



Haiku from the Hills of Northeast India: A Study of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Time's Barter*

Ruth Magdalene.T,

Research Scholar, Department of English

Dr. S. Kalamani,

*Professor of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women
Coimbatore-641043*

Abstract

Haiku belongs to the Japanese poetical tradition; it is a short poem with 17 syllables and 3 lines. Haiku poetry finds the miraculous in the commonplace. The poems are traditionally about nature or the natural world. The poetry form of haiku in Japan is the most acknowledged aesthetic medium to depict the beauty of nature and the four seasons they experience. Northeast Indian poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih uses the haiku as a medium to explore the nature bound surroundings of his hills. Nongkynrih's sixth collection of poetry in English is the 'Time's Barter: Haiku and Senryu'. The book consists of 280 haiku and senryu with black-and-white paintings and illustrations of nature. The haiku is filled with rain, land clouds, plums and cherries, domestic life, city vistas and unclipped vignettes of the abundant nature for which the Northeast Indian land is renowned. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's collection has a witty genre of senryu with frequent references to traffic jams, timber trucks, elections, emails and mobile telephones. Popularizing the haiku as vignettes of nature increases the awareness about the environment and brings one closer to nature. The haiku takes the form of ecopoems as it takes on the contemporary issue of environmental concerns. It is a call to the present generation to guard and preserve the nature and wildlife in the hills.

Keywords: *Conservation, Environment, Haiku, Northeast India, Nature, Senryu.*

I. Introduction

Haiku belongs to the Japanese poetical tradition; it is a short poem with 17 syllables and 3 lines. Haiku poetry came to existence many centuries ago as a form of entertainment in feudal Japan. This can be linked to Indian's own court poetry in ancient periods, where poets vied with each other during poetic endeavors, to create poems that surpassed the other's wit. The literal meaning of haiku is 'pleasure verse' and this poem is known for its aesthetic quality. The form is popular, enduring and appealing to people from all walks of life. Nature in its varied beauty, the four seasons and the culture and society of Japan are brought out beautifully in these small and simple poems.

II. Aesthetic Haiku and Alluring Nature

Haiku has a clear set of guidelines for writing. The essence of a haiku lies in the 'Kiri' or the cutting word which is often represented with juxtaposition of two images or ideas. The cut also creates a gap in the verse, a



space or 'ma'. Ma is an essential quality in a haiku which is suggestive of what is left unsaid and that leads to a resonance in the readers. 'Kireji' or the cutting words appear at the end of one of the verse's three phrases. It aids the haiku to stand as an independent poem. If no direct equivalent is found, the poets use punctuations such as dash or ellipsis or an implied break to create juxtaposition between the two images.

Haiku poetry finds the miraculous in the commonplace. It captures the moment in all its splendour much like a photograph or painting. The common thread of grace and beauty pervades all haiku poems. Each line should be complete in itself in expressing an idea, the season should be mentioned and there should be spontaneity. A haiku poem provokes the imagination of the reader and makes him think. Philosophy of life is presented in the short three lines. It has the freedom to describe anything, but is seldom complicated to understand. A haiku need not be a complete sentence. There are no rules regarding punctuation and capitalization.

As English poetic verse is characterized by syllabic metre, the Japanese verse counts sound units known as 'on' or 'morae'. The traditional haiku consists of 17 syllables in three phases of 5,7 and 5. According to some translators of Japanese poetry, 12 syllables in English approximate the duration of 17 Japanese 'on'. In modern haiku 17 on is not traditionally followed at times. In the 21st century, haiku in English have a shorter version of phrases away from the standard form. According to the structural rules it avoids similes and metaphors. Haiku is written in present tense sounding it as happening.

The Japanese believe that seasons impact our physical, emotional and spiritual bodies. A haiku must contain a 'Kigo', the seasonal reference or the word indicating the season of the year the haiku is set. The word implies the season of the poem and the word is drawn from 'saijiki'. Saijiki is the list of seasonal terms used in haiku and other related poetic forms of Japanese. For instance, the use of blossoms indicates spring and snow indicate the idea of winter.

Matsuo Basho and Ueshima Onitsura in the 17th century were the two masters of haiku who transformed and elevated the poetry to a greater level. Basho is known for his playful game of wit to sublime poetry. His book '*Narrow Roads to the Interior*' is considered as Japan's most famous literary work. Basho's tradition of poetry was admired by many and his poetry dealing with the lives of plants, animals, insects, beggars and the destitute captivated many in Japan. No subject was too low, base or insignificant for his poem. He is considered by many 'Haisei' or the poet saint. The contribution of Yosa Busan, Kobayashi Issa and Masaoka Shiki to haiku poetry in Japan has enshrined them as the greatest masters of the art. The name haiku was given later to the art by the efforts of Masaoka Shiki.

