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Research Paper

Myths That Remember: Gendered Resistance and Indigenous Knowledge in Khasi Poetic Memory

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Abstract: *This paper explores the intersection of gendered resistance and indigenous knowledge in Khasi poetic memory, with a focus on Esther Syiem's poems "Noh Ka Likai", "Pahsyntiew", and "The Hill of Woman's Death". These poems explicate upon the rich cultural heritage of the Khasis, weaving together narratives of resistance and survival through a gendered lens. Through the lens of Khasi mythology, the paper examines how women's voices resist both cultural erasure and historical violence, challenging patriarchal structures and asserting a reclaiming of indigenous wisdom. The work of Esther Syiem, a prominent Khasi poet, represents the reclaiming of mythic memory, where female figures endure and actively reshape their environments, offering a counter-narrative to dominant colonial histories. The study investigates how these myths, transmitted through poetic forms, act as repositories of Indigenous knowledge, which assist in a continued dialogue between the past and the present. By focusing on the poetic renderings of female agency, the paper depicts the role of oral traditions and myth-making in preserving a collective Indigenous identity that resists the forces of colonialism, especially modernity. The analysis is rooted in feminist and postcolonial theories, which examine how these myths preserve and propagate a worldview that upholds indigenous sovereignty, environmental sustainability, and gender justice.*

Keywords: *Khasi Poetic Memory, Gendered Resistance, Indigenous Knowledge, Esther Syiem, Myths*

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I. Introduction:

In recent decades, scholarship has increasingly turned to interdisciplinarity to address the complex and entangled realities of culture, language, gender, and history. This paper contributes to that critical imperative by examining Khasi poetic memory through the intersecting lenses of literary studies, indigenous knowledge systems, cultural memory, and gender theory. The work of Esther Syiem, particularly her poems, "Noh Ka Likai", "Pahsyntiew", and "The Hill of Woman's Death", can be perceived as both a cultural archive and an aesthetic resistance. In Syiem's hands, poetry becomes a space where memory is not merely preserved but actively reimagined; a form of what Saidiya Hartman terms "critical fabulation," where silenced voices are recuperated through imaginative narrative (Hartman 11).

While inheritance and lineage pass through the mother's line, matrilineality does not equate to matriarchy, and women's autonomy is still vulnerable to the encroachments of patriarchal religion, law, and bureaucracy, particularly under colonial rule and its legacies. Syiem's poetry addresses these complexities by centring the female voice not as a mythic victim but as an agent and custodian of memory. In doing so, her work challenges both the moral simplification of mythic narratives and the silences imposed by institutionalised history. Interdisciplinarity, then, may be viewed beyond being merely an academic method to one that should be considered a necessary mode of critical engagement. This approach enables us to acknowledge the various interconnections of knowledge, resistance and memory intertwined within indigenous cultural productions.

In Indigenous contexts, myth is not reducible to folklore or superstition. Building on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's assertion that indigenous storytelling represents a vital "space of resistance" (4), the article contends that myth, as employed by Syiem, is not only a form of cultural memory but also a mode of epistemological assertion. This understanding of myth as an epistemic and political force shifts the interpretive lens from passive reception to active engagement. Rather than static relics of the past, myths within indigenous frameworks are repositories of lived knowledge and cultural continuity. They encode ontologies that resist Western binaries between past and present, body and spirit. As such, the retelling of a myth is never neutral; it is an act that engages memory and contests imposed meanings. For the Khasis, whose oral traditions sustain a sense of identity rooted in matrilineal

inheritance and ecological interdependence, myth becomes a symbolic narrative and a form of historical consciousness.

The theoretical foundation of this article draws from a constellation of thinkers. Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory helps frame Syiem's work as a performative act of remembrance that connects generations across time and space. Assmann describes memory as a collective practice rooted in symbolic places and ritual forms. In this light, Khasi landscapes such as the cliff of 'Noh Ka Likai', the sacred groves of Pahsyntiew, and the hill of the unnamed woman become mnemonic terrains, where myth and memory converge.

This article also engages feminist theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ketu Katrak to understand how female subjectivity is negotiated within and against both indigenous and colonial frameworks. Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates deeply in Syiem's poetic project, which seeks not to romanticise the subaltern woman but to restore her voice, however fractured, through lyrical testimony. Katrak's insights into the postcolonial female body as a site of resistance inform this paper's reading of embodiment and ecological ethics in the poems. These perspectives are further explained by the ecological wisdom of thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Amilcar Cabral, who link land, culture, and liberation. Syiem's poems perform what Michel de Certeau calls the "tactics of everyday life": subtle acts of care, cultivation, and memory that resist institutional control (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 23).

