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## **R.K.Singh: Expanding the Domain of Indian English Haiku**

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**Abstract:** Within no time, Indian poets have broadened the haiku poetic form and made it easily accessible with the help of technology. R.K. Singh (working in this genre for almost two decades) stands prominent with his good number of haiku anthologies in English. He gives a new dimension to haiku practice in India with his free style of writing. Singh's style of expression, the images created to communicate his thoughts and cultural messages in Indian context show how haiku fits in English language and culture significantly. Thus, the article is an evaluation of Singh's poetic pattern reflected by maintaining the haiku sequence within the haiku conventions when analyzed pragmatically.

**Keywords:** Indian English poetry, haiku genre, cultural messages, Indian context, poetic pattern, haiku conventions, pragmatics.

The poetic form and style of haiku shows a sudden spurt in India almost parallel to technological advancement. More and more people with a variety of professional background have been trying their hands in communicating their brief sensuous experience in this genre of Japanese poetry. As Thomas B. Robert writes:

Writing haiku is a process of utilizing a modicum of words to promote an intimate connection with our direct experience. Just as wood is to fire, the words in haiku are consumed in the process of creating the experience to which the words refer. The fashion in which words are used in Haiku is unique in that they provide a vehicle to enrich observation and subsequently communicate that observation. (201)

Thus, haiku being a linguistic creativity with the ability to connect is the key mechanism that triggers the reader's involvement. The intense compression and compactness (within 17 or less syllables) of imagistic language have kept the long-winded poems out of the limelight. The decline in the reading habits of long poems in the fast-paced world owes to the multiple layers of meanings that get unfolded over a few readings. Moreover, long poems often grapple with narratives, take time to read, and at times appear imperfect. Surprisingly, this decline is an offshoot of technological advancement as people spend more time reading online. The expansion of internet facility has enabled the poets to get together from various parts of the world, either independently or under the auspices of a larger haiku group, to study and practice haiku. There are several haiku sites which are quick, easy and convenient to use; which are no less than fully endorsed encyclopedia-like sources.

Viewed in this perspective, the Indian English haiku scene during the last 25 years has a dominating presence of poets such as Angelee Deodhar, Dwarkanath H. Kabadi, I.H. Rizvi, D.C. Chambial, Vishnu P. Kapoor, Narayan Raghunathan, Kanwar Dinesh Singh, Urmila Kaul, R.K. Singh, Kala Ramesh, Ramesh K, VidhurJyoti, Radhey Shiam, etc. Among them, R.K. Singh has come to the prominence with his haiku anthologies namely *Every Stone Drop Pebble* (1999), *Peddling Dreams* (English/Italian, 2003), *The River Returns* (2006), *Sense & Silence: Collected Poems* (2010), *New and Selected Poems: Tanka and Haiku* (2012), and *I Am No Jesus and Other Selected Poems: Tanka and Haiku* (English/Crimean Tatar, 2014). He has his official websites, <http://rksinghpoet.blogspot.in/> and

<http://rksingh.blogspot.in/2013/07/haiku-directory-haiku-personal-blogs.html> to promote and protect his work and broaden the possibility of a rich array of haiku poetic style. Singh has tried to concretize the haiku images of self-effacing nature; oriented haiku with subjective, surreal and mythic elements, the emergent social and political consciousness, validating and exemplifying haiku practices in India.

