

Short Verse Delight

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PRASEON PUBLICATION

Published by:

Praseon Publication

168, Swapnil House, Housing Board Colony,
Sec-7 Extn., Gurgaon 122001 (Haryana) INDIA
Ph. : +91-124-2250680, Mob.: +91-9213188263
e-mail : publishing@computerplanetindia.com
Visit Us at : www.praseonpublication.com

First Edition : 2011

ISBN - 81-902433-7-3

Price : Rs 95.00

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Laser type setting:

ComputerPlanetIndia.com

Printed at:

Praseon Creative Art Print

168, Swapnil House, Housing Board Colony
Sec-7 Extn Gurgaon 122001(Hr) INDIA

Dedicated

Rabindranath Tagore who introduced To ever revered the concept of Haiku to Indians and wrote Haiku like poems, on the occasion of his 150th birth anniversary.

Other books by the author:

He has written 12 books in Bangla besides the following in English-

Sri Aurobindo's Ideal of Freedom and Human Unit
(Essays)

Mother of all Beings (Biography)

Sri Aurobindo: The Yogi of Divine Life
(Philosophy and biography)

Lord Ganesha (Monograph)

The Witness Tree (Poems)

In Celebration of Nature (Poems)

The Paper Boat (Poems)

Short Verse Vast Universe (Haiku and other short verses)

Aju Mukhopadhyay's Poems on Sri Aurobindo and the
Mother (Poems)

White Bird and its Black Shadow (Short Stories)

The Moments of Life (Short Stories)

In Train (novel)

Water (Environmental)

Acknowledgement with gratitude to magazines and E-zines who published them:

Akita International Haiku Network, Chrysanthemum, Autumn Leaves, Shamrock Haiku Journal, Haiku Darpan, Face Book, New York Times, Origami Peace Tree; 1000 cranes, Poets International, *Ambrosia*, *Happy Haiku*, *Daruma Museum*, *India Saijiki*, Haiku Review, Sketch Book, Poems in favour of Burmese and Africans in respective websites, Creature Feature, The Sons of Camus Writers International Journal, The Storm, sssModern English Tanka and some other magazines and e-zines.

I have written most of the haiku in accord with the most modern trend except some at the end which are traditional haiku with syllabic count. Other aspects of them are as I felt and published. Some touches have been made in some haiku even after publication. Haiku and Tanka published here are the selected ones out of what have so far been written and published.

Pondicherry Environment (Environmental)



Haiku

many hued winged dreams
flash in the garden of my heart;
myriad butterflies.

messengers of spring
stream of hope and dream;
hued Lepidoptera

hundreds of butterflies
appearing disappearing;
coloured fantasy

delicate enchanters
winged robbers of my heart
coloured spring-messengers



sitting in my heart
moving huge antennae
the moth enervates me

time stilled
hanging in space-
waiting

life in between
birth and death-
activity

firing the sky
setting sun plunges
in the dark



Short Verse Delight

Mesmerised
By Golden dear,
Sita surrenders.

rain falls
leaf shakes
the tree stands.

You go
I stay
We live apart.

Incited by others
You're self-massacred-
Robust Africa.



Short Verse Delight

As I stepped
On to it unaware,
The beetle cracked to death.

A solitary
pensive crow
sits on the veranda rail.

coral reef coral reef
beauty of the dead body!
the world lives in it

pain gnaws at my heart
as the boat reaches mid-river-
for what I left on shore.





dark room;
dust dance in the space-
Sunrays

Life is a lone bridge
between the birth and death;
walk on till the end

Rhythmic steps and mudras
Colourful body and facial expression;
Indian classical dance.

a face with
brows and lashes-
quivers in the waves



endangered
black-necked crane
stands on one leg-

the deer runs alone:
none is after
none before

tidal waves
lashed the beach, fumbling beyond;
full moon gloats in sky

with a serious look
fearful cicada
whirls



Short Verse Delight

a round leaf
twirling in space for long-
fall it must

crickets drone
routinely but presently-
pause to begin

so near yet so far-
the sea we know
is unknown

trying to catch
the water down the slope-
cat is perplexed



Short Verse Delight

dead it falls-
so long a part of the tree;
withered leaf

after tasting my blood
the mosquito doesn't want me-
to sleep alone!

Dubbawallah dances
when the eater munches
from the dubbah lunches.

Cranes fly-
making the wide sky
limitless



tales of the ocean
waves tell the shore-
quite unknown

Mosquito coil burns
shedding its burnt body in a row-
around the centre.

full moon floods the earth
flowers paint it with colours-
spring night's pregnant

body of the river
unfathomable and shallow;
near and far



rain drops on the
stair pagoda and sea-
simultaneously

white sky came down
touching the frozen white sea;
flying birds stilled between

bright silver line
round the cloud-
sky in bike's mirror.

black cat jumps
chasing the butterfly-
falls disheartened



Short Verse Delight



crows chasing the kite-
as it rises high
it leaves

The river wears
a bushy necklace as it
takes a u-turn; flows

lake water-
wind whipped waves sparkle in the Sun-
squirrel stops to see

water splashing inside
swishing the edge of the boat-
dark green lotus leaves, close



Short Verse Delight



wasps buzz
in the heart of the lotus;
usurpers be aware

Time has snipped
the thread between the reel and the kite;
boy-days are over.

romping through the ripe
paddy field in dark night-
fox catching rats

depression;
winds thrash the trees,
no rains- whatever it is!



