

RESOURCE PAPER - 7



INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

The Fragrance of Haiku

by
Ms. Geethanjali Rajan

RESOURCE PAPER - 7



INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

The Fragrance of Haiku

**by
Ms. Geethanjali Rajan**

PREFACE

This Policy Paper is on Haiku. Of late the Haiku community is on the increase. Haiku in many languages, portraying the minds and hearts of authors, makes the readers feel happy and live close to the poets - past and present. We dedicate this Resource Paper to great Haiku poets. Our efforts, with all humility, is:

*a small stone
creating ripples
in haiku river*

We are happy to present the 'The Fragrance of Haiku', written by Ms. Geethanjali Rajan, a language consultant and a senior Japanese language teacher at the Language School of Indo-Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Ms. Geethanjali's journey into haiku started in 2003; her English language haiku and senryu have appeared in many places - World Haiku Review, Chrysanthemum, Notes from the Gean, A Hundred Gourds, Mainichi, Asahi, Creatrix, Prune Juice and some others. She is the recipient of a few awards - Redleaf Poetry India Award 2013 for haiku, an Honourable mention in the Genjuan International haibun Competition 2014 and 2016, the second place (haiku) at the Tata Lit Live, 2014 and a second place in The Sonic Boom International Senryu Competition 2016.

Hope the readers will enjoy the content of this Resource Paper.

June 2016

Suguna Ramamoorthy
Secretary-General IJCCI

The Fragrance of Haiku

Haiku - Vignettes about Japan

Japan's contribution to world literature is as important as the contribution by any other major country. How can it be not so, when the land itself is pristine, well-endowed by nature, the country gifted with four seasons, and its people possessed by deep beliefs and a rich culture? Japan has always had a rich and diverse literary tradition that has evolved through the ages, though accessible to the majority of the world only through translation. Both poetry and prose date back several centuries in the Japanese tradition and many noted works of literature have been contributed by this island nation. In the arena of fiction novels, *The Genji Monogatari* or *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, a noblewoman and lady-in-waiting at the Imperial Court, is credited to be the world's first full length novel and this was written as early as the 11th century (Heian period). *Manyoushu* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves) is believed to be the oldest poetry collection of Japan and is a wealth of short and longer poems. This contains poems dated between 350 to 759 A.D. In the field of poetry, Japan has given the world waka, haiku, tanka and many of its related literary forms, of which this paper will explore the beautiful poetry form of haiku.

What is haiku?

Haiku is a short Japanese poem containing 17 syllables or morae ('on' in Japanese), in the format of 5-7-5 syllables. It is mostly an unrhymed poem that is based on nature and traditionally, almost

always has a seasonal reference word (kigo) contained in it. The essence of haiku is also often dependent on the juxtaposition of two images, resulting in a cut (kire) in the verse, along with a cutting word or kireji. In short, haiku captures a moment much like a photograph or painting.

furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto

- Matsuo Basho

old pond...

a frog leaps in

water's sound

- translated by William J Higginson

Evolution from hokku to haiku

Haiku has existed in Japan for many centuries as the art of haikai no renga or collaborative (and sometimes, competitive) poetry conferences were a form of entertainment in feudal Japan. This can be likened to India's own court poetry in ancient periods, where poets vied with each other during poetic endeavours, to create poems that surpassed the others' wit. However, the vulgarity or base humour of the form of haikai in Japan, when it was a pastime in the court or houses of rich merchants was not appreciated by all.

The evolution of haiku itself, as a standalone art form, is seen to have come from the opening verse of the linked poems of verse or renga, which was called the 'hokku'. The opening verse or hokku always had a traditional tone to set the season, time and literally, the stage for the rest of the verses that would be written by many poets collaboratively, to form the long chain of poems or renga. By the 17th century, the hokku is said to have become a standalone verse. Much of the seriousness and aesthetic fineness of haiku is a result of the poet traveler, Matsuo Basho's life and

journey in Japan and also, into his own self. He is said to have lifted the form of hokku to a sublime level and is considered by many as Japan's greatest poet.

natsukusa ya tsuwamono domo ga yume no ato

- Matsuo Basho

The summer grass!

