

# Lyrical Resistance in the Shillong Music Scene: Women in Music and Dissidence



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# Lyrical Resistance in the Shillong Music Scene

## *Women in Music and Dissidence*



### **Introduction**

When starting a discourse on music and resistance one is obliged to examine the context in which the music is created. Despite discourse about music being universal, a contextualised understanding is required to gauge the composition and meaning of a song or a piece of music. Music is highly anecdotal and context-driven, especially when its mode of conception and creation is taken into account; it is also never apolitical as it allows for its representation through sound (Damodaran 2016). According to Jacques Attali's (2009) conceptualization of music, music today is not innocent as it is so ubiquitous in the form of popular music that it is fetishized as a commodity, laden with signifiers for a society that vastly lacks the means of communicating meaning in a capitalist environment. The signifiers in music are both of order and subversion.

This essay assesses how women create music while manoeuvring the intricacies of male-dominated spaces and a culture that is charged with many complexities of politics, tribal identity, and gender.

### **Politics, society, and gender in a Matrilineal Society**

Besides colonialism and the fight to preserve an indigenous identity, culture, and tradition against British colonization and Christian missionary ‘civilizing missions’, Shillong also has a long history of being at the centre of identity politics of the Khasi-Jaintia people. Shillong was the erstwhile capital of Assam and, later, the capital of the state of Meghalaya, formed in 1972. Meghalaya’s formation was enabled by a demand for autonomy for the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo people, who refused to continue to remain under the Assam government, and later achieved autonomy under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In all this, women in Meghalaya were predominantly absent from politics and public forums. As of 2020, only four women serve in the state Legislative Assembly with 60 seats. Further, women are barred from participating in local administrative bodies called Dorbar Shnongs. Matriliney and ‘matrifocality’, as Mishra calls it, is limited to the domestic space and seldom crosses over to the political and public spaces. Khasi-Jaintia people are matrilineal only for the purpose of propagating clan names and determining inheritance (Mishra 2007; Nongbri 1988). Nongbri (1988: 75) writes about how Khasi women’s roles are predetermined by traditional norms that limit them to the home and hearth,

The Khasi definitions of gender roles provide the ideological support for the domestication of women and their exclusion from the political domain. Although there are no formal laws which prevent Khasi women from holding public office, they are not allowed to attend traditional village and ‘state’ durbars (customary administrative and judicial councils). A woman who dares to voice her opinion on public affairs is regarded as a “hen that crows”—a freak of nature.

Even today, a patriarchal and paternal attitude is the norm in the workplace where women are sidelined in policy and decision making. Despite this, some women have flouted norms and traditions in search of truth and justice, as shown in *When the Hens Crow* (2012), a documentary about women in a village called Jongsha who fought as Right to Information (RTI) activists. The title refers to the aforementioned popular Khasi phrase, *haba kynih ki syiar kynthei* (when the hens crow), a misogynist metaphorical phrase for the downfall of Khasi culture when women participate in politics, administration, and the public space.

The complications of matriliney are manifold and not limited to a discourse on the subjugation of women in patriarchy. This can be seen in how matriliney

has been critiqued by men’s rights groups like the Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) (Home Hearth Restructured) who demand that alterations be made to customary laws of lineage and inheritance saying, ‘It’s about patriliney. The aim is to change customary laws, give Khasi men respectability and drive, and check their downslide’ (Das 2017). Similar discontent, centering around a Khasi woman’s body, culminated in a controversial bill passed by the KHADC, led under the late Chief Executive Member H. S. Shylla, called the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage, (First Amendment) Bill, 2018, which aimed to de-centre the power of lineage through women by bringing in politics of Khasi and non-Khasi, Khasi and Dkhar<sup>1</sup> and so on. This was opposed by many sections of society including SRT. The bill was never given assent by the Governor.

A very good poem/song in the vernacular depicting this anxiety with identity and purity of race centred on the woman’s body can be seen in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s poem turned song *Ka Jingiam Jong ka Riti* (2020) (The Mourning of Custom, author’s translation), where Riti is also often a Khasi woman’s name. The song chronicles the sorrow of a young girl who is admonished for loving a Dkhar; it is a poetic depiction of the current discourse in Khasi society advising/ admonishing the youngest daughter or *khatduh* to remain chaste and uphold Khasi ethnic purity of custom and progeny by avoiding marrying a Dkhar.

<i>Ka Riti ka iam briew... Ki la ia pynbor da u para jait,</i>	Riti mourns ... as they forced her to marry a fellow Khasi,
<i>Ka doh jong ka doh, ka snam jong ka snam.</i>	Flesh of flesh, blood of blood,
<i>Phi dei ka khun khlieng kpoh, ki ia ong, ka ban phikir i'u khiewja,</i>	You are the youngest daughter, they said, the one to oversee in earnest the rice pot,
<i>Īa ka spah jong ka iing. Phi dei ka nongsumar jong ka kur,</i>	The riches and the home. You are the custodian of the clan name,

<sup>1</sup>Used for designating a non-Khasi and non-tribal person from the plains.