Short Verse Delight

on grass she shone
under the vast sky-
bare and alone

flaming the earth, sky
linking the aeons they fly-
ancient flamingos

love blooms at the turning
of the lane, smiles
a rose bud-

your fleeting shadow
tells me that you came, didn't
call me



Short Verse Delight

silently
in the deep of the sky—
a throbbing star dies.

stars are fading
one after the other;
threshold of the dawn

To find life in planets
man is targeting stars-
beyond many light years!

thirsty earth is expectant;
lightnings flash across the dark-
peacock dances.





A crane flies
ahead of others—
dividing the sky

Living apart
With coalescing mind and heart—
We live together.

Living together
Not agreeing in any affair—
We live apart.

leaping frog loves my room;
presently resting
in a glass of water.



the shadow of an embodied
being is a corrupt thing;
revealed by light

The man swerved
failing to cross his own shadow—
into the gulf.

black shadow shortens
as it rises high, vanishes-
bird over the lake

with its offering abundant
dream spring recurs every year—
how can the haggard welcome it?





margosa and mango
flowery fragrance spread-
dream spring nostalgic

Global Warming-
northern cherry blossoms
open early this year

a shy girl-
jasmine buds open
slowly in twilight

spring rains-
mushrooms push up
amids the marigolds



on grass she shone
under the vast sky—
bare and alone

an eerie afternoon;
suddenly flows the cool breeze—
fragrant through garden

after the rains
push up the heads-
mushrooms

evening shadow-
my mother's face vanishes
in the dark





severe winter-
futon is a nice thing
to hide in

she alone
is taking a bath-
dark pond

stowing down
river at Torii gate-
lonely goose

wild wind rages
fire spreads by leaps and bounds-
beach shelters the refugees



light and cloud change faces
deep valley unfathomable-
unknown call

dry leaves
off the source-
fall on forest floor

dead it falls-
so long a part of the tree;
withered leaf

swooped in vain
only foam in its talon-
bird of pray





puffed up
tailes swelled, face to face-
two cats

long after
the doors suddenly opened;
inexpressible

came today
as I was used to yesterday-
morning tea

gecko
concentrates and crawls;
moth takes off suddenly



crystal drops make sound
on so many tin roofs loud-
monotonously

Bridges of hope and
Despair across life's curved path;
We cross them to live.

Courageous saints
face the bullets bare-headed-
the people support.

A degraded part
rots the whole in Myanmar;
must be amputated.



blue moon
in the rippling water-
looks up at sky

Someone pats my back
telling I know everything;
But I realize it.

Tsunami roaring
High wall pulls everything in-
The beach is emptied.

All hermaphrodites
Have usual rights other than-
Natur's deprivation



beginning of spring-
rangoon creeper shamelessly
blooms, day in day out.

World Animal Day
They observe feasting on fresh
plump animal flesh.

bent to smell the rose
met protruding eyes in vase-
green frog leaped on face

Nuclear weaponry
is Man's death-trap; he neither
can use nor refuse.





a ripe coconut
 falls on the garden carrying
 the moonlight with it

To keep love in tact
 is a hard struggle; often breaks up
 like a flower vase.

sitting on a bough
 coloured sunbird stares at me;
 bird's rapt manwatching.

a glade in the wood
 chilled stars and cool moon aglow-
 animals are rare



Tanka

as if a mass exodus
 but their faces are serene -
 sea of humanity
 gathered at Allahabad Ganga
 bathing for nectar; Kumbha Mela.

The roar of a single beast
 over the evening river—
 shuddered silence!
 Soon the crickets resume
 then croaks the frog

sitting in my room
 windows wide open
 air flowing through
 trees around;
 floating in the lap of time



golden clouds
drifting toward the sea
merge with the eternal blue,
impromptu;
souls absorbed in Tao.

Looks like a stretch of
silvery sand, Polar river
glistening in the Sun
gives them water;
flowing underground.

Silently
in the deep of the sky
a lone star throbs and dies;
a constellation at a distance
quietly moans



birdwatcher
on a high up branch
focuses on the eyerie—
eagle mother from the sky
alights on the bough . . .

along the lakes and dales
walks the poet—
calm and serene Cambria;
an osprey swiftly dives in
and lifts a prey in its talons

pachyderms smelt us
as poachers in a glade—
as they chased
we ran for life;
breathing heavily





fields after fields
dykes with stubs
harvest over;
silver moonlight focuses on rats—
under the autumn sky

heads high, leaves thick
sprawling branches, flowers
a green island;
concrete jungle gloats—
time to engulf it.

silently
in the deep sky
a star throbs;
shy
as it falls



pregnant mango flowers
tiny stars of neem—
fragrance wafts in the air;
spring
intoxicating

innumerable
bridges I crossed
over river turbulent;
life in storm and calm—
I don't know the ocean

We crossed path
many times before,
never it occurred
until today—
that you are my life's core.



those rosy cheeks
benevolent eyes
how many times I see
waking and in dreams—
my neighbour she is!

high jumping
tsunami hit the shore—
dragging the men
boat and children,
hid in its stomach.

Dharmasala
Tibetans and the head lama—
Buddha resettled;
wind blows helter skelter
the lamp on the cliff burns steadily.