This article unfolds in three sections. The first focuses on "Noh Ka Likai," exploring how Syiem reimagines a culturally iconic tragedy as a feminist narrative of grief and refusal. The second section examines "Pahsyntiew" as a meditation on ecological wisdom, ancestral ambiguity and gendered agency. The final section considers "The Hill of Woman's Death" as a powerful critique of gendered violence and the politics of forgetting. The article shows how Syiem's poetry transforms Khasi myths into counter-archives that resist forgetting and reclaim indigenous female voices.

Section I: Re-membering Grief: "Noh Ka Likai" and the Politics of Poetic Refusal

Esther Syiem's poem "Noh Ka Likai" should be viewed not just as a literary adaptation, but as a radical re-storying of the iconic myth about a woman named Likai. After the death of her first husband, Likai remarries, only for her second husband to grow resentful of the love and attention she gives her daughter. In a brutal act of jealousy, he murders the child, cooks her flesh, and leaves it for Likai, who eats it unknowingly when she gets home from work. When she later discovers her daughter's severed fingers in a betel-nut basket, she is overcome by unimaginable grief and throws herself off a cliff, now named Noh Ka Likai, meaning "the leap of Likai." Through this poetic intervention, Likai's grief becomes a locus of epistemic reparation.

The poem begins with a tone of mythic reverence but quickly immerses the reader in the emotional devastation of the protagonist, Likai. Rather than focusing solely on the violent climax, Syiem introduces the protagonist, Likai, as one who is "haunted by unnamed fears" ("Noh ka Likai") as she confronts the daily rituals of food and domesticity symbolised by "*jadoh*" (a traditional Khasi rice and meat) and "*dohsyiar*" (chicken meat). Besides being ritual meals that are usually comforting, it feels like a forced peace offering after some daily emotional or psychological pain. Likai seems resigned to accept it, hoping for a better tomorrow.

The horror, when it arrives, is visceral but not sensationalised. As Likai reaches for the "shangkwai" ("Noh ka Likai")—the bamboo container traditionally used for chewing betel nut—she touches something "soft." The basket is described as being "askew with the weight / of broken ligaments." In this moment, the sacred is made grotesque, and domestic space is transformed into a site of betrayal. The rupture is not just emotional but ontological: it upends the foundational structures of kinship, trust, and sustenance. Yet, instead of merely mourning this violation, Syiem's speaker announces: "I will face him no more." This line, seemingly understated, carries tremendous force. It is not just a renunciation of her husband but a larger refusal to be reabsorbed into patriarchal narratives that demand women's silence, sacrifice, or survival on someone else's terms.

In evoking Likai's inner world, Syiem performs an act of historical retrieval. As Gayatri Spivak famously argued in her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the subaltern woman is often overwritten by the discourses of both empire and patriarchy. Syiem's attempt at giving Likai back her voice does not forget to represent her grief and decision to "hurl [herself] into these waters" ("Noh ka Likai"), which may often be considered to be marks of hysteria, but as one that must be regarded as a systemic failure of communal ethics. The cliff where Likai jumps from transforms into a monument of resistance; it emerges as a hill of memory where the personal becomes mythic, and the mythic becomes political. The transformation of the cliff into a hill of memory signals more than personal trauma. It enacts a mnemonic geography where pain, place and protest coalesce. This mythic space, charged with emotional and historical weight, becomes legible through oral-poetic forms. Here, the poem functions as a performative utterance that restores what Spivak identifies as the subaltern's silenced subjectivity.

This act of re-membering, literally putting back together what has been fragmented, is reinforced through Syiem's poetic structure. The poem uses a circular, recursive rhythm that mimics oral storytelling traditions. This aligns with Walter Ong's notion that oral cultures depend on formulaic repetition to sustain memory across generations (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* 36). By invoking images of the hearth, the

basket, the meal, and the cliff, Syiem creates a mnemonic constellation through which Likai's story is continually reactivated. The poem, then, is not a closed narrative but an open site of return, where grief becomes both testimony and resistance.

