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Haiku¹ & Women

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Haiku was borne in Meiji (1868-). During Meiji, there was almost no existence of female haikai (haiku poet). At Taisho 2nd (1913), Takahama Kyoshi (1874-1959) firstly introduced a column named “Hujin Jikkushu” in his magazine *Hototogisu* for the female poets, that allowed a chance for the women to submit their haiku works. Having said that, female poets were not in fact attending any haiku gatherings as men did but just followed the themes set and circulated by the editors. It was because at that time ladies in good family were not allowed to go out without any companions, they could only get permission to go out for their family’s matters but absolutely not for any personal excuses.

As a result these women’s works were unavoidably developed from their daily family lives therefore they were ridiculed as “kitchen haiku.” Frankly speaking, “kitchen haiku” was not really a disparaging term at the beginning; it described the fact that female poets were unable to get their poet ideas freely around thus majority of their poet situations were based on their family’s experiences but afterwards, it turned into the implication of “nonsense or worthless ladies’ works”.

It is commented that *tanka*² is more suitable for women but not haiku. The reason is that because it is allowed to express directly the feelings in *tanka*, but for haiku it is needed to hide such feelings behind the wordings. Women, who are weak in controlling their feelings, are therefore said unsuitable for haiku.

Starting from the middle of Taisho (1919-), there appeared successively a few great female poets, say, Hasegawa Kanajyo (1887-1969), Sugita Hisajyo (1890~1946), Takeshita Shizunojyo (1887-1951); Nakamura Teijyo (1900-1988), Hoshino Tatsuko (1903-1984), Hashimoto Takako (1899-1963), most of them are wives of good families yet the number of female poets was still far less than male poets.

The great jump of female poets happened in the 40th of Showa (1976-), there might be a few reasons for such, firstly, along the popularity of electrical appliances it brought the easiness for women to participate more in their social activities. Also, like Sugita Hisajyo, being a housewife who left doing housework but simply fascinated in haiku composing was once criticized inappropriate, but became socially accepted. This change in opinions to female was likely to be another reason.

Making haiku is definitely not able to support one’s living financially. It’s a matter of fact that haiku composing was just limited to a sense of leisure interest. Female treated haiku composing to be one of the basic skills, like piano, dancing, they need to equip to be qualified as being educated.

Different from other literatures, most of the haiku authors are women while they are also readers to other haiku poets. This unique way in supporting each other is a special element in the literacy of haiku. Certainly, it does not mean that we are denying any of the values of literacy of haiku.

Because of the growing popularity in women’s participation generally, it is natural that more and

more superb female poets are coming out. That explains why we have so many female haiku poets nowadays.

Looking back to the history of Japanese literacy, the period where female poets became active can be traced back to the time interval in between the age of Heian (794-1185) and the beginning of Kamakura (1185-1333), in which verse writing activities were limited to the nobles only. It does not mean that the female poets were extremely excellent at the moment, it was just because female poets have had their opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities among the nobles.

There must be a lot of talented women who, despite of having good competences, were unaware of their existences nor their surroundings, being totally neglected or ignored. By considering such fact, recently it makes me feel as a woman that how we should treasure our environments and surrounding experiences.

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¹ A Japanese short poem consisting of 17 syllables in the 5,7,5 combination. It always started with seasonal expression.

² A traditional Japanese poem containing five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7 and 7 syllables. Below a brief comparison between Tanka and Haiku

	Combination	Expression	Restrictions
Tanka	5,7,5,7,7 total 31 words	It's normal to express feelings directly	Relatively free
Haiku	5,7,5 total 17 words	A realistic expression but never put feelings on wordings directly	Must include seasonal wordings

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