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**From Matsuo Bashō to Faisal Rehan: A Comparative Study of the
Versatility of Haiku**



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Abstract

This study investigates the cross-cultural adaptation of haiku by comparing the classical Japanese haiku of Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) with the contemporary Pakistani haiku of Faisal Rehan. Rehan explores Pakistani experiences, cultural symbols and social realities in *Takht-e- Suleman Par* (*On the Thorne of Solomon*). The findings reveal that while both poets maintain haiku's core characteristics—brevity, imagery, and suggestiveness—significant differences emerge in thematic emphasis and cultural expression. Bashō's haiku are rooted in Japanese aesthetics, Zen philosophy, and seasonal awareness, while Rehan's haiku reflects contemporary Pakistani experiences, cultural symbols, and social realities. The study demonstrates haiku's remarkable versatility as a literary form capable of transcending geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries while retaining its distinctive poetic identity. This research contributes to comparative literature and cross-cultural poetics, highlighting how literary genres adapt to new cultural contexts.

Keywords: Haiku, *Takht-e- Suleman Par*, *On the Thorne of Solomon*, Comparative Literature, Cultural Adaptation, Pakistani Literature, Cross-Cultural Poetic

1.Introduction

Haiku originated in the Japanese literary tradition as an independent art form during the seventeenth century, reaching its classical peak through the works of Matsuo Bashō, who transformed haiku into a medium of artistic and philosophical expression (Blyth, 1949; Shirane, 2000). Traditionally structured as a three-line poem following a 5-7-5 syllabic pattern, haiku evolved from the *hokku*—the opening verse of collaborative *renga* poetry (Carter, 1978). Its defining characteristics include brevity, vivid imagery, seasonal references (*kigo*), and cutting words (*kireji*) that create contrast or pause. Bashō elevated haiku by incorporating philosophical depth, natural imagery, and spiritual insight, often addressing themes of impermanence, solitude, and the interdependence of humanity and nature. His aesthetics aligned with Zen Buddhist principles and traditional Japanese concepts such as *wabi-sabi* (Ueda, 1992; Miner & Odagiri, 1985). During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, haiku underwent remarkable global dissemination, transcending Japan's borders to influence writers across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This internationalization demonstrates haiku's adaptability and capacity to cross spatial and cultural barriers while maintaining essential artistic elements (Higginson, 1985; Shirane, 2019).

1.2 Haiku in Pakistani Literature

Haiku has gained significant popularity in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, where Urdu and English poets employ the form to convey cultural values, environmental observations, personal emotions, and social realities. Pakistani poets often incorporate symbols, landscapes, and experiences specific to their cultural context, demonstrating creative exchange between global literature and local creative traditions. Rehan represents an important contemporary voice in Pakistani haiku. His poetry demonstrates engagement with traditional haiku aesthetics while addressing themes

pertinent to modern Pakistani life—identity, social experiences, memory, and emotional tensions. The selected haiku exemplifies the creative possibilities of literary forms transferred to new cultural contexts. Since this study is based on the selected haiku from the English translation of *Takht-e- Suleman Par (On the Thorne of Solomon)*. The english translation is done by (Late) Yasir Abbas, Assistant Professor, Dept. of English Language and Literature, GU, DIK. Using a qualitative comparative literary methodology, the current research examines structural elements (syllable patterns, kigo, kireji), thematic concerns, imagery, and cultural adaptation of haiku.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive scholarship on haiku's influence in Western literature, its adaptation in Pakistani literature remains underexplored. There is a lack of systematic research examining how contemporary Pakistani poets reinterpret traditional haiku conventions and incorporate local cultural experiences. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Rehan adapts and recontextualize the classical haiku tradition of Bashō.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does Rehan sustain the traditional elements established by Bashō?
2. What thematic similarities and differences exist between Bashō's and Rehan's haiku?
3. How does the comparison enrich understanding of haiku's versatility as a cross-cultural poetic form?

