
Brewing the Brevity: A Comparative Study of Haiku and Triveni

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Abstract

The evolution of poetic expression has been an interesting phenomenon if we take into account the great varieties and forms through which human beings convey their inner thoughts and observations. From the detailed and drawn-out forms like epic and ballads, to the complex and terse forms like Haiku, Doha and Sher, one can witness the mercurial and individual choice of a poet. The present paper tries to understand two of the pithiest poetic forms namely, the traditional Japanese Haiku and the experimental triplets devised by the famous Indian poet, Gulzar who named them, 'Triveni'. The paper will look into their basic characteristics and patterns of similarities and distinctiveness and subsequently evaluate their success in achieving their professed aim...to invite a reader for a complex intellectual experience.

Keywords:

Hiaku, Triveni, pith, imagist, concrete, poetic forms

The giant floating globe fondly called as the Earth, boasts of many magical occurrences – the single orb to have life, countless throbbing organisms and from magic to marvel – the ever-evolving human species. They observe the great and small overtures of nature and delving deep into the mechanism, they emulate all these natural intricacies into human contrivances. Still more magical is the invention of language and its secondary usages. Language has played an indispensable part in making connection and in generating bonds among human beings through the communication

method. If there would be no language it becomes almost impossible for humans to express themselves. The undeniable cruciality of language in our life can be easily felt in the words of Khaled Hosseini,

“If culture was a house, then the language was the key to the front door, to all the rooms inside.”

Expression is that main quality of humans which sets them apart from the rest of the creatures in this world. Being social creatures, human beings must voice their thoughts, ideas, emotions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge to other people. There are many ways of expression out there to express ourselves for instances: music, writing, painting, cinema, drawing, dancing, art, drama etc. our daily lives greatly depend on expression or it can be said that expression has a deep influence on our daily activities. In simple words, expression is an external manifestation of an internal state of mind, as well as heart.

To cut the long story short, literature and literary expression is a human specific practice which has been going on for almost two centuries. The wordsmiths have paraded their uncanny aptitude to use language in innovative ways. Literature empowers them to pen their ideas, attitude, emotions and thoughts in unique and momentous method with artistic genius. Literature embraces both oral and written forms of expression. If anyone who adopts literature as an approach of expressing her/himself then it is also essential to keep in mind that the chief foundation of literature is its creativity and aestheticism. Not every human being feels at ease and proficient in manifesting her/himself with art of literature.

The unmitigated hunger for creating and utilizing the resources of language has led to an endless variety of literary forms across the globe such as poetry composing, novel writing, drama writing, biography and autobiography writing, essay writing, short story writing etc.

Literature of any language bestows upon poetry the place of honor, it being the most ancient literary way of voicing the inner thoughts. The art of poetry is considered as the oldest, purest and the most powerful form. The relevance of poetry can be noticed and felt by the literary scholars and literature lovers through the wide range of poetic forms out there for instance lyrics, ghazals, shers, dohas, songs etc. Since centuries, poetry has had a prodigious impact on human psyche and

soul. Poetry can be perceived everywhere in every minute happening around us in the atmosphere and in the nature. For example, it can be felt in the dew drops, in the chirping of the birds, in the peaceful flowing of waters and streams, in the sound of air etc.

Poetry is esteemed as the bona fide art form that contains therapeutic properties of soothing and pleasing the melancholic hearts. It also has expertise of provoking thoughts and sparking our mindsets with the light of hope and positivity. Wordsworth, the great English Romantic poet of the 18th century goes on to define poetry as an unpremeditated composition of inner thoughts which can bring the most intimate connection with nature into being.