F S Flint, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos William and Amy Lowell in the west were influenced to practise haiku poetry. Ezra Pound's '*In a Station of the Metro*', published in 1913 is considered the first haiku written in English. In India, Rabindranath Tagore started to write haiku after his visit to Japan. His collection of haiku was published in English and Bengali. In Tamilnadu, Subramania Bharathy translated some haiku into Tamil and popularized the art form. Almost every state has practitioners of haiku and a Hindi Quarterly journal called 'Haiku Bharati' was started by Professor B.S. Aggarwala which exists even today. Northeast poets were



introduced to haiku around 1900. The Assamese poet Neelmani Fukan published his translations of Japanese poems into Assamese in 1971.

Haiku poems are traditionally about nature or the natural world. Nature in haiku is a pristine feature from the Japanese contributors because they are gifted with a country abounding in nature in its magnificence. Early poets believed that one had to experience the moment to write it and not just sit at the desk and create a flowery verse. This tradition leads one to read the book of nature and observe its life force or 'Zouka'. Nature has been a prominent theme among the Japanese from the early period. Yosa Buson, Masaoka Shiki, Kawahigashi Hekigoto and Takahama Kyoshi are few known poets of haiku who praised nature in their writing and their haiku focuses on the aesthetics of nature. The use of Kigo, the seasonal word is a proof that the Japanese as a race are very much aware of nature and its varied manifestations in their everyday life.

Haiku finds beauty in the transience of nature, in a world devoid of trappings, in simple or rustic settings. Yuugen or the mysterious is another concept in haiku that accounts for the subtle or hidden beauty. For instance when one stands near the mountain, the beauty is awe inspiring. Haiku makes one in tune with the surroundings, promoting the quality of lightness or Karumi. Karumi was popularized by Matsuo Basho and is best explained as looking at the beauty of the world in wonderment.

Literature from Northeast comes with variety of hues in terms of their culture, ethnicity, traditions and religious practices similar to the Japanese literature. Nature plays a dominant role in both the region's poetry. The poetry form of haiku in Japan is the most acknowledged aesthetic medium to depict the beauty of nature and the four seasons they experience. Northeast Indian poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih uses the haiku as a medium to explore the nature bound surroundings of his hills. The natural landscape of the hills with its rich tapestry of flora and fauna is very much connected to the language and culture of the people which is rendered in the haiku.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is one of the famous Northeast Indian poets. Born on 4th April 1964 in Cherrapunjee, Meghalaya, India he belongs to the Khasi tribe. He writes poems and short stories in his native Khasi language and English. Nongkynrih's sixth collection of poetry in English is the '*Time's Barter: Haiku and Senryu*'. *Time's Barter* is a hallmark in his career. This collection is the first book of haiku poems by an individual author from the Northeast to be published by Harper Collins. The book consists of 280 haiku and senryu with black-and-white paintings and illustrations of nature.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's haiku genre is new to the Northeast region and he modestly comments on his own haiku writing as late in blooming compared to the mainstream poets. The haiku is admired by many across the world and has created a ripple in the Northeast Indian haiku and Indian haiku societies.

Late- blooming cherries
by the highway-how else can I
describe my haiku.



The haiku is filled with rain, land clouds, plums and cherries, domestic life, city vistas and unclipped vignettes of the abundant nature for which the Northeast Indian land is renowned. The quality of his haiku writing has been recognized in Wales and has been translated in other languages too. *Time's Barter* has a beautiful introduction by the late Nigel Jenkins, a Welsh poet who praised Nongkynrih's verse for the literary context praised him as a new found voice in the Northeast Indian haiku tradition. Nongkynrih's haiku and senryu depict his ability to convey multiple competing impressions within a few lines. The time of the book passes in and around Shillong, where Nongkynrih lives and teaches at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). The book contains multiple images of plum and cherries similar to the Japanese tradition of haiku.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's collection has a witty genre of senryu with frequent references to things such as traffic jams, timber trucks, elections, emails and mobile telephones. The senryu is derived from the name of Karai Senryu, a poet who has an anthology interested in collecting poems of wit and irony. Senryu has the same formal characteristics as the haiku, but tends to display a greater interest in human relations. Senryu is the form of haiku that foregrounds humour and social observation. It is similar in form to haiku but takes as its theme human foibles instead of nature and is cynical or satirical in tone. Contemporary phenomena such as poverty, over- population and global warming are addressed by Nongkynrih in his collection.

Modernity resulting in the mundane lifestyle of the hill people is brought out satirically in his senryu by comparing it to the soggy flow of the drains. Nongkynrih directly points out the harsh reality of the hills turning into a mechanized system. The merry rural folk going to their agriculture fields have turned robotic, leading a wearisome lifestyle.

Sluggish drain flow-
city folk
going to office.

Senryu by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are found with directness, simplicity and observational accuracy. Agriculture is the line of work for the natives. Befitting their tradition they adore and worship the harvest crop which is their means of survival. The hill people have the custom to conduct feasts before and after the harvest to offer thanksgiving to the Gods of harvest. The influence of the west is more in the region of Northeast compared to the other states of India. The modernity of the younger generation is being tried to rule out by the social activists, writers and other native people. The poets play a role in bringing out the realistic picture of what westernization has done to their hills. The Senryu by Nongkynrih present the social realistic picture of how the value of their vegetative crops has degraded on the one hand and on the other hand how the fashionable world and markets have intruded in their hills affecting the lifestyle and economy of the people.



