctive char–chapori dialect, they have faced decades of political targeting. State mechanisms such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) have deepened this precarity, casting doubts on their citizenship. The derogatory term Miya has become a site of struggle, its reclamation central to Miya poetry's mission of resistance (Das Gupta and Hussain; Laskar and Hazari).

Literary and Theoretical Context

Miya poetry functions as South Asian subaltern literature, giving voice to histories and lived experiences excluded from official narratives. As Fanon writes, "the colonized intellectual… turns himself into a kind of mouthpiece for his people" (Fanon 222). Hussein's poetry also echoes Angela Davis's conviction that "freedom is a constant struggle" sustained by cultural production (Davis 17). In this framework, Miya poetry is not merely expressive—it is insurgent, a vehicle for reclaiming narrative authority.

The opening line of "Poetry Will Belong"—"Mud will roll with pigs in poetry" (Hussain 11)—evokes the Brahmaputra plains' environmental fragility and the humiliation imposed on marginalized communities. The metaphor of poetry as "the fifth passenger / on a seat meant for four" (11) critiques systemic overcrowding in cultural and political spaces, echoing Fanon's assertion that reclaiming space is an act of decolonial resistance (138).

The poem, "Your Name is Hussein & You are a Terror", One of Hussein's most searing works directly confronts the weaponization of identity:

"Your existence is fire and brimstone
Your laziness an unpinned grenade
Your steady silence an affront to a world stinking of sulphur" (Hussain 57).

The piling of militarized metaphors—"cluster-bomb," "shower of pellets," "anthrax"—exposes how the Muslim minority body is rendered suspect. Even joy is marked as deviant:

"More platypus than wood duck
More bat than bird
More cockroach than dinosaur"(57).

The final declaration,

"Your quiet a salivating sword /
Your Name is Hussein & you are a Terror" (57), transforms the imposed label into defiance. In Fanon's terms, Hussein turns "the language of the oppressor" against itself (101). Davis's argument that naming is a battleground for liberation also resonates here (53).

The poems "15th August 1947, "A Lesson in History," and "Standing by Abba's Grave" bridge personal history with national memory. By foregrounding moments such as standing beside a father's grave on Independence Day, they challenge sanitized nationalist narratives and demand recognition for erased subaltern histories.

In "Birth Certificate," the speaker recalls arm-wrestling his father "Against a granite palm-print / Against the bamboo knots on / His fingers" (Hussain 58), a metaphor for inherited endurance. In "The Holy Cross," Catholic ritual is reframed: "straps binding holy armour on our upper bodies" (61) symbolize religious assimilation as cultural containment.

The poem "City of Dead Fairies" embodies displacement, surveillance, and contested citizenship through surreal and multilingual imagery—"the toga's butt is red / As it flapped away" (Hussain 73).

Hussein turns a domestic memory into a reflection on political visibility in the poem "Dressing My Father"- "two days before the Panchayat elections when Abba dressed after bathing (Hussain 67).

Domestic details—"water swimming in a bottle… the water in the bottle shivering" in the poem "At the Counsellor's Office" (Hussain 81)—illustrate the absurd criminalization of everyday existence.

Poems such as "The Snake and the Tree Frog" and "When Numbers Turn Sentient" dismantle bureaucratic objectivity, revealing how "Numbers have no mouths" (Hussain 95) yet still speak in the language of exclusion.

Hussein's poetic strategies—multilingualism, autobiographical intimacy, militarized metaphor, and the reappropriation of slurs—create a literature of subversion. Code-switching refuses linguistic purity, asserting a hybrid cultural identity. Militarized imagery reclaims tools of state violence as symbols of agency. These techniques align with Fanon's idea of literature as political intervention and Davis's emphasis on cultural work as a sustaining force for liberation movements.

In "Rani of Rajouri", Shalim M. Hussein crafts a layered portrait that is at once intimate, observational, and politically charged. The poem opens with an imperative—"When you wake at 6 / There are things / You should expect of the rani of Rajouri"—immediately positioning the reader in a space of anticipation and surveillance. The "Rani" here is both a specific figure and a symbolic construction: a woman whose morning gestures are observed, catalogued, and perhaps judged. The description moves fluidly from the physical—"Legs crossed, folded, fingers / Tangled in last night's party hair"—to the technological and material, as the Rani engages with "paper, cellphone, / repeat gifts (for everyone knows / the queen's love of gun-metal)."

The reference to "gun-metal" is striking, blending luxury and violence, beauty and militarism, hinting at the geopolitical tensions embedded in the title's "Rajouri"—a district in Jammu and Kashmir, a region marked by militarization and contested sovereignties. The Rani's private morning becomes inseparable from public histories of conflict. The closing images—"a peek of a / friend's bra" and "Lips pressed with the pink / of a few hours past twenty one"—layer sensuality with temporal specificity, suggesting a threshold between youth and maturity, innocence and political awareness.