Nuclear fission
Based on dangerous division
Is an occult fault;
Sun is bounteous
Alternative source

Ganga laughs
sweet metallic voice
eddies dangerous-
fishes abound
fishing boats struggle

filigreed work in gold
done in many artiste-days;
made and erased
in my presence-
in sky





eye to eye
as I pull her cheek-
naked they meet
in each other's
mirror

wallowing in beach
two naked bodies-
shrieking birds
fly around-
descending darkness

moonlit paddy field
sways its head in delight
vast as sea;
jackals, rats and fireflies move
in search of food.



way home
the bird is carrying
love's orange rays
in its wings-
farewell to the Sun

armed soldiers guard
both Line Of Control;
a thin stream
flowing between-
trembles

flowing over the
Gondwanaland-
Subarnarekha
joins the past
with the present



feather grass ripens
on the Steppe, wind plays with it-
rustling, lifting the plumes
driving the opaline costume-
moonlit fray.

golden clouds
drifting toward the sea
merge with the eternal blue,
impromptu;
souls absorbed in Tao.

sweet metallic sound
clad in red, Ganga laughs loud
eddies dance around-
full moon
'who's playing?'



The Wonderful World of Dazzling Short Verses

The world of epics is not compatible with the present day mood of the connoisseurs. The restive mind of the modern man can neither conceive nor relish the epics though the world is moving with its ever increasing mass of living beings. The present age is the age of short poems of various genres like Sonnet, Tercet, quatrain, Limerick, couplet, Rubaiyat, Ghazal and Some more names may be added from the Urdu world like Sher, Nazm, Rubai, Doha, Musallis besides the Japanese short verses like Haiku, Zen, Tanka. Not that the poets often revert to all these short verse forms though some stick to them. The general trend is to write short poems of short length, often unrhymed but with some kind of rhythm. Prose poems are more in vogue. There is no clear definition of short poem, which may perhaps extend to a couple of pages. Longer poems are usually called long poems. But our discussion is about the very short verses which abound in world literature.

Epics represented the age. Sometimes poets of later ages used to contribute their might to swell the body of great epics as a national heritage, though diminishing their quality. Thus the original length of Mahabharata, between 24000 to little over 26000 slokas, swelled to more than one lakh slokas. Epics, the literary history of civilizations, like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Iliad and the Odyssey, are no longer produced. Epic poems were written at later ages too by such poets as Milton but they were not the epics of the lore. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri, written in the last century, spanning to nearly 24000 lines, is a spiritual epic of a different genre.

Short poems of two to four lines usually dazzle like flash lights. Examples of such creations are aplenty in the world literature. Ancients used very short poems to express profound wisdom. Moderns too are fond of such short and lovely poems. Thus the old Japanese



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hokku and waka has been revived by the moderns calling them haiku and tanka which have won the imagination of the poets all over the world.

Let us delve deep into the world of short verse by the ancients. The mandalas in the Vedas, the oldest available scriptures in the world, consist of suktas or hymns of two lines, as heard by the Rishis. Book of Psalms in the Bible consist of psalms of three or four lines each. So are the revelations of the prophet in the Quran made in few short lines. Such things have been categorized as religious literature. Later many beautiful short verses adorned the Upanishads, two chapters of which are given below.

*By that renounced thou shouldst enjoy;
lust not after any man's possession.*

(Isha-1).

*By whom impelled is this word that men speak?
What god set eye and ear to their workings ?*

(Kena-2)

(Portions of slokas as translated by Sri Aurobindo)

Japan occupies a conspicuous place in the history of such poems with treasures of Haiku, Tanka, Senryu, Renga and other forms born out of Zen and other meditations of Buddhist lineage. The spiritual Gurus in China too sometimes expressed their thoughts and observations in such manners.

Of the of popular Japanese short verse forms, Haiku, Tanka and Sitigotyo, first two are very short verses and among them Haiku is the most popular. Haiku is a three lined poem. Whereas in original Japanese Haiku has 5-7-5 beats, rather than syllables, it is being written in 5-7-5 syllables in English language by many. They hold the view that it is nearest to the original verse form and carries much of



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the spirit of Haiku in most cases. Some hold the opinion that it may be of two shorter lines with a longer line between them but a strict 5-7-5 syllables are not required for English and other languages which do not conform exactly to the Japanese. And freedom is available in not counting the syllables strictly. Finer three linens are lighter in weight and subtle in meaning. Haiku is usually a poem of nature; unusually revealing some truth or it is a flash of recognition with light footsteps.

Couplets written by Tiruvalluvar in Tirukkural in the first century C.E. on ethics in Tamil language are based on kural metres, like-

*Self control places one among the gods;
lack of it leads one to the darkness of hell*

(NO. 121)

A discussion about short poems is bound to come round Sufi poems of the medieval age. In Arabic and Persian principal poetic forms were four; Qasida (ode), Ghazal (lyric), Rubai (quatrain) and Masnavi (epic). Of the four Rubai became famous for its brief expression of mystical insights. The language was often direct and simple but paradoxical. In eleventh and twelfth centuries Persian quatrain became a standard mode of expression to clinch a point in Sufi literature like,

*Last night my idol placed his hand upon my breast,
he seized me hard and put a slave-ring in my ear.
I said, "My beloved, I am crying from your love!"
He pressed his lips on mine and silenced me. ¹*

Many of the Arabian and Persian Sufi poetry drew upon the traditional themes of love and wine but the context and interpretation made them Sufi mystical poems. Many of the court poets of Arabia and Persia, who wrote secular poems, wrote Sufi poems also,



which became a fashion. Arabian Hallaj and Persian Hafiz were the best examples.