The art forms of poetry writing are used in many ways by all the wordsmiths across the globe in different languages. The genre of poetry writing dates back ages earlier human beings started penning down their oral songs, myths and legends. Most literary scholars believe that the oldest and earliest form of poetry was epic writing. There are countless forms of poetry writing which are as old as the existence of humans on the earth and an important element of any literature and culture of any civilization. The area of poetry writing is very vast and it contains a wide range of poetic forms for instance: from oral to written, from old to new, from ancient to modern, from ballad to epic, from sonnet to elegy, from noted to niche, from haiku to triveni, from free verse to blank verse, from villanelle to ghazals etc.

These different forms enable a poet to articulate his/her or other's thoughts, observations and emotions in new and innovative manners. The dawn of poetry started since ages and it is a boon not only for those who created it but for those also who read and get overwhelmed with it. But this dawn of poetry has been enriching with the varied use of numerous forms.

The purpose of this research paper is to present a comparative study of the oldest Japanese poetic form Haiku and the modern Poetic form Triveni as invented by the legendary Indian poet and lyricist Gulzar.

Haiku refers to a very popular and widely acknowledged poetic form of unrhymed three lines. Basho, the renowned master of haiku defined this poetic form as,



“...simply what is happening in this place at this moment”.

This poetic form got its origin in ancient Japan. It is believed that this form was developed by Zen Buddhists two to three centuries earlier. It was started as a reaction against the long and elaborate poetry at that time in Japanese literature. It is also regarded as the world’s shortest poetic form, and also deemed as the most used and preferred poetic form throughout the world. The chief reason behind the immense popularity of haiku is its brevity and compactness. Some honored names of poets, considered as the greatest Haiku practitioners of the world are: Matsuo Basho, Kobayashi Issa, Yosa Buson, Natsume Soseki, Masaoka Shiki and Katsushika Hokusai. Among these poets Basho is noted as the one who took this form to another level of sublimity. He added simplicity and depth in the meaning of haiku. Initially this poem was written in one line but gradually it evolved into a crisp poem of three lines.

The word Haiku was derived from the Japanese word and the meaning of this word is “Starting Verse” or “amusing verse”. The structure of a Haiku is well knit as it contains five, seven and five syllables respectively, hence there must be total seventeen syllables in it. The most common themes of haiku writing are natural phenomena such as seasons, natural landscapes, time of day and many more. Initially the themes of haikus were bound to these elements but with the wider use of this form the scope of themes has become vast. From the beginning to the nineteenth century onwards haiku has become as the most beloved art of expression coveted by every artist who pays attention to follow only one condition of it and the condition is to write it in the restricted three lines of seventeen syllables.

R. H. Blyth in his book Haiku says:

“A haiku is not a poem, it is not literature; it is a hand beckoning, a door half-opened, a mirror wiped clean. It is a way of returning to nature, to our moon nature, our cherry blossom nature, our falling leaf nature, in short, to our Buddha nature. It is a way in which the cold winter rain, the swallows of evening, even the very day in its hotness, and the length of the night, become truly alive, share in our humanity, speak their own silent and expressive language.”

Great Haiku poetry has the ability to evoke powerful emotions within the space of a few short lines. Often there exist within the best Haiku poems, depths within depths, meanings within meanings. Great Haiku poetry within the power of a few poignant words can suggest and point to the amazing joys and sadness of life, and to the mystery of humanities place within the great circle of existence.

There are some variations in the genre of haiku writing for example Senryu: it is similar to haiku in seventeen syllables but does not present elements of the nature and of the seasons. Some literary scholar believe that Hokku or haiku were traditionally a brief preface to Renga: a sort of longer poem.

Some famous examples of Haiku:

Furu ike ya

Kawazu tobikomu

Mizu no oto (original in Japanese by Basho)

The old pond;

A frog jumps in-

The sound of the water. (translation by R.H. Blyth)

This iconic creation of Basho's pen is given the same position in the sphere of literature as Wordsworth's Daffodils and Yeats' Lake Isle of Innisfree. In this poem the image of frog symbolizes to Spring season and to feature season (kigo) is the chief feature of haiku writing. And this frog (Kawazu) is the kigo of the poem. There are two other images in this poem the first is that of the pond (static image) and second is the sound of frog's diving. The image of pond metaphorically refers to subconscious mind of humans generally and of an old man (the poet himself) particularly.