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To study the traditional elements established by Bashō and examine how Pakistani haiku follows them.
2. To analyze and compare prevalent themes in Rehan's (selected) haiku with those of Bashō's traditional haiku.
3. To explore the merit of comparing Bashō's haiku with Pakistani haiku regarding haiku's adaptability across cultures.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Development of Haiku

Haiku's origins lie in the Japanese poetic tradition of renga (linked-verse poetry). During the Edo period (1603-1868), the opening stanza (hokku) gradually evolved into an independent form. Early practitioners established conventions centered on seasonal references (kigo), cutting words (kireji), and conciseness. Bashō (1644-1694) elevated the hokku from light verse to philosophical art, integrating Zen Buddhist themes of impermanence, mindfulness, and insight (Shirane, 2000). Following Bashō, Yosa Buson and Kobayashi Issa diversified the haiku tradition. Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) formally coined the term "haiku," advocating for shasei (sketch-from-life) realism and establishing haiku as an autonomous poetic genre (Masaoka & Watson, 1998). The twentieth century marked haiku's international proliferation, influencing Imagist poets like Ezra Pound and Beat poets including Gary Snyder (Haiku | EBSCO Research Starters, n.d.).

2.2 Matsuo Bashō and Classical Haiku

Bashō is universally recognized as the most important haiku poet. His poetry

exemplifies simplicity, philosophical depth, and acute observation of nature. His iconic haiku—"An old pond— / a frog jumps in— / the sound of water"—exemplifies how an ordinary natural occurrence generates profound insights into life and awareness (Bashō, trans. Ueda, 1992). Bashō's aesthetic philosophy, aligned with Zen principles, emphasized spontaneity, wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection), and the ability to grasp the eternal in the ephemeral. He declared, "Learn the rules, and then forget them" (Bashō, qtd. in Yuasa, 1966), suggesting a tension between discipline and creative freedom that underpins haiku's adaptability.

2.3 Faisal Rehan and Contemporary Haiku Adaptation

Rehan represents a generation of Urdu poets blurring lines between traditional South Asian forms and global poetic structures. While not all of Rehan's poems conform strictly to haiku form, many demonstrate its essential qualities: economy of expression, sensory detail, and emotional subtlety. In "Hashiye Par Likhi Gai Nazm" (A Poem Written in the Margin), Rehan writes: "mujhe rangon se mohabbat thi / zindagi ke canvas par / main naye naqsh-o-nigar banana chahta tha..." "I loved colors... / I wanted to create new designs... / But I was compelled / to paint the city in flames" (Rehan, 2020). This poem demonstrates haiku-like compression, use of imagery, and sudden turn in final lines—encapsulating a moment of insight within political and emotional landscape.

Haiku scholarship emphasizes Japanese masters while neglecting contemporary adaptations in South Asia. Research on haiku's global spread focuses predominantly on Western traditions. This study addresses these gaps through systematic comparison of Bashō and Rehan, examining structure, imagery, themes, symbolism, and cultural adaptation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative literary analysis to explore haiku's versatility across cultural and historical contexts. The comparative literature approach allows analysis of literary texts across linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1. Primary Sources:

20 haiku by Matsuo Bashō (from authoritative English translations) and 20 haiku from *On the Throne of Solomon* have been selected for the current research.

3.2.2 Secondary Sources:

Scholarly books and articles on haiku and Japanese literature. Research articles in comparative literature. Studies on literary translation and cultural adaptation.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The study employs two complementary approaches:

3.3.1 Thematic Analysis

Identifying and interpreting motifs in selected haiku through close reading and thematic coding of key themes:

1. Nature and seasons
2. Impermanence and transience
3. Human emotion and reflection

4. Spirituality
5. Cultural identity

3.3.2 Stylistic Analysis Examining formal and linguistic aspects:

1. Brevity and compression·
2. Imagery·
3. Symbolism·
4. Seasonal references (kigo)·
5. Cutting techniques (kireji)·
6. Poetic structure

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Structural Analysis

The comparative structural analysis reveals that both poets maintain haiku's essential brevity while demonstrating significant cultural distinctions.