Rubai was written not only in those two countries but in other countries where Muslims lived, like India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Africa, Turkey and others. Many times subjects and ideas in such poems were mixed with symbols and legends of other religions. Magi or Zoroastrian priests merged into tavern keepers and represented Sufi masters.

Couplets are found about infant Krishna (Bal Krishna) in awadhi dialect (Of Hindi language) which are interpreted as Sufi poetry. Many Sufi poets as Rumi and Hafiz are multilingual and multicultural. Many such poems are written in Urdu, a language born out of Hindi and Arabic. There is hardly any difference in form and theme between court poetry and Sufi poetry in Turkish, as in Arabic and Persian though tekke was generally considered different from divani or court poetry in Turkish.

It was perfectly possible to write poetry in Sufi style without being a practicing mystic. Many poets of the medieval period loaded their poems in Sufi imagery though few of them had serious connections with Sufi order. But Rumi, the author of the largest corpus of lyrical poetry in Persian literature (40000 verses, though often partly repeated) and the mystical epic, Masnavi of 25000 verses, was a Sufi mystic. His poems are part of the Sufi music.

Sufi poetry, scholars expounded, was not only intimate utterances of the individuals who had deep acquaintances with their subjects but also complex, deliberately composed literature with elaborate rules of rhymes and metres. There were large numbers of Sufi poets in the middle ages.

Mention must be made of the beautiful Rubaiyat, consisting of series of rubai or quatrains, by the famous Persian poet, Umar (Omar)



Khayyam of the 11th century though he was not a Sufi.

*Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears
Today of past Regrets and future Fears-
Tomorrow? - Why, Tomorrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n Thousand years.*

In Rumi we get the spiritual flame.

*Do you think I know what I'm doing?
That for one breath or half-breath, I belong to myself?
As much as a pen knows what it's writing,
Or the ball can guess where it's going next.*

Let us quote a couplet from the ever romantic, bibulous Hafez.

*If Hafez's tears do not move you,
Then why has your heart not yet turned to stone?*

Urdu Sher of Mirza Ghalib, couplets, is very famous.

*Life would have passed as it were
But the remembrance of your way has brought me here.*

With the Sufis we should name the great son of a weaver, Kabir, of the fifteenth century Varanasi or Benares, India. Brought up in Hindu, Muslim and Sufi heritage, he was a real saint and harvested golden crops of his songs out of his life and beliefs.

*Do Not Go To the garden of flowers!
O Friend! Go not there;
In your body is the garden of flowers.
Take your seat on the thousand petals of the lotus, and there gaze on the
infinite Beauty. ²*

*Empty the Cup! O be drunken!
Drink the divine nectar of His name!*



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*Kabir says: 'Listen to me, dear Sadhu!
From the sole of the foot to the crown of the
head this mind is filled with poison.'*³

Nineteenth century French poets, Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud wrote few such short poems.

We find Indian vachanas or pravachanas, apothegms, aphorisms or sayings credited to someone like Khana of Bengal or simply anonymous, just as they are in short verses carried by folk memory. Sometimes they look like riddles, but are still valued. They are sometimes in the form of couplets.

Poet Rabindranath Tagore also included some couplets and quatrains in the vast body of his lyrical and other poems. In 1905 he wrote a few poems, short as in Japanese forms. Some of the short poems he wrote while sailing back from Liverpool to homeland in 1912-13. Some he wrote in Japan in 1916. Some such poems were written in English as in *Fireflies* and *Stray Birds*, besides others in Bangla. Such poems have been termed as epigrammatic by the critics. The author in his *Fireflies* wrote, "Fireflies had their origin in China and Japan where thoughts were very often claimed from me, in my handwriting on fans and pieces of silk" – as published in New York; The Macmillan Company. 1928.

Among the books of such verses in Bangla, 'Kanika' was published in 1899 and 'Lekhan' in 1927. 'Sphulinga' was written between 1912 and 1916. A couplet from 'Kanika' is given as example.

*Ungrateful
The echo always taunts the sound
Lest it may be revealed that it's indebted to sound.*

We may site another beautiful couplet from 'Lekhan'-
*The shadow keeps in its breast the memory of light
Picture we call it.*

(No.41)



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Much after Tagore's creations of such verses, when Nishikanta Roy Chowdhury or poet and painter Nishikanta, brought up in Shantiniketan under the guidance of Tagore and other teachers, took to writing such verses at the young age of about 21 years under the general title, *Tukri*, Tagore took much interest in them and corrected some of them almost beyond recognition but regretted later for that in a letter to poet Buddhadev Bose in 1940. Such poems were published in *Bichitra*, a Bangla monthly, under the guidance of Tagore in about 1931. Some of the poems were kept intact. A three line poem from *Tukri*, as remained unchanged, is reproduced below.

