

Haiku In Malayalam: Reading Ashitha

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Abstract: Haiku, the Japanese mini poems set in three lines, following a 5,7,5 syllable structure, had enchanted the Malayalee from the 90's onwards but none had successfully mastered the craft of achieving the poignant precision of Haiku, until Ashitha tried to use the form for her poetical expression. This paper tries to look at the intricacies of crafting Haiku in Malayalam and analyses select Haiku poems of Ashitha.

Key Words: haiku, malayalam, Ashitha, translation, poetry

Ashitha (1956- 2019) has written over twenty works in the categories of story, poetry, novel, children's literature, and translation. She is also hailed as a genius in Malayalam translation literature. Ashitha won the Edassery Award for her work *Vismayachinangal* in 1986 and the Lalithambika Antharjanam Memorial Literary Award in 1994. In 2000, she won the Padmarajan Award for 'Thathagatha'. She also won the State Sahitya Akademi Short Story Award in 2015 for her book 'Ashitha's Stories'(Ashithayude Kadhakal). She has also received the Thoppil Ravi Foundation Award among many.

This paper is focusing on haiku by Ashitha as she helped attracting Malayalees attention to the Japanese poetic form of Haiku, first through her translations and later Original Haiku in Malayalam. Haiku, is an unrhymed poetic form consisting of 17 syllables arranged in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively. Another significant feature was its reference to nature. The haiku first emerged in Japanese literature during the 17th century, as a terse reaction to elaborate poetic traditions, though it did not become known by the name haiku until the 19th century. Influential early haiku poets included Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, Masaoka Shiki, Takahama Kyoshi, and Kawahigashi Hekigoto. Outside Japan, Imagist writers like Ezra Pound and T.E. Hulme wrote haiku in English.¹

Later haiku also underwent changes with changing times and in the 19th century, haiku subjects expanded beyond natural themes. But the haiku remained an art of expressing

much and suggesting more in the fewest possible words². Ashitha's haiku poems experiments with both these variations, the former and the later quiet beautifully. Brevity being the soul of this poetic mode, Ashitha never compromises, as she is known for crafting the most soulful yet brief short stories.

Tracing haiku's influence in India, Satya Bhushan Verma in 1991, published a study *Haiku in India*,³ where he remarks that though Indian literature has had its own strong traditions it has always adapted western literary forms with enthusiasm. Verma also remarks how many early translators of Haiku in India never maintained the structural and metrical precision of the form, only translating the meaning conveyed. While agreeing that metrical precision while translating from one language to another with vastly different metrical structure and grammatical rules, could be difficult, as Sreedevi K Nair notes in her *Is Poetry Lost in Translation*⁴ sensible translators who are indeed concerned of carrying the whole effect of the SL into TL would definitely find ways to do justice to both form and meaning. Ashitha was keen on introducing literary works in other languages to Malayalam through translation. She translated the poems of the Alexander Pushkin into Malayalam. She had also published a collection of Haiku translations. This paper does not delve with these translation's per se but would be looking into the metrical differences and adaptations of the form in Ashitha's original Haiku works in Malayalam. Her Haiku poems were first published by Green Pepper publica in 2014 and later Mathrubhumi books republished it in 2018.

In the foreword to the book Ashitha mentions how she started composing Haiku and explains how brevity is its soul. "Haiku presents a slice of your heart. There is a difference in Stories and Haiku. If a story is written to get away from oneself, a Haiku presents itself when one is totally absent."⁵ These words also throw light on the spiritual tremors which can be vibrantly felt across her oeuvre. She continues:

"It is only three lines that are written; but a thousand and more is conveyed and the interconnectedness of this world and the nether and its beauty is revealed to the reader. That is when the three lines of Haiku dawns in one's conscience, like the 'All' encompassing steps of Vamana.!

It is the raising of oneself to a novel plane of consciousness"⁶

There was a collection of most popular Haikus from Japanese literature translated and published with a foreword by V.T. Abdurahiman in 2011 titled "Cheevidekhalude Cheviyil

Paadunna Gayakar”(Singers Singing in The Ears of Crickets). This book had Haiku by early masters like Matsuo Basho, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, Chiyo-ni, Ryunosuke Akutagawa and many more. It also carried illustrations and brief bio notes of the poets. As Verma notes in his study of Haiku in India, with less access to the Japanese language it was translations that introduced the genre and these translations did pave wave for the enthusiastic reception of the original Malayalam attempts by Ashitha. Haiku written originally in Malayalam has been true to the genre only rarely, most missing the metrical precision and composing short verses and publishing it across social media platforms tagging it as Haiku. Here, it is necessary to note as observed earlier, that the metrical difference between Japanese and Malayalam do play a role in posing this difficulty. In short, haiku in Malayalam is not possible by following the rules of the Japanese language. The traditional Japanese Haiku poem in three lines has two images and a conclusion that clinches a comparison. Ashitha’s poems also largely conform to this pattern.⁷ And leaving aside the ‘syllable’ structure, we can see Ashitha takes advantage of the limited possibilities and still brings the beauty of haiku to the Malayalam language.