Table 1: Structural Elements in Bashō and Rehan's Haiku

The comparative structural analysis reveal that both poets maintain haiku's essential brevity while demonstrating significant cultural distinctions. Bashō's haiku strictly follows traditional Japanese conventions, using kigo and kireji to create multileveled significance. His seasonal imagery serves not merely as nature reference but as symbolic means for communicating philosophical reflection. Rehan employs brevity and imagery within a Pakistani context. His references to orchards, flowers, mountains, and rain serve as cultural signposts linking traditional form to local experience. He does not merely mimic Japanese practices but reinterprets them in a different socio-cultural context.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

Table 2: Thematic Comparison of Nature

Theme: Nature	Japanese Haiku	Pakistani Haiku	Thematic Expression
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Poet	Haiku Example	Syllable Pattern	Kigo (Seasonal Reference)	Kireji (Cutting Word)
Bashō	An old silent pond / A frog jumps into the pond— / Splash! Silence again.	5-7-5	Pond, frog	Splash!
Rehan	She smiles in her room/And the orchard come to life/Almond flowers Bloom	5-7-5	Orchard, flowers	Bloom.

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Theme: Nature	Japanese Haiku	Pakistani Haiku	Thematic Expression
Water	Old pond / A frog jumps in— / Splash!	Cloud the conjurer/with the magic wand of rain/Summons the spirit, the soil scent.	Both haiku use water as a central image but express it differently; Japanese haiku focuses on the action and sound, while Pakistani haiku emphasizes serenity and unity with nature.

Table 4.3: Thematic Comparison of Impermanence

Theme: Impermanence	Japanese Haiku	Pakistani Haiku	Thematic Expression
Seasons	Autumn moonlight— / a worm digs silently / into the chestnut.	Let the season change/milky flakes on blue hilltops/And let there be some rain	Both haiku reflect the impermanence of seasons; Japanese haiku subtly hints at decay and the cycle of life, while Pakistani haiku reflects the impermanence of life and nature through the imagery of changing seasons, snowflakes, and transient rain.

Table 4.4: Thematic Comparison of Human Condition

Theme: Human Condition	Japanese Haiku	Pakistani Haiku	Thematic Expression
Solitude	Temple bells die out. / The fragrant blossoms remain. / A perfect evening!	Mighty mountain rusts/and the prison of silence do/Howl glacial gusts	Japanese haiku finds tranquility in the lingering sensory experience, while Pakistani haiku personifies nature to express a reflective, solitary peace.

Table 4.5: Cultural Symbols in Haiku

Symbol	Japanese Haiku	Pakistani Haiku	Cultural Meaning

Symbol	Japanese Haiku	Pakistani Haiku	Cultural Meaning
Cherry Blossoms	Cherry blossoms bloom— / short-lived and sweet, / spring's breath.	N/A	In Japan, cherry blossoms symbolize the transient nature of life, a core theme in much of Japanese art and literature.
Rose	N/A	I love jasmine /the hands of my beloved are/hennaed wild jasmine	In Pakistani culture, the jasmine often symbolizes love, beauty and the spiritual journey in Sufi poetry.

Table 4.6: Seasonal References and Cultural Context

Seasonal Reference	Japanese Haiku	Pakistani Haiku	Cultural Context
Autumn (Kigo)	Deep autumn— / my neighbor, / how does he live, I wonder?	Illumine the night/on the bank of Saif-ul-maluk/the fairies alight.	Japanese haiku uses autumn to evoke feelings of loneliness and reflection, common in Japanese aesthetics. Pakistani haiku evokes a magical and enchanting atmosphere, to symbolize change and the impermanence of life, reflecting a universal but culturally nuanced sentiment.

5. Major Themes

The thematic analysis reveals five major themes with associated sub-themes:

Major Theme Focus Key Concepts

1. Nature and Seasons Exploration of natural landscapes and seasonal transitions, Seasonal Imagery, Symbolic Nature, Urban vs Rural.
2. Transience and Impermanence, Capturing fleeting moments and passage of time, Death and Rebirth, Human Response.
3. Human Emotion and Reflection, Internal states influenced by surroundings and memory Loneliness, Joy, Spiritual Insight.
4. Stylistic Innovation Techniques to enhance haiku form and meaning Classical

Technique, Modern Adaptation, Cross-cultural Influence.