Importantly, Syiem resists romanticising Likai. The closing lines: "I never wanted to be remembered… / I only wished to release… / the channels of my grief" provide a critique of how female suffering is often co-opted for communal myth-making. Likai does not seek martyrdom or spectacle but only to grieve. The political complexities of memorialisation are highlighted by this paradox: remembering someone who wanted to be forgotten. It challenges readers to consider whose voices are kept alive in cultural memory and for what purposes. Syiem's use of lyrical form and spatial symbolism, such as the hill, the hearth, and the waterfall, reinscribes Likai's memory onto the land itself, enacting what Assmann calls the localisation of "mythical memories" (*Cultural Memory and Western Civilisation* 297)**.** The myth thus becomes a mnemonic landscape, where the physical geography of Meghalaya is inseparable from its storied past. This poetic re-inscription turns landscape into text and memory into ritual, which is a distinctly Assmannian process. In this way, Syiem's poem is a cultural performance of resistance, ensuring that the subaltern female voice, once silenced by horror, speaks across generations.

By reimagining Likai's grief as a political act and her memory as a living archive, Syiem refuses the erasure of female experience from Khasi cultural history. "Noh Ka Likai" thus functions as a counter-narrative that honours subaltern knowledge and insists on the transformative power of mourning as resistance. It is not simply a retelling of a familiar myth, but a poetic intervention that reclaims the silenced and speaks across generations.

Section II: Gardening Memory: "Pahsyntiew" and the Ecology of Gendered Resistance

According to Assmann, cultural memory relies on symbolic people, places, and practices that communities use to remember, reinterpret, and transmit foundational experiences. In "Pahsyntiew", the flower garden is more than just a physical location; it becomes a metaphor for ecological balance, feminine agency and ancestral wisdom.

The legend of *Ka Pah Syntiew* is a sacred Khasi folktale centred around a divine being who chose to live among mortals. She is the daughter of 'Lei Shyllong, the mountain god after whom Shillong is named. One day, villagers in Pomlakrai discover a mysterious girl sitting atop a sacred rock near the Cave of Marai. Despite efforts to reach her, she remains silent and unmoving until she is finally coaxed down with a bouquet of wildflowers. She is adopted by the village chief, U Mylliem Ngap, and named Ka Pah Syntiew, meaning "the flowered one." As she grows, Ka Pah Syntiew becomes a wise and revered figure, later called Ka Syiem (the queen). She marries a nobleman (U Kongor Nongjri), and their prosperous family line becomes the ancestral lineage of the 'Syiems' of Shillong. Eventually, she reveals her divine identity and returns to her celestial origins by vanishing into the Cave of Marai, leaving behind a legacy of spiritual wisdom and matrilineal nobility.

The speaker in the poem addresses the ancestress as both inspiration and enigma, a personal myth who, despite being venerated, was "weighed and found wanting" ("Pahsyntiew"). Pahsyntiew is remembered for her departure, that is, from self-possession to being "wooed…with yellow *jalyngkteng* flower", symbolising patriarchal seduction and loss. Her refusal to remain available to communal dreams, choosing "the alternate world… only for yourself", becomes a form of resistance, a disruption of the maternal ideal. Yet, like Likai, she is haunted by the expectations imposed upon her: to nurture, to belong and to symbolise continuity. Syiem uses this ambiguity to critique how Khasi myths, though rooted in matriliny, still subject women to roles that silence their autonomy. In doing so, the poem does not reject the ancestral figure but reclaims her as a site of epistemic resistance.

Syiem's diction is intimate yet interrogative: phrases like "I upheld you as/ my personal myth" and "yet I still choose/ to look upon you" ("Pahsyntiew") mark a shift from passive reverence to active re-reading. By using "you" repeatedly, the speaker creates a direct address and a dialogic space in which she presents her ancestor as kin while holding her accountable. Metonymically, natural symbols such as the "yellow jalyngkteng flower" stand for seduction, domestication and the conversion of the divine woman into a reproductive organ. The flower's brightness draws attention to the contradictory position of women in matrilineal societies and celebrated as givers of life and lineage, yet burdened with symbolic expectations of nurturing, containment and self-sacrifice. The poem simultaneously asks whether such inheritance binds or liberates, while the motif of "mother-seed" and "warmth" evokes the generative potential of matrilineal memory. Syiem implies that memory is a contested space rather than a pure act of devotion through her use of enjambment and changing tones, which range from elegy to irony and admiration to accusation.

"Pahsyntiew's" non-linear structure reenacts a ritual of return in addition to telling a story. This non-linearity mimics ritual, a recursive return to sacred acts, places and figures. The repeated invocation of ancestral presence repositions the poem as a ritual of re-connection rather than a resolution. The absence of closure resists the Western literary demand for catharsis, instead embracing what Assmann identifies as memory's inherently open-ended temporality.