'Tis all that's left

Of ancient warriors' dreams

- translated by Prof. Inazo Nitobe, 1893

Basho's tradition of poetry was admired by many and his making poetry from the lives of plants, animals, insects, beggars and the destitute captivated many in Japan. No subject was too low, base or insignificant for his poems. His students were many and they carried the tradition of sublime haikai forward. Matsuo Basho is considered by many as 'haisei' or the poet saint. The contributions of Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa and Masaoka Shiki to haiku poetry in Japan have enshrined them as the great Masters of the Art. The name 'haiku' itself was a name given later to the art, by the efforts of Masaoka Shiki. He also introduced many concepts into haiku that were a result of western influence and possibly, visual art.

Understanding Japan through the aesthetic of haiku

Haiku is an art form that has captured the imaginations and minds of many across the world. But what aspect of this poetry form is it that essentially brings Japan to us? This is a question that leads to various facets of Japan - its natural beauty, the four seasons, culture and society. And in all of these areas, is the common thread of grace and beauty that one finds amidst an overwhelming need for structure.

Onji or syllable count

Traditional Japanese haiku always have 17 sound units (onji). This, as earlier mentioned, is in the format of 5-7-5. While many poets of other languages, including English, earlier tried to stick to this, it must be understood that each language has its own metre and rhythm. In India itself, writing a sentence in one's native language is very different from writing in English and a syllable to syllable correspondence is impossible, not just difficult. Japanese language finds its metre in the 5-7-5 pattern and that is why haiku has that rhythm and not vice versa, as commonly believed. Hence, when haiku travelled to various other languages, the count of syllables varied widely. This is a necessary deviation, based on the characteristic of each language. However, haiku in Japanese (except for free format modern haiku) consists of 17 morae and this makes the poet (be it an elementary school student or a professional) restrict the verse to 17 sound units. What one wants to say has to be short, precise, devoid of adjectival adornment and yet, beautiful. This definitely brings minimalist writing and perhaps a way of life that is stripped of decoration, to the fore. This also points one to the Japanese quality of the requirement of structure in all walks of life and society.

Nature and seasons - kigo

A very important aspect of haiku is its rootedness in the moment. Early poets believed that one had to experience the moment to write it and not just sit at a desk and create flowery verse. This tradition leads one to nature and required that one observes its life-force or zouka. The ephemerality or transience of nature is a core value in haiku. This too is seen in life in Japan, where one faces the ire of nature quite frequently and utmost care is taken when looking after the surroundings. Food, clothes, customs, flower arrangements and traditions change with the seasons and

each brings its own joy! Kigo or the season word found in all traditional haiku, is proof that the Japanese as a race, are very aware of nature and its manifestations in their everyday life. Of course, to the credit of the Japanese is that they have kigo dictionaries and Saijiki, an almanac of season words that haiku poets use. This is probably a necessity as Japan adopted the Gregorian calendar that left many flowers and insects confused about the season they belonged in!

shi ni jitaku itase itase to sakura kana

- Kobayashi Issa

Falling cherry petals say

Hurry, hurry

Thy preparedness for death

- translated by Ian Mutsu

The ephemerality of things and the poignancy thereof, 'mono no aware', is something that is best captured by sakura blossoms. They arrive in spring, provide joy and entertainment and after just a few days, are seen no more till the next year. What better metaphor can capture life's pathos?

The cut or kire

So much can be said in 17 syllables, and yet, much of the beauty of haiku lies in what is not said! Haiku uses the technique of juxtaposition of images using a word to cut the single sentence. This cut also creates a gap in the verse, a space or 'ma'. The cut also allows for a change in viewpoint or a turn. Ma is a gap in time, space or in the poem's imagery that lets the reader step in and be part of the poet's image. A small space is all that is created, and that is the invitation into the poem. This space can even be in the

reader's mind. This compares to Japan itself as it values its space, and houses that are compact and minimalist in furnishing, are the norm. Ma is an essential quality in haiku where it suggests what is left unsaid and that leads to a resonance in the readers.

chouchou ya nani o yume mite hanezukai

- Chiyo-ni

Oh! butterfly

what are you dreaming

fluttering your wings?