Through this juxtaposition of the sensual and the martial, Hussein reframes femininity in conflict zones—not as passive victimhood but as a site of self-fashioning, negotiation, and resistance. The poem's compressed narrative and fragmentary details mirror the fractured lives lived under constant political strain, aligning it with the protest aesthetics that characterize *Betel Nut City.*

"The Poet at Connaught Place" is one of Shalim M. Hussain's most visually layered and politically suggestive poems in *Betel Nut City*. At first glance, the poem appears to be an urban vignette—a meeting between the speaker and a poet in the bustling heart of Delhi. Yet the opening lines, "By the time the poet calls to say that she might be late / Summer has come / Roads melt, mirages sit cross-legged," establish a surreal, almost apocalyptic tone. The "big flag" at Connaught Place, drained to white, becomes a potent image of a faded or hollowed nationalism, stripped of its saffron and green vitality.

The arrival of the poet—"in what remains of saffron and green"—reintroduces these national colours, but in fragments, implying an incomplete or fractured identity. Her playful yet subversive acts—dipping "a snake in tarmac," pulling "edges of Rajiv Chowk," and creating a "paper tree"—function as acts of poetic insurgency, reshaping the city's iconography. The conjured birds, "sparrow, parrot, chopta," evoke biodiversity and regional rootedness, while "hair / pulled from paddy fields / dyed in peat and sunshine" collapses rural and urban geographies into one body.

The final gesture—ordering "mutton cutlets" with "a smile that's here / But not quite here"—underscores the poem's meditation on displacement and belonging. Like much of Hussain's work, it transforms an everyday encounter into a commentary on the uneasy intersections of art, identity, and the nation-state, where Connaught Place itself becomes both a performance stage and a contested political space.

Shalim M. Hussain's *Betel Nut City* is a text where the personal and the political constantly intermingle, where memory is not simply nostalgia but a site of contestation, mourning, and subtle protest. In the poems "Simal Tree," "Death by Music," and "Namaaz," Hussain crafts intimate vignettes that simultaneously preserve individual experiences and articulate broader conditions of displacement, generational change, and cultural continuity. The poems are rooted in highly localized imagery—a simal tree, a hidden gutkha packet, the rosewater in ritual ablution—yet they resonate beyond their immediate context, speaking to themes of dignity, mortality, and the persistence of love and devotion amidst precarity.

In "Simal Tree," Hussain builds a deceptively simple scene: a father leaning against a tree, too tired to ride his bicycle yet "too dignified to squat" (Hussain 80). The poem's form is a pantoum, a structure where lines repeat in a cyclical pattern, creating a looping rhythm that mirrors the act of remembering. This structure itself becomes political—an insistence on lingering with the father's dignity, refusing the forward rush of a society that erases the aged and the rural poor.

The simal tree here is personified as an accuser: "A simal tree declared my father old." This anthropomorphism positions the tree as a witness to decline but also as an arbiter, almost complicit in the indignity of ageing. The sensory detail—"matchstick, one end rolled in cotton"—anchors the father's presence in tactile memory, while the repetition transforms a mundane act (cleaning the ear) into a small ritual of selfhood. The image of "simal pods popped" leading to "the street [becoming] a cotton field" blends realism with surreal transformation, showing how a single sensory trigger can flood the present with metaphorical richness.

Politically, the poem resists narratives of progress that discard older generations. The father's refusal to squat is a refusal to relinquish dignity; the speaker's vow—"I'll never forgive that simal tree"—is less about the tree itself than about a society that measures worth in terms of vitality and productivity.

"Death by Music" reads like a set of instructions for tending to a body—yet it is charged with deeply personal observations that map class identity, private longing, and the intimate embarrassments of the deceased. The poem begins almost offhandedly: "If he doesn't listen to advice, / Keeps his headphones on while crossing… / And is finally hit by a bus…" (Hussain 81). The blunt inevitability in "finally hit" sets a tone of fatalistic realism, while the conditional "if" structures the poem as a hypothetical obituary.

The details are precise markers of class and consumption: "four packets of Kamala Pasand" gutkha signal both addiction and an economic shift ("shifted to inferior gutkha"), while the "new photo albums… one for boarding passes, one for handwritten copies of sms'es" evoke a pre-smartphone era of romantic sentimentality. These objects function as synecdoches, standing in for an entire life history and social position.

The repeated imperatives—"Remove… Hide… Don't tell… Cover… don't reveal"—create a narrative of posthumous curation, as if the speaker must manage the deceased's legacy to preserve familial dignity. The tone oscillates between affectionate teasing ("an idiotic love from a time before smartphones") and protective secrecy ("don't reveal / The combination to the hidden folder / On his mobile phone"). This tension reflects an ethics of care grounded in intimacy but shaped by cultural expectations regarding respectability.