<p><i>Ka ban pynneh ia ka khong; hato phi hun ia la ki jong ki khun thei sotti</i></p>	<p>Who will perpetuate our likeness; would you be content for our chaste young women</p>
<p><i>ban pynjaboh da ka snam u rondi? U symbai u dei ban long u ba paka.</i></p>	<p>To pollute with the blood of a <i>rondi</i>? The seed has to be pure.</p>
<p><i>Phi dei ka khun khatduh ka Thei sotti,</i></p>	<p>You are the youngest daughter, a chaste young woman,</p>
<p><i>Wat pynjaboh da ka snam u rondi; Hynrei ka ong “Mynsiem jong nga Ka shlei da ka jingbhabriew jong phi ko baieit nga la ud” (Nongkynrih 2020)</i></p>	<p>Don’t pollute with the blood of a <i>rondi</i>; But she said “My heart overflows with your beauty, my beloved and I sing” (author’s translation)</p>

Within the complexities of gender and identity politics in the Khasi matrilineal culture, women are rare in the popular music scenario, perhaps because of an awareness of the accepted norms and expectations that dominate Khasi society or the internalization thereof. I also observed that Khasi traditional music is mostly male dominated, and during sacred Khasi festivals and rituals, the priests and tribal administrators, as well as the musicians, or *dhulia*,<sup>3</sup> are always men. Many of the very few popular women music artists in Shillong say that they faced no issues in being performers, but they do not address the lack of women music artists consciously or unconsciously.



<sup>2</sup>Lowest of the low, implying the ‘baseness’ of promiscuity.

<sup>3</sup>Khasi musicians seen during sacred festivals and rituals that form a crucial element of ritualistic practices.

**Rise of women artists: Matriliney, Internet, and dissidence in popular music**

Music in Shillong reflects socio-political issues through lyrics and compositions that are anecdotal and highly contextualised to the time and place in which they are produced. Music does this through the way it is composed, in its arrangement, use of the vernacular, and overt socio-political references in the lyrics. When it comes to reach and impact today, songs become overnight ‘hits’ when they fit in with the right parameters of popular genres and are marketed strategically on online platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and music streaming sites like Spotify and iTunes. The internet has decentralized production, distribution, and consumption of music, and this has enabled many content creators, artists, and musicians to share their work online, garnering instant fame and a large fan following within the state and outside. With these developments, Shillong has witnessed the rise of music artists particularly in hip hop, R&B, and soul music. Three good examples are Khasi Bloodz, Meba Ofilia, and Reble.

Khasi Bloodz released a music video in 2013 for their song, ‘Rising Star’, which earned the group respect for being ‘true to its roots’, rapping in the vernacular, and representing the Khasi people and the Northeastern states on the hip hop scene in India. Since then, Khasi Bloodz has performed all over India, and signed up with Puma India as brand ambassadors, featuring in the music video ‘Suede Gully’ (2017) with artists from all over the country. The group made its presence felt rapping in the vernacular starting with ‘Trrrraak tak tak! Kumba phah I mei na iing’ (onomatopoeia for drum beats with ‘as your mother sent you from home’), which is a common Khasi crowd chant in local football matches and sports events. The group attributes most of its inspiration to a consciousness of where its members come from and who they are. In an interview with Bok and Big Ri from the Khasi Bloodz, they elucidated this saying:

Rap to us is like *Phawar*<sup>4</sup> to our ancestors. What we write and rap about are things that are meaningful to us. Our audience can either take it or leave it, but over the years we’ve met a number of people who told us our music helped them cope with real life situations. I’m grateful for that

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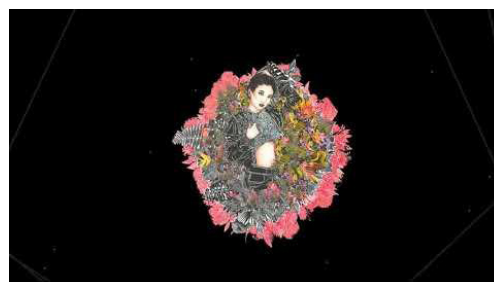
<sup>4</sup>Here it refers to the popular folk Khasi couplet rhyme in four lines used in folk celebratory mode, often as satire and lampooning various topics, ranging from frivolous to socio-political, accompanied by Khasi drums. Performed by men, it is practiced with one solo performer calling out the rhymes, followed by a ‘Hoi Kiw!’ from the crowd.

because our music helps us cope too. Songs like ‘Don’t Stop’ and ‘Hip Hop’. These songs helped me cope.