As sensitivity to seasonal change is an important part of Japan's native culture, Singh incorporates this sensitivity in the seasonal festival and activities of his own country. His use of language drawn in Indian context is evident from the haiku analyzed below:

Awaits the sunrise  
in chilly Ganges  
a nude worshipper (Singh 2006, 88)

A native of Uttar Pradesh, a place of ancient and traditional festivals, and living in Bihar for about four decades, the poet captures the fervor of 'Chhat Puja', an Indian thanks-giving festival dedicated to Sun god. He projects the devotees paying obeisance to the sun. The word 'awaits' is the waiting for the sun to rise which is perceived as the co-creator and sustainer of life on earth. It also connotes the common belief among the Hindus that their wishes are always granted by observing Chhat Puja. 'Sunrise' suggests the sun rays that blends with the aura to enrich the receptiveness of cosmic energy. The cosmic energy imbibed through the eyes at sun-rise heals, elevates and transforms the human body. In the second line, the adjective 'chilly' adds to the seasonal reference. Chhat Puja falls typically in the months of October or November, celebrated on the sixth day after Diwali, during the winter months in India. Winter is the usual festive season in North India. He makes 'Ganges' as a kigo which is the most sacred and national river of India as well as the powerful hub for religious activities. The Hindus believe that the rituals performed by the river Ganga multiply their blessedness. Thus, the phrase 'chilly Ganges' connotes the true spirit of spiritualism. During the festival, hordes of women and men observing fast stand in waist deep water with closed eyes and folded hands praying for wellbeing, prosperity and progress. This ardent faith helps them to

sustain the chilliness of water. Lastly, the phrase ‘nude worshipper’ portrays men/women who are not completely naked but their bodies arouse uplifting thoughts and emotions. The adjective ‘nude’ adds a positive spiritual sense and not a negative sense of nakedness. The word ‘nude’ stands from complete nakedness to usual body covering (women in simple sari and men in dhotis) which is a lifestyle component justifying the practice of asceticism for spiritual and physical purification in Hindu way of life. Thus, the poet while experiencing and enjoying the splendor of Chhat festival attributes a sensuous presentation of the local culture.

We get another example of an Indian festival in which moon rise is worshipped. He writes:

A thin fog  
rides the wintry moon  
rising slowly (Singh 2006, 46)

The haiku refers to the ‘moon rise’ during the winter months for the rituals of ‘Karva Chauth’, a festival in North India. The kigo ‘moon’ describes the keen observation of the poet. The phrase ‘thin fog’ denotes the seasonal reference. Fog, which often forms in winter night, reduces the general visibility. However, the adjective ‘thin’ shows the little thickness of fog. The festival is generally observed on the full moon day in the months of October or November, Indian winter months. In the second line the verb ‘ride’ shows how the fog controls the movement of full moon in winter. Therefore, the poet refers to the moon as ‘wintry moon’ suggesting the ‘Seasonal Full Moon.’ The exceptional thing about this festival is again the arduous observance of fast by the women for their husbands’ long life without taking a draught of water before the moon rise. With the mount of full moon, the women break their fast. Therefore, they eagerly wait for the moon to finish up the rituals. Meanwhile, the poet paints the playful act of moon with the phrase ‘rising slowly’ which suggests that the moon seems to play hide and seek with the waiting women. This sounds similar to what the Muslims do on Eid. The use of the adjective before the words ‘fog’ and ‘moon’ and the adverb ‘slowly’ after ‘rising’ evokes emotive responses.

This shows how the poet fixes his words comfortably in his English haiku and within the haiku conventions.

Singh's haiku is an expression of a visionary moment and an effective mode of communication in its extreme brevity. The kigo used within the words and the exalted feelings of the language in a haiku constitute the system of signs and emotive signals to the reader. The visual scene with literary references heightening the image's mood and cultural meaning is well depicted in yet another haiku:

Autumn's mellow mist:  
none available to clean  
the carpet of leaves (Singh 2006, 46)

The haiku echoes the transitional season, i.e. autumn when the temperature gradually decreases. The poet makes 'mellow mist' as the seasonal image to harness the power of season and give deeper meaning. The adjective 'mellow' describes the reddish color of mist that hovers in the sky bringing in the winds. It is also called the 'fall season' that makes the plant leaves with reddish tinge to fall away covering the floor surface as a 'carpet' and paving the way for further growth. The use of colon (punctuation mark) is an implied pause that allows making an internal relationship between his contrasting ideas and images woven into one single image. The images are the 'mellow mist' and the 'carpet of leaves' and the ideas is about 'the absence of women/men/children' in the house and the 'harvesting season' in India. 'None' here symbolizes women/men/children to clean the house courtyard which is covered with the fallen leaves.

