



MATRILINY AND GENDER NEGOTIATION IN KHASI SOCIETY: RE-READING WOMEN'S POSITION THROUGH SOCIO-CULTURAL STRUCTURES

Precious Star Tmung*

*Principal, Ri Bhoi Synod College Umsaitsning Meghalaya and also a research scholar at The University of Science and Technology Meghalaya. Email: preciousstartmung@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Khasi society of Meghalaya is widely recognised for its matrilineal structure, where descent, inheritance, and clan identity are traced through the female line. Such a system has frequently led to the assumption that Khasi women enjoy complete social empowerment and gender equality. However, a closer examination of Khasi social institutions reveals a more nuanced reality. This paper examines the socio-cultural framework of Khasi society with particular attention to kinship, inheritance, political institutions, and religious practices in order to analyse the actual position of women within the matrilineal order. The study argues that although women occupy a central role in lineage preservation and property inheritance, authority in political, ritual, and decision-making spaces has historically remained male dominated. The paper therefore attempts to understand the tension between matriliney and gender equality and its implications for literary representation and social understanding.

Article History:

Received Date: **02/05/2026**

Revised Date: **06/06/2026**

Accepted Date: **20/06/2026**

Published Date: **21/07/2026**

Keywords: Khasi society, matriliney, gender representation, inheritance, women, socio-cultural studies.

1. Introduction

The Khasi people inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya in North-East India and constitute one of the few surviving matrilineal communities in the world. Kinship is traced through the mother and inheritance follows the female line, especially through the Khatduh or the youngest daughter. Because of this distinctive system, Khasi society is often represented as a model of female empowerment.

However, matriliney should not be confused with matriarchy. While women inherit ancestral property and preserve clan continuity, socio-political and ritual authority frequently remains under male supervision. This contradiction forms an important area for gender studies and literary inquiry.

2. Matriliney and the Position of Women

Inheritance among the Khasis follows the principle of maternal succession. The ancestral property (Ka Nongtymmen) is entrusted to the Khatduh who acts as custodian of family continuity and ritual obligations. The Khatduh therefore becomes more than an heir; she emerges as the symbolic centre of clan identity.

Yet the authority attached to inheritance remains limited. Although the youngest daughter receives responsibility over ancestral property, she often functions under the guidance of the maternal uncle (U Kni), elders, and family councils. Thus ownership does not necessarily imply autonomous control. This reflects an interesting paradox within Khasi society: women become the visible bearers of lineage while men frequently occupy positions of authority.

3. The Maternal Uncle and Gendered Authority

One of the unique institutions of Khasi society is the importance attached to U Kni or the maternal uncle. The maternal uncle assumes responsibility for guidance, decision-making, family welfare, and ritual matters. The existence of this institution reveals that despite matrilineal inheritance, social power continues to remain gendered. Women preserve property and family continuity whereas men often exercise administrative and advisory authority.

This division challenges external assumptions that matriliney automatically ensures gender equality.

4. Political Structure and Male Leadership

Traditional Khasi political institutions further illustrate this complexity. The office of the Syiem, though inherited through the female line, generally passes to male descendants of the royal clan. Governance is conducted through the Syiem with the support of the Durbar and Myntris.

Women participate symbolically through figures such as the Syiem Sad, custodian of ritual obligations, yet executive authority historically remained male centred.

Consequently, the Khasi political structure presents a dual pattern:

- female continuity through lineage
- male authority through administration

Such a framework creates important questions concerning representation, leadership, and gender balance.

5. Religion, Culture and Women's Identity

Religion occupies a central place in Khasi society. The concept of Niam signifies both faith and living tradition. The principles of Kamai ia ka Hok, Tip Briew Tip Blei and Tip Kur Tip Kha establish ethical relationships between God, society and kinship.

Women occupy significant positions within family rituals and preservation of clan continuity. Nevertheless, ritual leadership and interpretation often remained associated with male authority.

The religious sphere therefore mirrors the wider social order where women hold symbolic significance while men exercise interpretive power.

6. Discussion: Matriliney and the Myth of Absolute Equality

The study demonstrates that Khasi society cannot simply be categorised either as female dominated or patriarchal. Instead, it represents a complex social order where women enjoy inheritance rights and symbolic centrality while authority remains negotiated through kinship structures. The distinction between inheritance and power becomes essential. Possession of property alone does not eliminate gender hierarchy.

This observation becomes particularly significant when analysing literary representations of Khasi women. Literary texts often portray women simultaneously as:

- a. custodians of culture
- b. preservers of lineage
- c. economic contributors
- d. subjects of social expectations
- e. agents of transformation

Thus, Khasi literature becomes an important medium for understanding changing gender relations.

7. Conclusion

The matrilineal system of the Khasi people remains one of the most distinctive cultural institutions in India. However, the present study argues that matriliney should not be interpreted as complete gender equality. Women occupy central positions in inheritance, lineage, and cultural continuity, yet socio-political authority frequently remains male mediated.

The tension between symbolic power and actual authority therefore becomes crucial for understanding Khasi women and their representation in literature. Future studies may further explore how contemporary Khasi writers negotiate these contradictions in literary texts.

References

1. Bareh, Hamlet. *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*. Spectrum Publications, 1967.
2. Chaudhury, J. N. *Khasi Canvas*. Firma KLM, 1978.
3. Gurdon, P. R. T. *The Khasis*. Macmillan and Co., 1907.
4. Mawrie, H. O. *The Essence of the Khasi Religion*. Khasi Authors' Society, 1981.
5. Natarajan, B. *Studies on Khasi Political Institutions*. North Eastern Hill University Publications, 1977.
6. Roberts, H. *Khasi Grammar*. Government Press, 1891.
7. Rymbai, H. *Religion and Culture in Khasi Society*. Vendrame Institute Publications, 1992.