

The Changing Seasons in haiku

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The most well-known form of Japanese poetry overseas is probably haiku. It is also the most experimented-with Japanese poetry form outside of that country. Known to be a poem focused on nature, of seventeen sound units, and of a fixed form (*teikeishi*) in Japan, haiku has travelled to most countries and languages of the world, and has been interpreted in so many ways (to a point that the definition of haiku in a language such as English is possibly that there is no one clear definition.) However, in Japan, haiku were known for their references to nature and inclusion of a season word (*kigo*) in the early days. Like all poetry forms that evolve, haiku too has contemporary writers (Japanese) who write in formats that don't conform to the original. There is nothing surprising in that. Every art form evolves and so has haiku. However, what really is to be noted is that a majority of writers of haiku in Japanese (and in many other languages) still include seasonal references into this tiny but power-packed poem, and consider it a rule that has to be followed when composing haiku.

しばらくは 花の上なる 月夜かな

- Matsuo Basho

for a little while
above the blossoms
a moonlit night

- Translated Geethanjali Rajan

(Blossoms in this haiku refer to the cherry blossoms of spring and conjure a scene of beauty to enjoy. It also hints at the transience of things when the moon and the flowers will soon disappear – cherry blossoms last only a few days and the moonlight, a few hours.)

To understand the place of nature in haiku, a closer look at the traditional form of haiku is probably the starting point. And here, the starting point is indisputably Japan. While some writers of English Language Haiku (ELH) would like to believe that what they write is a different poetry form altogether from the original (thanks to the development and evolution haiku has gone through overseas), a nod to haiku's Japanese parentage or an acknowledgement that it really originated in a country where most people still live in awareness of and appreciate the change of seasons is essential (almost every introduction to Japan has a line that it is a country that is blessed with 4 clear seasons (*shiki*)). However, the haiku tradition is not just about chronicling nature.

初夢に古郷を見て涙かな

- Kobayashi Issa

in my first dream

seeing my home town
tears roll down

- Translated Geethanjali Rajan

(While far away from home, Issa talks of seeing his native place in the first dream of the year (first, being a season word for New Year).)

Talking of nature in haiku, the traditional Spring-Summer-Autumn-Winter divisions of season words or *kigo* that are found in the haikai poems can be found in an almanac called the *saijiki*, which is a compendium of words that refer to seasons, and also includes examples of well-known haiku that use the particular season word. What the *saijiki* does for a writer of haiku in Japanese, whether senior or novice, is to provide a list of words in the 4 seasons, often along with another group of *kigo* under the division of 'New Year', which they can then refer to while composing their haiku. Such an almanac could contain thousands of season word references or *kigo*. The nature component of haiku was obviously strong for the earlier almanacs to have tens of thousands of entries. This again is not something that is static. A comparison of *saijiki* will show that many changes occurred across the years and different editions of the same *saijiki* would have entries modified to suit the times – a dynamic situation.

Within the seasons in a *saijiki*, season words or *kigo* are specific and are further classified into various categories—weather, flora, fauna, heavenly occurrences (astronomy—sky, elements), geography (landscape), life, food and events (human activities). To help understand the specificity of *kigo*—if spring were the season, then we could probably find the following entries in a *saijiki*, apart from many, many others.

1. Season and climate — lengthening days, vernal equinox
2. Flora —plum blossoms, cherry blossoms
3. Fauna — baby animals —calf, colt
4. Astronomical occurrences —hazy moon
5. Geography—spring fields, spring mountains
6. Human activities —spring cleaning
7. Events — festivals, example: Doll's festival

While these are specifics to the poetry tradition of haiku in Japan, what is more interesting is perhaps the tradition and the philosophy behind this whole concept. What the study of haiku did for me is to open out the world of nature and the understanding of how we can be respectful (revere is preferred but too strong a word in today's urban scale of life, unfortunately) of a culture that harmonises with nature through its observation of it. The very fact that there is an almanac for writing a poetry form was fascinating enough for me to delve deeper. Here are a few pearls from the deep dive. I start with the shallow where you can paddle and hopefully, we can start the journey to the deeper end.

While we speak of nature, the importance of the seasonal component in haiku is the comprehension of the changing of the season, the passage of time, the ephemerality, not just a static picture of a season itself. Each of the four seasons is divided into early, middle and

late periods, with their specific occurrences. For instance, *ume no hana* (plum blossoms) come in early spring – they are after all the early blossoms that herald the season. This already divides the year into twelve parts, based on seasonal and natural occurrences. This is not to be confused with the calendar months of the year – we are talking seasons, not months.