*It is better to keep her in my mind
Keep in my dreamland fair
In my thatched house; where else to give her share ?*

Kunjunni, a Malayalam poet, recently expired, is famous for his *kunjunnikkavithakal*, a book of very short verses; couplet, tercet or quatrain, rhymed or unrhymed. He wrote stories and other write ups, mainly for the children, but he is popular for his witty, ironic and humorous short lines. Sometimes they carry profound meanings. He was a man of quite short height, 1.5 metres but he writes,

*That I am short
I know I'm tall.*

A few more of his verses may be cited for example.

*The sky shouts at times;
The sea calms at times.*

*I'm nailed to myself,
My own cross;
I'm no Christ yet.*



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*My head's above the earth,
But it's far below the sky.
It's a pity
My thoughts dangle between.*

Swami Nem Pal of Bulandshahr is a veteran politician and poet. His poems are patriotic and moral, full of feeling for the country. He gives waking call to the youth of the country and judges the society with a sense of righteousness. We may give a few examples of his quatrains from his book, 'India Malcontent' in two parts.

*Wake up! Advance
On destined track;
Welcomes thee chance;
Wake! 'tis daybreak. (5)*

*Our society
Is so impaired;
It needs piety
To be repaired. (137)*

*Deteriorates
Life of nation
It necessitates
Deep operation. (139)*

Sugam Babu has written-

*The mother
For her child
the child
for her child-
Feeling is a river
that never flows upstream.*

Wings. August 2006)



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Large number poets in India and abroad are writing Haiku and other short poems. Kurt F. Svatek also has written number of very short poems, as in his *Touch of Heavens*. The list of poets and poems is not exhaustive but they focus the world of short verses. Such a short poem may be very short lived like spark with fire in its wing born to die soon, but joyous as it lives to illuminate; a very temporary affair. It may also conceal in its frail heart profound ideas or high philosophies, often born out of deep meditation. Short but beautiful, many times such poems keep a mark in the reader's heart. It may be hoped that such poems will continue to be born to give joy.

References:

- 1 Carl N Ernest. 'The Shambala Guide to Sufism'. Shambala. 2000. p.157
- 2 Tagore. One hundred poems of Kabir (Verse No.4). The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. New Delhi; Sahitya Akademy. Reprint.2004
- 3 Tagore. No.58



Introducing Haiku in India

Tagore wrote Haiku like short poems

Tagore visited Japan in 1916 and was very pleased with their land and people in general. He wrote Japan Yatri (Japan-Traveller) profusely praising them and their culture. Their poetic mode of expression in Haiku immensely praised him. While he wrote such short verses before and after his visit to their land, Krishna Kripalani in his 'Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography' suggested that the poet was influenced by the haiku while creating his later haiku-like poems. While he was impressed by the brevity, economy and intensity of these poems, he neither had shown any sign of acquiring their metrical subtleties nor tried to imitate them, though he had shown in the meantime the capacity of creating varieties of rhymes and rhythms in his poetry. By his analysis of Basho's poem- 'A mud puddle/ A frog jumps in/ Splush'- he for the first time drew the attention of Indians to such poetic creation and by the praise bestowed upon such creation in his travelogue he encouraged his countrymen to be interested in them.

Short poems occupy a conspicuous place in the history of literature. In Vedas, Upanishads, Bible, Koran and in other scriptures we find couplets, tercets or quatrains. Persian, Sufi and other poems, Japanese Haiku and other short verses, even Kabir's devotional and philosophic doha have still been encouraging and influencing the poets of the modern age. Brevity, witticism, sarcasm, devotion, mysticism and imagery are the intrinsic part of short verses. Among the short verses, those up to 4, 5 lines dazzle like stars in the sky. Such poems are very popular throughout the ages. Haiku is prominent among such poems.

Poet Rabindranath Tagore was a real creator who touched upon almost all genres of literature. Though he is known mainly as a



poet, the creator of lyrics to which he gave tunes and sung, he wrote almost all other types of poems except the epic. His English writings in original and translations have been produced in three giant volumes which do not contain all his works in Bangla. At the same time the volume of his works brought out in Bangla do not contain his works in English. Bengalis get most of him in his mother tongue so they usually do not come across his English writings. And others mostly know him through his works in English and translations of his works.

Five books of Rabindranath Tagore containing short verses in original Bangla and English and those translated from one language to the other exist, though it is not known, in respect of some poems, which language was the medium of creation of the original. Of them 'Kanika' in Bangla, meaning fragments, was published first in 1899. In his introduction to The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol-1, published by the Sahitya Akademi (1994), the editor wrote that the source in respect of many such poems was epigrammatic and didactic tradition of Sanskrit and Persian poems prevalent in Bengal during that period. An example is,

*We shut the door, lest error enter in
But truth asks, 'How shall I admission win?'*

After his visit to Japan where he was reverentially welcomed, he wrote more such poems. With reference to Basho's: 'A mud puddle / A frog jumps in / splash', written in English, I find a difference with his rendering of it in Bangla in his Japan Yatri as it is given below in my translation of the passage.

"This tendency to economise one's expression may be found in their poems also. No where else in the world is found this three line verse. Three lines are enough for their poet and reader.