The frog has been a traditional subject of Japanese poetry since the first recorded songs; even today, Japanese learn the songs of different species of frogs from records, much as we learn the calls of “songs of birds”. But Basho’s frog leaps, making a small sound with his action, rather than his voice.

Another illustration of renowned Haiku

I write, erase, rewrite

Erase again, and then

A poppy blooms.

(by Katsushika Hokusai)

This wonderful piece of art is penned down by one of the reverend perfectionists of Haiku, Katsushika Hokusai. With this poem Hokusai features natural imagery Poppy to describe his creativity and writing. Here, the poet equates his writing process with the processes of nature. He constantly fails in his writing activity then he rewrites and engages himself in the process of writing until he gets the desired outcome in form of Poppy. With this short and pointed poem the poet wants to highlight the importance of perseverance in human life which can be comprehended in the blooming of Poppy.

One more fantastic instance of Haiku

After killing

A spider, how lonely I feel

In the cold of night.

(by Masaoka Shiki)

This poem is the brainchild of the noted Japanese literary artist Masaoka Shiki. This haiku is regarded as one of the most popular thoughtful haikus. the poem is about the dark, gloomy and negative effect on the mind and heart of the poet after killing a spider, the sole companion of his solitude. Basically, this brief poem captures the value of life whether a small creature or a giant and of loneliness. So this short piece is an endeavor on poet’s part to impart a sense of giving value to every creature’s life on this earth.

The majority of Japanese who like traditional haiku probably know and like Issa better than any other poet. He came to prefer the company of small, seemingly insignificant creatures, and wrote many haiku on such topics as grasshoppers, flies and bugs, sparrows, and other less-than-glamorous beings. One of Issa's the best-known verses shows his empathy with those who are often not appreciated:

oh, don't swat!

the fly rubs hands

rubs feet

Here Issa implies that, the fly prays twice as much as most humans.

With the wider fame and popularity of Haiku in the entire Japan, gradually the literary souls of other parts of world took great interest in this poetic form. The wordsmiths of Indian Subcontinent have already used the poetic form couplet and got great excellence in it for instance the Dohas of Kabir and Bihari. Some scholars even believe that there is a popular proverb that the couplet (dohas) form of Bihari is widely acclaimed as, "Gagar me Sagar". It demonstrates that since ages Indians also love to express themselves briefly or it can be said that the ancient intellectuals or poets were already blessed with the spark and magic of brevity.

In recent times one of the leading experimental magician of words and an acclaimed practitioner of poetry, Gulzar has also acquired inspiration from the art form of Doha and Haiku and tried to immortalize this form. He named his invented form Triveni, a poetic form little bit similar to that of Japanese haiku and senryu. He has shown perfectly his various talents and skills in many creative arts such literature, music, cinema and he has provided epic level to all these arts with his unmatched charisma and virtuosity. Triveni also has three "hemistichs" like a haiku. The very important fact which differs a Triveni from that of a Haiku is that unlike Haiku it is devoid of restrictions of syllables or 'radeef' and 'qafia'. The master of this form explains that the first two lines are a complete verse in themselves but the third 'misra' or line can be termed as the real twist

or the soul of the poem. This third line is the root element of a Triveni that provides a new and unique dimension to the whole verse. In an interview the honored painter of words asserts that,

“I called it Triveni because the first two lines meet like the Ganga and the Yamuna and complete a thought, it forms a poem on its own. But beneath the two there is the subterranean flow of another, the Saraswati. Hidden. Not visible to the eye. The Triveni intends to reveal the Saraswati. The third line, lost in the first two, either changes the meaning of the poem altogether, its focus, or gives it a surprising twist, in the process of creating an entirely new poem altogether.”