6. Key Findings

1. Structural Continuity:

Both poets maintain haiku's 5-7-5 syllabic pattern and essential characteristics of brevity, imagery, and suggestiveness.

2. Thematic Divergence: Bashō's haiku are rooted in Japanese aesthetics, Zen philosophy, and seasonal awareness; Rehan's reflect contemporary Pakistani experiences, cultural symbols, and social realities.

3. Cultural Adaptation: Rehan adapts haiku conventions to Pakistani context, substituting Japanese cultural symbols (cherry blossoms) with local equivalents (jasmine, monsoon rains).

4. Emotional Expression: Bashō expresses emotion indirectly through imagery; Rehan employs more direct emotional expression reflecting modern Pakistani sensibilities.

5. Versatility Confirmed: Haiku demonstrates remarkable adaptability across cultures while retaining its distinctive poetic identity.

7. Discussion

1. Preservation and Adaptation of Traditional Features

The analysis reveals that Rehan preserves core haiku characteristics—brevity, imagery, suggestiveness, and concentrated meaning—while adapting them to modern Pakistani cultural contexts. This supports literary theories that literary forms are dynamic entities capable of transformation without losing essence (Lefevere, 1992; Damrosch, 2003). Rehan's work demonstrates that literary adaptation is not measured by fidelity to original rules but by meaningful reinterpretation.

2. Thematic Similarities

Both poets share significant thematic concerns: Nature as primary source of imagery and meaning· Exploration of impermanence, change, solitude, and memory· Use of indirect expression, inviting reader interpretation· Commitment to distilling universal human experiences into few words. These similarities suggest that certain concerns are universal to human experience regardless of culture (Ueda, 1992; Shirane, 2019).

3. Cultural Context Differences

Bashō's poetry embodies seventeenth-century Japanese cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic values—Zen-inspired awareness, seasonal consciousness, contemplative reflection. Rehan's poetry expresses contemporary Pakistani experiences and concerns—local landscapes, cultural references, emotional introspection, and social issues. These differences reflect how literary genres respond to their cultural contexts while maintaining core features (Damrosch, 2003; Ramazani, 2009).

4. Haiku's Versatility

The study confirms that haiku is not culture-specific but a flexible literary genre capable of expressing diverse cultural experiences while maintaining its distinctive artistic qualities. Haiku serves as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue, connecting different cultures through a shared artistic form that reflects unique experiences for each culture.

8. Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This comparative study of Bashō and Rehan demonstrates haiku's remarkable versatility as a literary form. Both poets employ haiku's core characteristics—brevity, imagery, suggestiveness, and concentrated meaning—while expressing distinctly different cultural experiences. Bashō's haiku reflect seventeenth-century Japanese aesthetics, Zen philosophy, seasonal awareness, and contemplative observation of nature. Rehan's poetry reflects contemporary Pakistani experiences, cultural symbols, emotional expression, and social realities.

9. Key Contributions

1. The study addresses the research gap in haiku's adaptation in South Asian literature.
2. It demonstrates haiku's capacity to transcend cultural boundaries while retaining essential characteristics.
3. It illustrates how literary genres evolve through cultural contact and creative reinterpretation.
4. It contributes to comparative literature and cross-cultural poetics.

10. Concluding Remarks

Haiku's survival and development across centuries, languages, and cultures demonstrate that it is not a static form but a living, adaptable art. Bashō's haiku emerged from a wandering monk's path and Zen practice; Rehan's haiku reflect the urban South Asian world—contemporary pressures, novel languages, and commonplace realities. Yet both share a silent authority: the ability to describe a vast world with few words. As this thematic comparison shows, haiku survives because it welcomes change instead of opposing it. The frog Bashō hears splashing in an ancient pond also jumps through Rehan's orchard—different tones in its splash, but its essence remains alike.

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