Beauty in starkness

Each culture has their own aesthetic framework that is seen in their visual art, performing art, architecture and literature. Think of our Chola temples and bronzes and Moghul forts of yore. Much is to be said about the Japanese aesthetic appeal of wabi-sabi. Translated, wabi refers to beauty in simplicity or poverty and sabi is the serenity or even, loneliness that comes along. Put together, it takes us to an aesthetic value that the Japanese uphold in all aspects of art and traditional life. To seek and find beauty in imperfection, in fading leaves, chipped vases or a rust-covered garden bowl would be wabi-sabi. True haiku finds beauty in the transience of nature, in a world devoid of trappings, in simple or rustic settings. It also suggests a loneliness or perhaps, a meditateness in these conditions. Sample this haiku by Basho set in a simple hedge.

yoku mireba nazuna hana saku kakine kana

- Matsuo Basho

Looking closely

I find a shepherd's purse blooming

under the hedge.

- translated by Soichi Furuta

Other Japanese art forms too reflect this wabi-sabi style of beauty. Japanese Pottery, which is famous world over for its elegance and minimalist style is a reflection of this aesthetic, where imperfections are appreciated, rather than condemned. Many a time, tea cups (chawan) are chipped deliberately at the bottom to incorporate the aesthetic. Kintsugi, an art of repairing pottery with a lacquer mixed with gold or silver, enhances the flaws and draws attention to it. Such is the reach of wabi-sabi on the art field.

kono aki wa hiza ni ko no nai tsukimi kana

- Uejima Onitsura

this autumn

I will be watching the moon

with no child on my lap

Onitsura's haiku depicts the loss of a child at an early age. Very often, the acceptance of a condition itself, is the cause of peace and calm; however painful or desperate the situation. This too can be beauty in literature.

The mysterious - yuugen

Yuugen is another concept that one encounters in haiku that gives it a vitality that the reader cannot ignore. It is a very difficult concept to translate into English. Roughly put, it means mysterious, secluded or subtle, hidden beauty. After all, when one stands in Tenryuujii in Kyoto and faces the mountains, the beauty is awe-inspiring, to say the least.

umi kurete kamo no koe honoka ni shiroshi

- Matsuo Basho

The waters fade

and the wild ducks' cries

are faintly white

- translated by Janine Beichman

Lightness

While haiku are nature poems, filled with subtlety and suggestion, it isn't always a grave or serious verse. In fact, many Japanese haikai promote the quality of *karumi* or lightness. Popularised by Matsuo Basho, *karumi* is probably best explained as looking at the beauty of the world in wonderment, much like a child. It counters the sad, loneliness in nature and helps put things in better perspective. It also means that one is in tune with the surroundings and is able to relate to the object that is being written about, in the simplest, yet purest way.

kore hodo no botan to shikata suru ko kana

- Kobayashi Issa

“The peony was as big as this,”

Says the little girl

Opening her arms

- translated by R.H.Blyth

The poet and the poem

When a haikai (poet writing haiku) writes a verse, he or she probably is filled with many emotions, like all other poets. But haiku, unlike free verse, is not about conveying one's complex emotions to the reader in concrete terms. Haiku is a poetry form that calls for subtlety and refinement. The poet is in the moment but not completely consumed by the moment. He or she feels but is not overwhelmed by the emotion. The poet is part of the moment but so also, a little detached. Haiku does not encourage author intrusion, though it does seem that the Great Masters of Japanese Haiku did allow their observations and emotion to be presented in a gentle manner. This very relationship of the poet to the subject or object of haiku can be likened to what the holy

book, The Bagavad Geeta suggests, “detached attachment”. This is also the case in many of the religious practices associated with Buddhism, where one overcomes the confines of bondage, but is not totally cut off from the realities of life. Along with this construct, finding divinity in living and nonliving objects (animism), which is a part of Japan's Shinto religion, is an inseparable part of the haiku tradition. Eventually, the Japanese ideal of sincerity to one's job comes through in haiku too, where makoto or sincerity in connecting to the moment being written about is the ultimate requirement.

odoroku ya yuugao ochishi yowa no oto

- Masaoka Shiki

surprise!