The poet highlights the standard beliefs and values of Indian mythology according to which sweeping the house in the morning is related to goddess Lakshmi who adores cleanliness and removes negativity from the house. Moreover, the concept of 'harvesting season' is implied as the season provides ideal conditions for harvesting crops, fruits and vegetables. In India, planting is done in spring season and harvesting in autumn season. Harvesting is the most labor extensive activity for the farmers and family members. The women as well as

children join their men on the field as agriculture is the only means of their earning. Written in 5-7-5 format and refined with his aesthetic sensibility, Singh's haiku is a border between abstract and concrete expressions. This creates a mystical quality.

Singh's style of haiku composition incorporates keywords that indicate all living things – human beings themselves and the cultures created by human beings. They are examples of senryu. The Haiku Society of America defines senryu as: "A senryu is a poem structurally similar to haiku that highlights the foibles of human nature, usually in a humorous or satiric way" (Haiku Society of America). Contrary to this, explaining his haiku style, Singh states: "Now I do not adhere to the 5-7-5 syllables nor do I make any difference between haiku and senryu" (Dominic 2014). A close reading of his haiku shows that creating haiku for him is much like an inspiration that depends upon the degree of sophistication in relation to his own sources for his haiku images. For example:

With her saree  
hitched up between the legs  
my wife in bed (Singh 2006, 48)

Saree is one of the oldest forms of clothing for Indian women. It shows their modesty, grace and culture. However, the haiku ironically evokes an erotic picture of Saree that is so deeply ingrained in Indian ethnicity. His wife appears more dazzling to him in Saree which seems to turn him on. The verb 'hitched up' shows her unwillingness or reticence, or resistance to the desire of sex. The visual image of Saree hitched up between the legs adds to an erotic sense of Saree, here used to protect the part. R.K. Singh creates haiku out of ordinary incidents, situations and events that one encounter in day to day life. He observes a situation, perceives it and describes it in such a way that it immediately assumes his urge to achieve harmony between concept and medium, between what is said and how it is to be said.

Singh further shows the portrayal of action in images that leads to a meaning and appears visual:

Knitting silence  
my wife on the bench  
after lunch (Singh 2006, 57)

The poet describes his wife's loneliness that she experiences in her dwelling. With the verb 'knitting' the poet suggests the indispensable urge of his wife for a conversation. This conversation can be inferred as 'gossip' which is often the favorite recreation and pastime. 'Silence' is ironically pointed to a woman's tendency to get involved in gossip to pass time. Gossip is a sort of pleasurable behavior for the woman who is alone all day and craves for an adult conversation, or has worries which she must share with someone. The noun 'bench' adds to the context referring to the benches in the park where one often visits to relax or meet someone to talk to. She is more likely to complain about other women, their weight gain, their children, their sex lives, and their bond with their mother-in-law, etc. That is how she seems to be planning quietly or 'knitting' in silence. The phrase 'after lunch' indicates the free time which is a kind of relief to her from her mundane routine. The poet satirizes the whole point of gossip which is to add two and two to make five.

He composes most scathing of all personal satire when he images the declining level of intellectual activities:

Reshuffling the shelves  
it's only dust in alleys  
sneezing scholarship (Singh 1997, 107)

With the verb 'reshuffling' or rearranging the book shelves, the poet hints at the irony of shifting dust covered books that results in allergic sneezing rather than expanding knowledge. The phrase 'dust in alleys' suggests that the books now molder in dust and damp metaphorically degenerate scholarship. There is no sharing of knowledge in the isolation of 'alleys'. There is a tendency to forget the facts and events over time; it is dust covered. For most of us, after we graduate from high school or college, our pursuit of new knowledge bottoms out over time. The poet ironically states that his knowledge makes him feel



uncomfortable. He seems to believe that the development of knowledge, what was the panacea for all problems to man, has pushed wisdom aside. With this generalization, the poet in a confessional mode communicates that the consequences of our wisdom-less knowledge now threatens our happiness, welfare and survival.