Through the speaker's evolving relationship with the myth (from childhood reverence to critical adult reflection), Syiem articulates a form of remembering that resists the historical erasure and simplification of tribal women's roles. The speaker's desire to "preserve [her] from the imprecision of passing eras" ("Pahsyntiew") suggests an urgent need to anchor such feminine figures within a living cultural memory. Furthermore, the ambiguity surrounding Pahsyntiew's departure, whether it was a rejection of the dominant social order or a return to her kind, renders her an emblem of gendered resistance. Her refusal to remain within prescribed roles and her association with sacred natural symbols such as the "*jalyngkteng"* flower and Krem Marai caves embed her within an indigenous knowledge system that privileges matrilineal continuity and ecological belonging.

Syiem explores the link between gender and environmental ethics through the story of a woman caring for a flower garden in sacred groves, traditional Khasi areas protected by ecological wisdom and cultural taboos. Pahsyntiew is a woman whose understanding of the land embodies what Vandana Shiva refers to as the "feminine principle" (Staying Alive 5) of ecological thinking, which can be interpreted as a relational and embodied conception of sustainability. However, this female character is neither romanticised nor idealised, portrayed as a lone defender of land and memory who opposes erasure, commodification, and intrusion.

Pahsyntiew is not portrayed through the lens of victimhood; instead, she exercises autonomy in her decision to leave, but an act layered with symbolic meaning. Her departure may be read as a refusal to conform to the roles imposed by patriarchal kinship or colonial legality. Rather than centring on her suffering, the poem subtly foregrounds her voice through the speaker's memory, invoking her connection to the land, the ancestral cave, and the *jalyngkteng* flower as extensions of her embodied presence. Reconfiguring the female body as a literal and metaphorical terrain of resistance is what Katrak defines as a postcolonial feminist strategy, and this alignment with nature and ancestral space reflects this. The elliptical and fragmented turn of the poetic form reflects the embodied knowledge that is beyond the scope of linear historiography. By reclaiming the indigenous woman's body as a living repository of choice, memory, and cultural continuity, "Pahsyntiew" challenges reductive narratives.

In contrast to Enlightenment rationalism, which separates humans from nature, Khasi indigenous knowledge presents an ontology of interdependence. Amilcar Cabral's notion that national liberation must include epistemic recovery becomes crucial here. Syiem's poems resist capitalist extractivism not by overt polemic, but through a quiet restoration of indigenous ways of seeing.

The motif of the flower-gatherer also embodies a form of mnemonic labour. By collecting what is scattered, she reassembles a fragmented heritage. This act resonates with what bell hooks asserts as the 'oppositional gaze', hereby looking here, poetic attention becomes a form of reclaiming denied subjectivity. In this sense, looking after the garden is not only cultural preservation; it is a quiet insurgency against erasure. The knowledge passed from grandmother to granddaughter, embedded in gestures and caretaking, affirms that memory does not need to be monumental to be radical—it can live in practices that sustain life.

Section III: Naming the Unnamed: "The Hill of Woman's Death" and the Poetics of Refusal

"The Hill of Woman's Death" is perhaps the most explicit articulation of gendered violence and cultural amnesia in Syiem's corpus. If "Noh Ka Likai" articulates grief as resistance and "Pahsyntiew" reclaims ecological care as memory work, then "The Hill of Woman's Death" confronts the haunting silences around gendered violence and cultural forgetting. This poem departs from mythic specificity to engage more directly with the social and political structures that naturalise the suffering of women.

The speaker does not seek to narrate a particular event; rather, she situates herself within a landscape that remembers what official history omits. The hill becomes a palimpsest where grief, protest and memory converge. The poem revisits a traditional tale from the Bhoi area, where a father imposes a deadly contest upon his daughter's suitors, turning love into spectacle and desire into paternal control. In this retelling, the woman, voiceless in the original legend, is given a powerful lyrical voice. The speaker's declaration, "This is what I've waited for" ("The Hill of Woman's Death"), is laced with irony. What appears to be anticipation is, in fact, entrapment within a patriarchal structure that commodifies her as a prize, stripping her of agency.

Syiem attempts to reclaim this narrative through an indigenous feminist lens, refusing to let the woman remain merely a grieving figure. Instead, she becomes a symbol of resistance through refusal. Her vigil, "on this hill I'll wait" ("The Hill of Woman's Death"), is not passivity but a subversive act. She refuses to be reabsorbed into patriarchal cycles of marriage or closure. In denying the privilege "to choose", the speaker confronts the settler-patriarchal logic that denies indigenous women full subjectivity, even within their communities.