And for this I have not found here anyone singing on the road. Their hearts do not make a sound like waterfall but are silent like water in a tank. However much of their poems I have seen so far, all are picturesque, not lyrics. Emotional burning of the heart tends to vital lavishness. They do not so spend. Their expression is limited to the feeling of beauty. This feeling is selfless. We do not cry for flower, bird or moon. The only relation we have with them is the relishing of beauty. They do not beat us, rob us or deprive us of anything. For this only three lines satisfy them and it does not break the peace of their imagination.

“Two classic examples of their poems will clear my point.

*Old pond,
Frog’s leap,
Sound of water.*

Enough. Nothing is required. Enough for the mind’s eye of the Japanese reader. . . .

‘Another poem:

*rotton branch,
a crow,
autumn.*

“This season carries the impression of death. A crow sitting on a rotten branch evokes the idea of decaying poverty of autumn . . . the power of imaging of the Japanese is very strong.

“Let me give you the example of another poem which is greater than the simple ocular capacity to visualize:

*The heaven and earth are flowers
The Gods and Buddha are flowers-
Human heart is core of the flower.*



“I think here we find some similarity between Japan and India. Japan sees the heaven and earth as blossoming flowers, India has to say that this heaven and earth, two flowers in one stem, like God and Buddha, would be outward things if man had no heart- the beauty of this beauty is hidden in the heart of man.”¹

When the poet was taken to a grassy meadow and was told a tale of olden times; of two chieftains of rival clans who fought from morning till sunset until both lay dead smeared with blood. The poet was asked to write a short poem on it. C.F. Andrews, who accompanied the poet, wrote, “I could see, at that moment, the strained anguish of the Poet’s face as he quickly grasped the incident just as it had occurred and shrank back from it in his own mind in horror. In a moment of quick gesture he wrote these words: ‘They hated and fought and killed each other! And God in shame covered their blood with His own grass.’”²

Here is an example from the book, *Stray Bird*, published in the same year of his visit to Japan-

*Some unseen fingers, like idle breeze, are playing
Upon my heart the music of the ripples.*

Lekhan was first published in the poet’s own handwriting in 1926 from Hungary. The editor of his English Writings has noted that the book contains 420 short verses of which 72 are in English and 48 are in Bangla whereas 150 poems are in both the languages. A considerable portion of the English part of the book was reproduced in another book, ‘Fireflies’, published in 1928, containing 256 verses. In his introduction to ‘Lekahan’ the poet wrote, “The lines in the following pages had their origin in China and Japan where the author was asked for his writings on fans or pieces of silk.” He visited Japan in 1916 and China in 1924. Three beautiful examples are given which appeared in ‘Fireflies’ also.



*Feathers lying in the dust
have forgotten their sky.*

*In the swelling pride of itself
The bubble doubts the truth of the sea
And laughs and bursts into emptiness.*

*The lonely light of the sky comes through the window
And borrows the music of joy and sadness from my life.*

'Sphulinga' (spark) in Bangla was published in 1946, after the poet's demise. The title of this book was drawn from the first poems in both 'Lekhan' and 'Fireflies'

*My fancies are fireflies
specks of living light
twinkling in the dark.*

The editor of his English Writings has informed us that many more epigrammatic writings of Tagore have been collected in Rabindra Biksha, titled 'Tukro Lekha' and short autobiographical poems. The fact is he was used to writing images from nature in different ways. We may cite for example his book, 'Sahaj Paath', or easy reading, done in rhythmic pattern for the students as lessens. From such poems groups of three lines may easily be taken out to construct number of haiku.

References:

- 1 Rabindranath Tagore. Japan yatri. Kolkata; Visvsabharati. Collected Works of Rabindranath. Volume.10. p.423
- 2 Krishna Kripalani. Rabindranath Tagore: A biography. p. 256- as quoted in 'The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore'. New Delhi; Sahitya Akademi. Vol-1. p. 616



Was Rabindranath influenced by the short poems of Nishikanta?

The Haiku like short verses of Rabindranath Tagore were written in both Bangla and English and was translated from one to the other. He wrote them both before and after his visit to Japan. In 1916 Tagore visited Japan and was reverentially welcomed. Afterwards he wrote a travelogue with details of life and culture there as he perceived. He profusely praised Japan and Japanese people. Tagore was attracted by their tradition of haiku though he did not imitate haiku. He did not write any haiku but introduced it in India for the first time through his travelogue.

Five books of Tagore, containing short verses in original Bangla and English and those translated from one language to the other exist though it is not known which language was the medium of creation of the originals of many such poems. Of them 'Kanika' in Bangla, meaning fragments, was published first in 1899. 'Stray Bird' was published in the year of poet's visit to Japan, 1916. 'Lekhan' was first published in poet's own handwriting in 1926 from Hungary. The editor of his English Writings has noted that the book contains 420 short verses of which 72 are in English and 48 are in Bangla whereas 150 poems are in both the languages. A considerable portion of the English part of the book was reproduced in another book, 'Fireflies' published in 1928 containing 256 verses. In his introduction to 'Lekahan' the poet wrote, "The lines in the following pages had their origin in China and Japan where the author was asked for his writings on fans or pieces of silk." He visited China in 1924.

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The editor of his English Writings has informed us that many more epigrammatic writings of Tagore have been collected in 'Rabindra Biksha', titled 'Tukro Lekha' with other short autobiographical poems.