In the context of Miya poetry, "Death by Music" can be read as a micro-political act: by documenting the minutiae of an ordinary life—its smells, its weaknesses, its small joys—Hussain resists the erasure of subaltern existence from public memory. The bus accident may be unremarkable to outsiders, but the speaker insists on the worthiness of preservation.

"Namaaaz" moves into the realm of devotional practice, yet its power lies in its intertwining of the sacred and the erotic. The speaker begins in a state of ritual obligation—"I had to clean myself"—but before the ablution is completed, "the wetness of your tongue was on my palm." This merging of ablution with sensual touch functions as blasphemous juxtaposition in orthodox terms, but in poetic terms it asserts that human desire is inseparable from spiritual life.

The poem's sensory richness—rose water "tucked" in ears, a cap pulled over hair, the "few strands that stuck out" belonging to the beloved—creates an intimate haptic landscape. The lines "I rolled up my pants and rolled out the mat / And on the velvet on the sheet, I could feel the underside of your feet" collapse physical memory into present ritual, blurring boundaries between sacred space and the space of lovers.

The climactic confession—"When I turned west and announced I would offer him / My prayers, God knew I wasn't fooling him"—is a moment of self-awareness that refuses hypocrisy. This is not a rejection of faith but a redefinition of it: the divine is invoked honestly, with the acknowledgment that love for the human other is part of one's offering to God. From an activist-aesthetic perspective, "Namaaz" challenges the binary between piety and passion, disrupting conservative religious narratives that police the body. In Miya poetry's broader project, this becomes a statement of agency—claiming the right to experience, articulate, and sanctify desire within one's own cultural-religious idiom.

Across "Simal Tree," "Death by Music," and "Namaaz," Hussain employs several recurring strategies: Precise object-detailing (matchstick rolled in cotton, Kamala Pasand packets, rose water) as a way to inscribe memory in tangible form and structural innovation, from the looping pantoum of "Simal Tree" to the imperative-driven list in "Death by Music" and sensory layering where sight, touch, and smell converge to evoke lived intimacy, resistance through preservation, documenting lives, gestures, and desires that dominant narratives overlook or suppress.

These strategies form part of Miya poetry's activist dimension—not through overt slogans, but through the slow, deliberate act of making the ordinary unforgettable. Each poem reclaims the right to narrate one's own story, to define dignity, and to integrate personal emotion into collective memory.

In "Simal Tree," the protest lies in refusing to let the father's weariness be a private moment erased by time. In "Death by Music," it lies in insisting that the dead are more than the circumstances of their death. In "Namaaz," it lies in integrating personal desire into a public act of faith, asserting that spiritual identity is not reducible to ritual correctness. Together, they reveal how Hussain's activist aesthetics operate through intimacy, turning memory into a form of resistance.

Miya poetry has provoked fierce reaction, including police complaints against Hussein and others for allegedly promoting social disharmony (India Today). While some Assamese critics view it as divisive, supporters argue that it enriches democratic discourse. The controversy itself affirms that Miya poetry occupies a critical political space—its very existence challenges the status quo (The Wire).

Shalim M. Hussein's *Betel Nut City* demonstrates how poetry becomes activism. By reframing identity slurs, reclaiming erased histories, and refusing linguistic and cultural erasure, Hussein crafts a poetics of resistance that embodies both Fanon's combat literature and Davis's vision of ongoing struggle. His work asserts that in contested spaces, poetry is not just art—it is survival.

**Work Cited**

1. Davis, Angela Y. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Haymarket Books, 2016.
2. Das Gupta, Uttaran, and Shalim M. Hussain. "This, Here, Is Home: Shalim M. Hussain on Miya Poetry from Assam." Words Without Borders, July 2024, wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2024-07/this-here-is-home-shalim-m-hussain-on-miyah-poetry-from-assam-uttaran-das-gupta/.
3. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
4. Hussain, Shalim M. *Betel Nut City*. Red Leaf Foundation for Poetry, 2019.
5. India Today. "Miya Poetry: Why Is It Creating Noise in Assam Now." India Today, 16 July 2019, www.indiatoday.in/india/story/miya-poetry-why-is-it-creating-noise-in-assam-now-explained-nrc-citizenship-bill-1570048-2019-07-16.
6. Laskar, Ajmol, and Mansur Ahmed Hazari. "Identity Crisis and the Emergence of Miya Literature as Resistance Literature." Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, vol. 17, no. 3, 2021, pp. 1–12.
7. The Wire. "Miya Poetry Weaves a World of Suffering and Humiliation in Contemporary Assam." The Wire, 2024, thewire.in/culture/miyah-poetry-weaves-a-world-of-suffering-and-humiliation-in-contemporary-assam.