Some have tried using similar word numbers instead of syllables (Three words in the first line, five words in the second line, three words in the third line) and though Haiku in original does not play to rhyming words, some have tried bringing in rhyme words and to lend rhythm. Instead, Ashitha gives importance to metrics as far as possible and concentrates more on the impact of the implosion of meaning, that can be achieved through limited number of words.

Critic Sreejith Perunthachan, in an analysis of Ashitha’s short stories observes:

Her stories are like borewells, taking so little space outwardly; but boring in deep. Poignant loneliness, in its most piercing facet exists in Ashitha’s stories, like a pencil sharpened to its best... She started looking for the armour of spirituality to help her beat her loneliness that life provides a woman. Naturally, her search took her to Tao, Laotsu, Rumi, Vachanam Poetry to Haiku and Meera Bhajans and to Guru Nithya Chaithanya Yathi and no wonder she dabbled in adapting the Puranas for kids.⁸

Even a casual reader could sense that the same pervades her Haiku deeply. Poignant sensibilities, sharpened even more to fit into the three lines of a Haiku; revealing a world of emotional turbulence and at times spiritual zen like calm. That is the decisive charm of Ashitha’s Haiku.

She was bedridden, battling cancer when Mathrubhumi released her Haiku collection in 2018, and in her note⁹ read aloud to the audience during the book release, she had written: “Though they are Haiku, they have more semblance to Zen poetry.” In the same note she quips: “One of the most difficult challenges in writing is saying what you have to, in the least number of words”. But a look at her Haiku will divulge how she overcomes this challenge masterfully. A few pieces are translated and reproduced here.¹⁰ The themes, as observed regarding her short stories, pertain to women’s lives, love or lack thereof, and often nature and spirituality. True to the poetic tradition, her Haiku ‘expresses much and suggests more in the fewest possible words’. Here the given poem *Of Life* (Jeevithathekkurichu) in three brief sentences expresses the passing of emotional phases and suggests more, in throwing light, on the cyclic seasonal quality to every phase whether be it immense joy or despondent sorrow that chips away at you.

Of Life

Some days bloom in boisterous joy

Some silently wither away

There are seasons to life, obviously!

Housewife

Day nor night, throughout, without break

Slaving like an ant

An average housewife

House wife, (Veettamma) makes one ponder at the unchanging pace and rhythm of a housewife slaving away at her chores, and by using the simile of an Ant, we are by visual imagery made to feel the insignificance, accorded to her actions by the world around her. To the Wind (Kaattinnodu) traces the turbulence of memories.

To the wind

Memories, like dry leaves in a whirlwind

You have uprooted me, oh wind!

today you are my unliked Beau.

Her spiritual Haiku's sparkle even more by their brevity, and by their subtle references; which holds much vast meaningful traditions and myths, that invokes deeper meanings.

God's Haiku

Vamana's three foot, the squirrels three stripes

Thrice disowned, thrice avowed; resurrection on the third day forth

...all your magnificent haikus! Oh lord!

By referring to the aithihya of Vamana the enormity of what a Haiku could contain within a three 'foot/ line' poem is so concisely and by association to the myth brilliantly conveyed. And the aithihya motif is extended using the reference to the squirrel's three stripes, carefully bringing in Rama's benevolent acknowledgement of small deeds, and the 'three' again repeats through the biblical reference to Christ being rejected and then avowed, and the story of resurrection is brought in. She twines these in one fell swoop in just two lines and marvels on God's play with 'three' and places lord as the master creator of haiku, in the third and closing line! **A beyond brilliant exposition of the idea of Haiku, using a Haiku.** And it also becomes a praise to lord on a spiritual plane. This stands proof to why Ashitha could grip Malayalam readers to take note of Haiku.

Notes

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*All Malayalam excerpts used in this article including Ashitha’s Haiku, has been translated by this author.