Born in 1909, Nishikanta Roy Chowdhury lost his mother at a very early age and then lost his father after a few years. He was brought up at Poet Rabindranath's abode and institution at Shantiniketan in Bolepur District of West Bengal. Nishikanta means moon and he was fond of writing poems, so Tagore affectionately called him Chand kabi or moon-poet. Full of conceits, Nishikanta often maneuvered to outwit his elders in many ways to drop out from school or to find time and place for writing poems. He was full of humour but innocent with a philosophical bent of mind. He was famous for his greed. He immensely loved delicious foods and relished them.

The great Tagore was before his eyes to influence him as a poet. Tagore took much interest in him and often asked for his small exercise book where he experimented with rhymes and rhythms.

Nishikanta wrote, among other types, short verses recording the common affairs and common talks between men and women, about the nature and surroundings. He gave a common title to such poems, 'Tukri' or wicker basket as he would fill it up with such verses. Introducing the subject he wrote,

*Markets are full of uproar
for the whole day.
I move about to collect talks
to load my wicker basket.*

At that time it was rumoured that girl students often avoided him lest they might be caught in his poem. Tagore changed, amended



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many such verses and arranged for their publication in 'Bichitra', a renowned Bangla magazine of 1931-32. Afterwards he regretted for having changed and altered much of the originals. Still, many originals remained.

Stories, incidents, scenes as they happen, occur or are seen around us, were loaded in his basket. Some such poems in their originals, of near haiku length with titles, are given below-

Tricoloured picture

*As far as I can see
the field is lush green;
In it moves the bulky idle cow,
a rook sits on its back,
jet black.*

The touch of colour

*The Sun sets under the breast of the dark pond
That sunk colour blooms as lotus.*

Lotus Hand

*Your fingers are like grapes full of juice!
will you place your hands on mine
to read your palm-line?*

Nishikanta the painter was a student of Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose in Shantiniketan. He became an accomplished poet and painter. His poems in later years, lyrical and devotional, have been highly esteemed by many. Though he was not a singer, his lyrics were tuned to music mostly by Dilip Kumar Roy who sang and recorded them in discs. Nishikanta, the sadhak-poet of Pondicherry, must have a place in the history of Bangla literature; as a creator of short verses, spiritual poems and devotional songs. He developed his poetry further, specially the devotional poetry, after his settlement in Pondicherry. Living with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Nishikanta became their disciple and was guided by them on the path of yoga and poetry. Sri Aurobindo commended



some of his poems and translated a few. Rabindranath also commended many of his poems.

Tagore's short verses were published from 1899 onward, as we have seen. He wrote series of stories in poems, both long and short, at different times. He had affectionate relationship with Nishikanta, who later in his life moved to Pondicherry. Tagore experimented in all genres of poems, introducing prose poems in Bangla. Nishikanta began writing short poems and others much later than his Gurudev. Tagore had created haiku like short verses long before Nishikanta began writing his 'Tukri' poems.

The difference between the two poets' short verses are that while Tagore's earlier poems were epigrammatic and later ones were influenced by the present, haiku like, but they too contained general and philosophic ideas and statements, sometimes with some abstractions, Nishikanta's poems were all based on current events, the images of the passing events with men and women as the main characters, enjoying the moments, mostly bigger than haiku length. He never tried to write haiku of poems or any of the the Japanese short verse forms.

Poets are influenced by poets. Nishikanta had poet Rabindranath before him from his childhood to be easily influenced. Even Rabindranath might have been influenced by a few ideas and words of Nishikanta, his student. But it can not be said that Tagore imitated Tukri to create his short verses. Truth is far from this.

Notes

All the Bangla poems of Nishikanta have been translated by us.

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- 1 *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi; Sahitya Akademi. Reprint- 2004
- 2 *Dalia Sarkar. Kavi Nishikanta*. Kolkata; Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1996



Finite or Infinite: A Haiku Point

The best of them come to us out of the moment in an insight so right, yet so beyond our ordinary habitual perception, as to dumb-found us. We find ourselves saying more than we mean and more than we know. (Zen and the Art of Haiku- Ken Jones)

Haiku is one of the tiniest poems but it is at the centre of one of the biggest controversies over its contents and forms. Though very light, haiku may attract a heavy supportive audience. Originating in Japan, written in one line usually but having three feet of 5+7+5 syllables, it is picturesque. Actually they are not syllables in Japanese but beats. Spreading its light wings it has flown over many other countries including India. Winning the heart of many, it is growing in popularity.

Besides the Japanese, large numbers of poets world wide including in India, are writing haiku in English and other regional languages. Born to die soon, they will continue to be born to give sparks of joy to readers. They may also conceal in their frail heart profound ideas or high philosophies, often born out of deep meditation. Short but beautiful, many times such poems keep a mark in the reader's heart.

After visiting Japan in 1916, Tagore introduced it to Indian poetry lovers through a now-very-famous haiku of Basho- 'Old pond/ Frog's leap/ Sound of water.'