This can be seen in all of Bloodz’s videos and is particularly explored in the web series *Hip Hop Homeland North East*, (2016) where the group’s members are shown eking a living by selling burgers to local Khasi tea joints and talking about where they come from: the stories of insurgency, the people who were in the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) and their influence on political awakening, and the realisation of the importance of political consciousness in artistic creation. In an interview with the author of this essay, the group’s members said that their content remains free from the influence of vested interests, and they produce freely relying on funding from online crowdfunding sites like Patreon and IndieGoGo. Lamonte Pakyntein, also known as D-Mon, has left the Khasi Bloodz to commit to his music production house, Mix & Flow, which has been crucial in the rise of many young artists, including the female artists mentioned below.

Meba Ofilia, a soul and rap artist, has made inroads into mainstream music through her online presence, releasing her debut track, ‘Real’ (2017) on SoundCloud. Since then, she has performed live at various locations around India and in Meghalaya. She recently started rapping in Khasi and English in her songs ‘Done Talking’ (2018) and ‘Journey’ (2019). Her song ‘Done Talking’ featuring Big Ri from Khasi Bloodz got the Best India Act award at the MTV Europe Music Awards 2018. In an interview with *Asiaville*, she talked about how coming from the Khasi matrilineal society helped her as she always had support in pursuing her music ambitions. She also spoke about her mother being her pillar of support





and her inspiration, while playfully warning men not to take women lightly. Her songs reflect a similar attitude of being true to oneself and others, not tolerating mistreatment in private or public, and working hard while celebrating one's achievements through love and support. When asked about using the vernacular in her songs she said, 'Personally, I like to incorporate both Khasi and English, English being the medium that connects one community to another and for me, singing/rapping in Khasi is more about embracing my culture and a feeling of being at home with my people.' Like Khasi Bloodz, Meba Ofilia has also signed up with Puma India as brand ambassador.

Taking a somewhat off-beat path, the young rap artist Reble came to the limelight with the release of the music videos for her songs, 'Bad' (2019) and 'Believe' (2019). Both were produced by Mix & Flow. She raps in English, and her songs are confessional and connect with audiences intimately about difficult life experiences and the struggle in coming to terms with these experiences and transcending them. The lyrics for 'Bad' are autobiographical and convey the struggles of being abandoned by her father and her mother's hope that her daughter will not have a similarly difficult life:

"Mama said it was your fault, was it? I don't know if it's true  
I never got the chance to know you, Daddy  
Did you do this on purpose?  
... And it's not normal and it's been depressing  
I hate when we talk formal  
'cause when we meet each other  
It's like we don't know each other"

This song talks of a common social occurrence in the Khasi-Jaintia community of fathers abandoning their spouses and children, perpetuating a cycle of neglect, abuse, and abandonment of responsibilities: 'I understood that life is never that bad/She grew up the same with a mother that never had a dad.'

This can be explored further in what Nongbri (1988) wrote in her article about the 'matrilineal puzzle' and its inherent contradictions, where a woman (the youngest daughter) is expected to be the custodian of clan rites and traditions, inheriting clan property while also being under the authority of her maternal uncles or *kñi*. Her husband is considered an outsider or a *khun ki briew* (someone else's son), and he has no custody or authority over his own children or his wife's property, and gets no inheritance from his own clan (Nongbri 1988). This issue

was recently highlighted by SRT. Changing social patterns of envisioning the home and the state are shifting dynamics where the Khasi matrilineal culture is bringing in new tropes following modern trends, especially those of Christian theology and western culture. ‘Bad’ places a strong focus on women and their roles as caregivers and parents, where mothers as single parents are a pillar of support that their children need despite dysfunctional family dynamics that are far from what is expected by a “respectable” society. This attitude of self-empowerment is not native to Khasi society, especially to Khasi women, as it came in with shifting discourses on gender, gender parity, and the matrifocality of the Khasi matrilineal society:

“And my mama always told me ‘Girl I want your life to be great  
I don’t want your life to be like my life of disgrace  
@#\$\$% everybody, do what you gotta do  
@#\$\$% everybody, be what you gotta be”

A song recently released by Andrea Tariang,<sup>5</sup> Meba Ofilia, Maya Lyngdoh, and Debra Rynjah, ‘Rise Up’ reflects modern viewpoints on women’s empowerment and solidarity amidst alarming rates of gender-based abuse and violence. Similarly, Meba Ofilia and Reble rap and sing with the confidence of self-empowerment even though they are women artists in a male-dominated industry. Despite not overtly referring to socio-political issues and refusing to comment on how their music is political, the simple act of self-affirming, solidarity, and being visible in the popular music scene in India is statement enough to help dismantle stereotypes about North-East India in general, and Khasi women and the Khasi tribe in particular. The music industry in Shillong is in its nascent stages, but that is changing in this era of the internet and decentralized access to resources allowing voices that are often marginalized in song and rap to come to the fore.



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<sup>5</sup> Actress and musician known for her role as herself in the movie *Pink* (2016).

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