a moonflower fell

midnight sound

- translated by Janine Beichman

Haiku in the world

From the islands of Japan, the rest of the world adopted and received many things - technology, preciseness, martial art, the list goes on. Add to this, the short form of poetry, haiku. It is not uncommon to come across Americans, Europeans, Asians or Africans writing haiku in their own native languages. There are many languages where the syllable count does not fit the Japanese 17. Many poets still try to stick to the 17 syllables as they try to adapt their languages and poems and fit it into the Nihongo framework. Yet others have rightly discarded the syllable count, as it is but a minor detail in structuring the poem. As long as the aesthetic and other parameters are met, the syllables are not completely adhered to. This has led to the development and spread of haiku far and wide.

India and haiku

India's relationship with haiku is very old. Poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Subramania Bharathi were smitten by the art and wrote about haiku. In *Letters from Japan* (Japan Jatri), Tagore writes about haiku and the need for control over not only language, but also control over the self in order to 'remain silent' to express the depth of beauty. In *Stray Birds*, he writes one-line thought like poems, which are haikuesque in nature.

If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars

- Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*

The butterfly does not count years but moments,
and therefore has time.

- Rabindranath Tagore, *Fireflies*

As was common with Tagore, he wrote both in Bengali and English, and translated with ease.

Subramania Bharathy is credited with having translated some haiku into Tamil and having popularized the existence of the art. More recently, many Tamil poets like Sujatha, Amudhabharathi and Kannikkovil Raja have contributed to haiku. In Tamil, the genre is called Thulippa and there are journals that are devoted to the art (example, minmini haiku).

Many poets write haiku in Punjabi, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarathi, Malayalam and almost every state has practitioners of haiku. As is the case, syllable counts matter little when transposed into other languages and what matters is the heart of haiku.

A very encouraging trend in India is the growing numbers of poets who write haiku in English (English Language Haiku or ELH). What has to be said here is that while it is an encouraging movement with many discussions leading to evolution of the

form, much of the literature and knowledge of haiku is from English haiku and not Japanese haiku. As Japanese language is not accessible to many, most people read haiku and its criticism from different parts of the world in English, and gather their perception of haiku and its characteristics and essence from the West. This is not without its own problems, if we look at it from a Japanese view point. However, many senior haikai in India have imbibed the spirit of haikai and distilled it to a fine degree, carrying forward Basho's legacy in English. Today, most international journals find many poets publishing their work and almost every competition in haiku and its related genres has an Indian name in the winners' list!

For haiku to be carried forward in its essence, an ideal situation of Japanese poetry books being available in translation in Indian languages or English is desirable. Translation projects can be taken up with the help of academia here. After all, India has a large consumer base in any field and so is the case with books. Hence, Japanese and Indian publishers will gain by looking at this opportunity. India is close to Japan in many ways and is getting closer still, as both the countries share many ideals including socio-culture and religious ideals. India has a very strong leaning towards spirituality, meditateness and its villages are still very tied to nature. However the situation in large metropolises is unfortunate, where nature and man are at loggerheads. Popularizing haiku as vignettes of nature will help to increase awareness about our environment, absorb with all our five senses and bring us closer to nature, which is the need of the hour! Under the people to people exchange declared by the Prime Ministers of Japan and India, cultural ties are expected to get a fillip. This may well be the time for exchanges in the field of Art and Culture between the two countries. Perhaps haiku will after all, be the one to benefit.

nao mitashi hana ni ake yuku kami no kao

- Matsuo Basho

all the more I wish to see
in those blossoms at dawn
the face of god

- translated by Makoto Ueda

Author's note:

All translations of Japanese haiku into English have been sourced from *The Classic Tradition of Haiku - An Anthology*, edited by Faubion Bowers, Dover Publications, 1996.

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank all the haijin (poets) and translators she has read in many languages in the last 15 years. It has been a magical and enriching journey.

Many online and print resources of haiku are available for further reading.

livinghaikuanthology.com is a repository of haiku from all over the world.

- Geethanjali Rajan





INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

No. 21, Kavignar Bharathidasan Road, Teynampet, Chennai - 600 018.

Tel: 91-44-2435-2010 / 2435-4779, E-mail: indo-japan@ijcci.com Website: www.ijcci.com