"Enough, nothing is required. Enough for the mind's eye of Japanese reader", he explained further in praise of it- "This tendency to economise one's expression may be found in their poems also. Three lines are enough for their poet and reader. And for this I have not found here anyone singing on the road. Their hearts do not make a sound like waterfall but are silent like water in a tank. However



much of their poems I have seen so far, all are picturesque, not lyrics. Emotional burning of the heart tends to vital lavishness. They do not so spend. Their expression is limited to the feeling of beauty. . . . For this only three lines satisfy them and it does not break the peace of their imagination.”¹

The first part of the ancient Japanese verse Renga was Hokku which later became Haiku. It has been defined by Shasei- Shasei is the principle of “sketching from life” in a haiku as especially advocated by Shiki. The idea is that, it is said, a haiku should be descriptive of a scene rather than be about abstractions or thoughts on the scene. Furthermore, to be true to a scene, most haiku should be written from actual memory (which may distort an element of the scene), directly experienced as opposed to imagined scenes. Further, haiku should preferably be written while directly observing a scene and not generally from memory.

No importance is given to rhyming but haiku too is a poem and poems usually rhyme, directly or indirectly. Rhythms are found very often though some modern haiku exponents have ridiculed rhyming.

Some modern haijins (haiku poets) write with minimum punctuation though kire-ji is an essential part of haiku as it divides two different flows of ideas or pictures, creating a special haiku point. They do not follow the traditional form of 5+7+5 syllabic pattern as they say that the system of syllables in Japanese language does not conform to other languages like English. So they take the freedom of composing a haiku with lesser syllables usually though they exceed the limit sometimes in some feet. And that becomes a rigid rule for them, not to conform to the traditional syllabic pattern. The freedom lovers are very meticulous about keeping and enlarging the stock of kigo or seasonal words as Japanese haiku are usually on Nature, they say. Haiku on human nature or relationship or



of any other theme is called Senryu. But we find that poets write large number of haiku without alluding to Nature or Season. Take for example the haiku of Basho referred earlier. The frog’s leap may not relate to any particular season though it may more happen during rains in our country.

The thing is, like religion the proponents and exponents of a genre of poetry or anything like that, formulates some rules while ignoring the existing ones, thereby creating another system within the system. If the Japanese syllables are different the principle remains the same. 5+7+5 syllabic foot could be written in English or in other languages too. And many are maintaining such pattern which is called **Vanguard** haiku by some.

I accept the logic that without using the capital letters the haiku seems lighter and with little punctuation, without a stop at the end, it seems to give it a sense of lightness, as if flying through the eternity. Away from the tradition the New Style haiku has been named **Shintai Haiku**. Many are the practitioners of it.

But it is to be admitted that with capital letters, punctuation and a definite syllabic pattern also the haiku may sometimes satisfy us though the rigid rule sometimes hampers the easy and spontaneous flow of the poem. But the present day experts seem to create their own rule, declared or undeclared; suggesting and demanding changes in some words, some punctuation, eliminating some of them to suit their notions, which are many times subjective.

Some of the Indian practitioners of such haiku are- Kala Ramesh, Angelee Deodhar, Vidur Jyoti, K. Ramesh, R. Samal, Rohini gupta, A. Thiagarajan, Narayanan Raghunathan, Shyam Santhanam, Parimala Rao and Malini Rao. Some haiku practitioners abroad are, Susumu Takiguchi, John Daleidon, Karina Klesko, Sondra Ball (recently died), Danis Garrison, Stanford Forrester, Dr.



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Gabi Gerve, Patricia Prime, to name a few among many more learned friends to be named, really. Haiku and poems of the similar genres have helped haijins to form a world wide family.

Some are very particular about the traditions like Mohammed Fakhruddin and Kazuyoshi Ikeda. Many more poets still write in the same pattern, the vanguard haiku, like Ram Sharma and others who write in the Poets International, edited by Dr. Mohammed Fakhruddin. Some other magazines and ezines too strictly follow the syllabic count as in the original Japanese haiku. Haiku with lesser syllabic count is called zen poem by the 'Poets International'.

On the whole a haiku should be light and picturesque in all sense. So didactic or pedagogic lines may not suit the haiku mood. In my opinion Basho's famous frog story was rendered better by another master, Issa. Do the Japanese like the frogs more?

*even in the well bucket
croaking all night. . .
a frog*

The leap of the Basho's frog, a finite thing, becomes infinite in Issa.

Let us see another poem-

*Smoke whirls
After the passage of a train.
Young foliage.*

(Shiki)

Though smoke too vanishes, the metaphoric use of the young foliage remains permanently before our eyes. I do not know if the master used the capital letters at the beginning of each line. But it matters little. Some hold the view that no ornament can be used in haiku. Their structure of fine haiku is like a quiz sometimes. Some



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of them tend to become minimalist; one or two words in a line. No rhyming is their stricture. No ears for rhythm!

Let us see two more haiku by the Haiku master Issa. And they rhyme!

*rising to the blue sky
baby sparrow's
first cry

fleeing the bees
the Monkey's restless
eyes*

Mohammed Fakhruddin always rhymes his haiku. And they are traditional or vanguard haiku. His haiku, when on Nature, are better. Here is one-

*A star appeared,
On dark-blue canvas above:
Then disappeared.*

No strict rules. It may be written differently. No water-tight compartments. No fight. Let those who feel that they are the best and finest, remain so. Let editors decide about their magazines and the ways of expression in it. All depends on the test if it is a poem. Let the poetry lovers judge the poetry in a poem rather than the experts, as always.

When all controversies are over, only the poetry remains; haiku too is poetry.

Reference:

- 1 Rabindranath Tagore. Japan yatri. Kolkata; Visvsabharati. Collected Works of Rabindranath. Volume.10. p.423



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