五月雨にかくれぬものや瀬田の橋

- Matsuo Basho

in the summer rain
it remains unhidden
the bridge at Seta

- Translated Geethanjali Rajan

(Here, the poet uses the word '*samidare*' which can be translated as Summer rain but in Japanese script, it literally translates to the 5th month's rain and brings in the image and quality of that rain, as opposed to rain in October or any other time.)

The origin of the division of a haiku calendar (different from the regular calendar one uses) is in a concept called *nijuushi sekki*, the 24 divisions of the calendar that was in use in the early days. It is said that this practise originated in China and was brought into Japan more than 2000 years ago. In China itself, the 24 *sekki* (solar terms) has been recognised as unique and bestowed the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage tag. Based on this system, a year could therefore, be divided into 24 sections (roughly a fortnight each) based on a natural clock. This also coincides with the journey of the Sun in every 15 degrees. It is also based on occurrences of the changing seasons, a sort of farmer's almanac. To understand this, let us look at the example of the divisions of winter according to the 24 *sekki*:

1. Start of winter
2. Minor snow
3. Major snow
4. Winter solstice (middle of winter)
5. Minor cold
6. Major cold

(I am giving you the English translations of the Japanese terms and these might differ from other translations, though the meaning does not.)

Each of these divisions of a season section has a specific date accorded and particular occurrences recorded – for instance, deer start to lose their horn and wheat starts to sprout under the snow, in the fortnight of *touji* (around winter solstice – 21st December to 5th January). What this makes evident is the microlevel at which people lived in accordance to and harmony with the natural ecosystem.

If this isn't amazing enough, let us look at the *shichijuuni kou*, the 72 microseasons or what is sometimes called the 72 pentads in Japan. The year is precisely divided into 72 seasons (and that happens to be a space of approximately 5 days each) and the occurrences have been recorded in detail. To make the concept of microseasons clearer, the 24 *sekki* are further divided into three micro divisions each. Here, the specificity of description leads us into the events where —water dries out for the first time and farmers drain the field (October, days 3 to 7) or hawks learn to fly (July, days 17 to 22) or *tachibana* orange leaves begin to turn yellow (December, days 2 to 6) or the rainbows go into hiding (November, days 22 to 26).

The 72 pentads were followed by haiku and tanka poets as the basis from which *kigo* (season words) came into being. However, the almanac is in use among traditional chefs, in *sadou* (tea ceremonies), *ikebana* and of course, among farmers, to name some other areas. The calendar formed a basis of when to plant, when to harvest, when frost would first appear or when the leaves would turn colour. It also helps us understand why the traditional sweet served in a tea ceremony is of a particular colour, shape or taste at a given time of the year. Basically, the 72 pentads could tell us what the seasonal flavour of the five days is – fish, fruit, star or activity! This type of life is still understood in Japan and here is a traditional and beautiful almanac with deep cultural significance. It can harmonise what is eaten, worn, done and celebrated with the elements of nature. And to go back to where I started, these microseasons form the basis of the concept of *kigo* or season word in haiku.

As a beginner, I often got the process of haiku wrong. I thought that one could add the *kigo* to the haiku, according to the season I was writing about, and a good traditional haiku could be brewed. (It still can be done, I suppose.) But the deeper one dives into an almanac, the more one understands that the season word or *kigo* in Japanese isn't there just to bring in a nature component or to express better what the poet wants to say. It is there to bring the reader to the same state of feeling as the poet, for in the observance and admiration of the changing season lies a seed of the sameness of sentiment or feeling (*doukan*).

Prof. Haruo Shirane (1) said of *kigo* in haiku that it -

“anchors the poem in not only some aspect of nature but in the vertical axis, in a larger communal body of poetic and cultural associations. The seasonal word allows something that is small to gain a life of its own. The seasonal word, like the famous place name, also links the poem to other poems.”

From there on, in very few words, a haiku poet takes you on the individual path he/she writes —for you to read, interpret, hold and then perhaps, let go.

Notes:

1. Shirane, Haruo, “Beyond the Haiku Moment: Basho, Buson and Modern Haiku Myths,” *The Haiku Foundation Digital Library*.

<https://www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/518>.

Source: http://www.haikupoet.com/definitions/beyond_the_haiku_moment.html