Market scene-
vegetable on footpaths-
shoes on glass cases.

The phenomenon of urbanization has become a growing concern in the Northeast Indian hills. The natives face deep concern for losing their indigenous culture and tradition by the waves of modernization and urbanization. The importance of maintaining the age old traditional values for their own survival and for the survival of indigenous identities is being voiced continuously by poets. The controversy of the hill people caught between tradition and modernity is being highlighted in his senryu regarding Shillong.

Shillong's hot debate
Is it a town? A city?
Scotland of the East.

The haiku's in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's collection *Time's Barter* are elegant, delectable, witty, and humorous. The verses are splashed with nature, rains, the wind, and burgeoning fruits. They are contemporary in tone and the poet's moods dominate the haiku as they are presented variously in sad, angry, and happy moods. The haiku celebrate the natural life and culture of his native hills. The poems are valued for their simplicity, openness, depth and lightness. Popularizing the haiku as vignettes of nature increases the awareness about the environment and brings one closer to nature. Nongkynrih recreate moments of connections with nature through his haiku.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's haiku depicts the voice of a patriot for his motherland, his indigenous culture, tradition and environment cherished by the people of his community. The haiku takes the form of ecopoems as it takes on the contemporary issue of environmental concerns. His experimentation with haiku is an attempt to capture the vivid shades of Northeast India in nativized resemblance of the Japanese form. Concerns of the environment, the inter-relationships of organisms and their environment, the totality or pattern of relations and interactions between human beings and their environment and surroundings also occupy a major space in his haiku. Kynpham through his poems pours out his concerns on the onslaught of changes in the environment which ultimately result to ecological imbalance.

Nature plays a vital role in the haiku of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. Blushing cherries, dancing wind, lashing rain, drooping plumes, steep pines, bending bamboos and many more collectively make Northeast the poet's heavenly abode to compose the haiku. Nongkynrih pays tribute to the classical Japanese art by the usage of traditional haiku symbols of cherries and plums. *Time's Barter* begins with the haiku images of plums and other Japanese nature symbols.



Dark foreboding sky-
scarlet plums,
festive with bulbuls.

Nature in the hills is being adorned by the poet as Nongkynrih pictures in his haiku the changes experienced as a person in love with nature. The poet describes with awe the transformation of the caterpillar to the beautiful flying butterfly. Life related lessons from nature are learnt through the haiku as it also implies that the gloomy and difficult phase of one's life too has an end thereby bringing days of happiness. The poet accounts in his haiku the beauty and decorum of many non living beings from the hills.

Creepy caterpillar,
when did you become
these flying colours?

Nongkynrih describes the joy of the natives in living their life in simplicity. The merriment they cherish in association with nature is brought out in the short three lines. The delighted boys fishing in their native rural area can be contrasted to the urbanized city boys caged with the virtual reality games. The hill people's constant voicing to stick to the rural tradition is justified by his haiku as pure bliss can only be found in association with nature. The haikus help to illuminate the role of nature in our daily life and to renew our relation with the earth.

Monsoon-
naked boys fishing
among green lotuses.

Northeast India has a coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the westernized, virgin forests and car- choked streets, ancestral values and insurgency. Nongkynrih adheres to the rural values as he finds them to be loyal and pure in heart. Modernity will lead to chaos but living in unison with nature will result in harmony. Though the villagers live in a house made of mud they have happiness in their home. The haikus depict the glory of the hill people living in accord with their environment.

Nature's loyal friends-
down to earth rural folk, their
huts made of mud.

The poet offers beautiful pictures of his hometown Cherrapunjee, Meghalaya. The place has the highest record for rainfall in the country throughout the year and is satirically called the wettest place on planet earth. The lush and diverse environment with caves and waterfalls finds mention in the haikus of Nongkynrih. The poet glorifies the geographic features bringing out minute details enriching the senses of the reader. The scorching sun during its set is equated to the soft red plum by the poet, which brings out the imaginative ability of the poet.



The underlying perspective in picturing the vividness is also an implying factor to the younger generation to safeguard their natural beauty.

Only in Cherra
can the sunset offer
a blood-red plum

The seasons are mentioned by Nongkynrih in his haiku by following the Japanese tradition of not failing to point to the time of the haiku being written. The poet's relatedness to the hills can be seen as he brings out all the seasonal changes occurring with minuscule description. The effect of the various seasons to the people in their daily routine and livelihood is outlined by Nongkynrih. The clothes remaining wet and other practical difficulties of people being hindered in their daily work due to the rainfall is narrated in the haikus. The feel of the senses during a rain is a realistic description.

Winter shower-
the aroma
of cooked earth.

III. Conclusion

The haikus related to nature explore the beauty of the hills the poet is surrounded. The haiku is a call to the present generation to guard and preserve the nature and wildlife in the hills. Haiku is being used as a tool by Nongkynrih to glorify the splendid Northeast region and to fortify their customs and traditions against the wave of modernity. The haiku poetry is a catalyst for the people to ponder on the environmental issues and concerns.

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