Meanwhile, interpreted in another way, he even seems to hint at the recent technological revolution which has adversely affected the value of books and altered the reading practices. Internet has become the World Bank of information covering almost every field of knowledge. Even the poet finds himself in the grip of this text-saturated world via his personal computing device. With the advent of internet and more recently user generated content developer; knowledge via printed books is beginning to slowly lose its value. Within his three lines, the poet looks for ways to squeeze the maximum meaning and feeling. Jim Kacian in his essay “The Use of Language in Haiku” writes: “Haiku is the poetry of a real. That is, it is the poetry that seeks to convey as clearly as possible the actual experience so that the reader may come to find the same experience in himself, and therefore share the insight which the experience prompted” (Kacian).

Singh visualizes his life experiences in an ironical way while watching and observing a weaver bird:

Weaving its nest  
grass blade by grass blade  
R K Singh (Singh 2006, 99)

In an ironic self-portrayal, he compares himself to the weaver bird. The phrase ‘weaving its nest’ refers to the weaver bird which is noted for its nest building techniques using grass stems and other plant fibers to protect eggs and nestlings from predators and adverse weather. The phrase ‘grass blade by grass blade’ suggests the typical technique of tearing the blade of grass lengthwise by biting through the one edge of the grass blade. As the male weaver bird is responsible for building nest, working very hard to woo a mate and to house the yet to-be-born chicks, the poet talks about his haiku making, slowly and steadily. The

poet realizes his potential to deal with life's difficulty patiently like the birds. The simple language shows the poet's perception and expression of his own self possibly proving what Professor Michael F. Mara has written: "the power of poetic language, thus, resides in its ability to say something by not saying it, or to say it by pointing at something else, or even by its indicating the opposite of what the poet intends to say" (Mara 2010, 76).

As a vehement critic of fundamentalism, Singh's biting satire is directed at the religious orthodoxy in the haiku below:

Setting ablaze  
Muslim houses and children  
Seeker's of Ram (Singh 2006, 63)

The poet denounces the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and their article of faith. The phrase 'seekers of Ram' perhaps refers to the 'Bajrang Dal', a Hindu youth wing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad in India. Though their official slogan pronounces a belief: "in validity of all religions and respect for all human beings irrespective of caste, color and religion- 'Aatmastvat Sarva Bhuteshu'," (HinduOrganizations.org) in actual practice they demonstrate hostility to people who are not Hindu. They are committed to building a temple of Sri Ram in Ayodhya. But, ironically, they indulge in violence and burn houses and places of worship of Muslims and Christians as reported in the newspapers from time to time. The shock agitates the poet and he forebodes the consequences of the socio-religious schism and mocks at the false principles of all those extremists who seek 'Ram' by killing the followers of other religions. He seems to justify what Marx stated about religion: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of people" (Marx).

Analyzing his haiku pragmatically helps to dig for the hidden meanings in his free style haiku. Gradually, the reader understands the new ideas and feelings that he talks about in Indian culture. The symbolic and the imagistic language gives an access to the readers

about the way the poet relates them and the direct presentation of things, his experiences and the exploration of tone. His haiku style justifies what Michael Dylan Welch says in his essay “Ten Ways to Improve Your Poetry with Haiku”: “Description may imply certain things but implication is not the same as inference...The poet may imply something while the reader may infer something. Therefore, it is effective for the poet to imply and central to the enjoyment of poetry, particularly haiku for the reader to infer, to figure something out based on the hints in the poem” (Welch). Thus, Singh’s poetic communication through his haiku gets enhanced with his language knowledge which he utilizes to project his skills of observation and the image evoking words to express that observation.

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