The titular "hill" in Esther Syiem's poem is not merely a site of mourning but functions as a sentient witness—a geological archive that resists domestication or erasure. In portraying the land as capable of remembering what society chooses to forget, Syiem aligns with indigenous epistemologies that view land as both sovereign and animate. This conception resonates with the idea of embodied memory, wherein trauma is not only inscribed in individual bodies but also in landscapes marked by violence and silence. By choosing to remain on the hill, the speaker anchors her resistance in the land. She refuses erasure, instead performing a reciprocal recognition with place, mourning not as weakness, but as an epistemological act, a way of remembering that is

both political and spiritual. Her vigil becomes an act of survival, unsettling the patriarchal myth and reconfiguring it as a space of female sovereignty.

The poem thus demands a reckoning not only with history but with the legal, social, and cultural structures that have allowed such deaths, particularly of women, to remain unspoken. Here, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" becomes especially pertinent, as Syiem's poetic intervention operates as a counter-discursive act that gives voice to a figure historically muted by both patriarchal and colonial narratives. By writing female agency into mythic silence, Syiem reclaims the subaltern woman's voice not through direct speech but through the landscape's testimonial presence. In doing so, she engages in what Chandra Talpade Mohanty terms "decolonizing feminism," wherein indigenous and local knowledges are foregrounded in resistance to global, homogenising feminist discourses. Syiem's work exemplifies a feminist praxis rooted in place, memory, and myth, foregrounding a form of storytelling that reclaims silenced voices not through confrontation alone, but through the enduring, remembering power of the land itself.

Syiem's language is stark and filled with pauses that echo both oral lament and testimonial poetics. The voice in the poem calls upon readers not to mourn passively but to "remember aloud" ("The Hill of Woman's Death"). This act of public remembering functions as an anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal gesture. Decolonial thought must engage with the coloniality of memory, which is how historical narratives have been cleansed of Indigenous pain. Syiem's poem actively resists this erasure by naming the unnamed through poetic address.

II. Conclusion:

Syiem occupies a unique position as both cultural custodian and modern interlocutor. Her dual roles as poet and academic enable her to mediate between orality and literacy, between tradition and modernity. Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" is instructive here. Syiem operates within a hybrid space where fixed identities are destabilised, and meaning is negotiated. This dual positioning also aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's advocacy for linguistic and cultural decolonisation. By writing in English while retaining the cadence, worldview, and ethical texture of Khasi orature, Syiem transforms the colonial language into a vessel of Indigenous resurgence.

This paper has demonstrated how Khasi poetic memory, through Esther Syiem's mythopoetic texts, functions as both resistance and reparation. Myth is not an anachronism but a living epistemology. Poetry, in Syiem's hands, becomes a method of remembering otherwise a radical refusal to forget. By integrating literary criticism, gender studies, eco-critical theory, and indigenous epistemology, interdisciplinary approaches are essential. They enable us to grasp the entanglements of voice, body, land, and memory in texts that emerge from historically marginalised traditions. Syiem's poetry calls us to listen attentively and ethically. In doing so, it affirms that resistance is not only about speech, but also about remembrance, and myth is where that remembrance takes root.

Across the three poems, Syiem employs varied poetic forms, ranging from narrative lament to lyric meditation, to evoke the textures of Khasi oral storytelling. Her frequent use of repetition, ellipsis, and pause mimics the rhythms of spoken remembrance. As Walter Ong argues in *Orality and Literacy*, oral cultures often rely on formulaic structures to aid memory and communal participation. Syiem adapts this technique for the written page, transforming the silent reading experience into an act of collective listening.

Moreover, her engagement with Khasi-English as a literary medium further complicates the politics of form. Like other postcolonial writers, Syiem negotiates the tension between expressing indigenous sensibilities in a colonially inherited language. Yet, she turns this hybridity into a strength, forging a poetic voice that is both rooted and resonant.

Esther Syiem's poetry, as exemplified in "Noh Ka Likai", "Pahsyntiew", and "The Hill of Woman's Death", embodies what can be called a poetics of decolonial remembrance. By reinscribing Khasi myths and landscapes with gendered meaning, she asserts the political relevance of Indigenous epistemology in contemporary feminist discourse. Her work speaks to multiple margins: gendered, cultural, linguistic and invites a rethinking of what constitutes resistance. It is not always loud or spectacular. Sometimes it is a woman tending to a grove. Sometimes it is a cliff that will not be forgotten. Sometimes it is a hill that holds names we refuse to speak. In reviving these poetic memories, Syiem challenges us to remember otherwise, to listen for what has been silenced, to read what has been unwritten, and to honour the myths that continue to remember when we cannot.

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