His all sorts of poetry including Triveni are admired for its laconic expression in which he puts few words but these few words contain an entire ocean of meanings. The sculpture of words has penned Trivenis on various themes such as death, love, life, morality and social values. His initiative of inventing Triveni can be counted as a luxury and enriching source for subcontinental poetry.

Here are some noted examples of Gulzar’s Triveni:

“Aao ab zabaanein baant le apni apni hum

Na tum sunogee baat na humko samajhna hai

Do anpadhon ko kitni mohabbat hai adab se”

(Come, let us divide our languages

Neither will you listen, nor do I have to understand

How much love for literature amongst two illiterates.)

One can see how Gulzar has debunked the very myth of language as a bridge between two persons, a medium that connects two minds. The first two lines convey the uselessness of language when two persons don’t know each other’s language. However, the third line brings a whole new vista as the use of illiterate highlights the basic barbarity of human beings who have devised ways of dividing themselves on multiple lines. Irrespective of their professed love for literature, they treat

one language better than other and fight over it like savages fight over food. So, it is a succinct example of adding a line that add a distinctive layer to the whole texture of the poem.

Let's see another example of triveni-

Humko Ghalib ne yeh dua di thi

Tum salaamat raho hazaaron baras

Yeh baras to fakat dinon mein gaya.

(Ghalib had given us this wish-

May you live a thousand years

Thousand years elapsed in few days itself.)

Now, in this particular instance, Gulzar begins with the reference to another master of laconic expression, Ghalib who has sardonically wished everyone a long life despite the harsh fact that life is full of sorrows, a bed of thorns. The last line in this example, with a childlike innocence, raises the existential query of the meaning of life. The days that are spent doing nothing are meaningless and the burning and unquenched desires of the speaker remain intact. So, the question remains, whether this time should be counted in the blessings or not. Once again, we see how Gulzar has made the perfect use of the last line to diverge from the road, he has taken in the first two lines and offering a bifurcated way to the reader leaving upon him/her to reach the destination of the purported meaning.

Another brilliant specimen of triveni to be discussed here is:

Samne aaye mere, dekha mujhe, baat bhi ki

Muskuraye bhi purani kisi pehchan ki khatir

Kal ka akhbar tha, bas dekh liya, rakh bhi diya.

(You come before me, acknowledge me, and even talk to me

Your smile reveals our long acquaintance

(Like yesterday's newspaper, read and discarded.)

Now this triplet is quite like the imagist poems of Ezra Pound, short, loaded with meaning and crisp images standing distinctively for fuzzy abstract notions. The first two lines talk about a meeting between two old acquaintances who meet one day casually. The meeting doesn't exude that warmth which is the hallmark of intimacy. However, the ultimate line once again pops up a new possibility of interpretation by comparing the meeting with reading of an old newspaper. It reeks of staleness, it is devoid of any excitement and vivacity, it seems to be all seen and experienced, as if one picks a newspaper out of boredom. These types of poetic expression bring the essential human element in the poem. Gulzar successfully installs an image which works like a thumbnail, quickly bringing to the mind of the reader its essential message.

A poetic expression can take an elongated form like wind passing from a narrow passage or it may be succinct and compact like a tea bag which exudes aroma and flavor only after it has been brought into the contact of a conducive environment. A Haiku or a Triveni may offer challenge to a layman as it requires focused participation from its reader to gain an inside view of the kernel. Through a careful observation of these two laconically poised forms of expression, one can understand that the basic purpose of the practitioners of both these forms is to invite the readers to unfurl the delicately coiled word images and in the process to discover with delight the stashed treasures of intellectual and emotional experiences. Like a Chinese box riddle, a haiku and Triveni also possess a terse and pithy structure and when anyone tries to unravel the subtle meaning of it, one goes to the motions of exhilarating meaning-making process. The engagement of the reader in discovering and establishment of the meaning seems to be the main purport behind such condensed poetic forms.

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