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Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 33: R K Singh

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DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Haiku in Indian English Literature

- It has its origin in Japan, but it was adopted by many English as well as other Indian regional language poets.
- Both eastern and western world adopted this poetic form in some way.
- Generally, haiku poem is made up of 17 syllables, divided into 5-7-5 segments.
- In India, Tagore is considered to be the first Haiku poet.

Continued..

- In India many forms of poetry like *doha* and *chhand* were in practice.
- In 1948, the Marathi literary journal *Richa* brought out a special number of haiku with a long article by Shirish Pai, a renowned Marathi poet.
- Amrita Pritam translated some haiku poems the literary journal *Nagmani.*
- Sindhi poets gave haiku a new form. They modified the old Indian poetic form Doha. They took 11-13-11 *ma:tra* part of *doha* and called Sindhi haiku.

"A naughty Pipal
Laughing
mischievously
Inside the well."

Contd…

- Hindi poet, Agyeya, translated some haiku poems into Hindi.
- “Haiku is closest to our poetic sensibility or perhaps it is closer to us than to the West.” -Agyeya
- Haiku has been adopted in Bengali, Assamese, Gujarati, Sindhi, Kannada, and Hindi.
- Some great voices of Indian haiku include Tagore, T.V. Reddy, R.K.Singh, N.V. Subbaraman, Urmila Kaul, Mahashweta Chaturvedi, and others.

“Bird flew away
The leaf trembled
And then settled down.”
_ Agyeya

“The koels are singing
Why don't you also
speak O nasty crow!”

R K Singh

- ✓ Born on 31 December 1950 in Varanasi, India.
- ✓ Poet, critic, journalist, and reviewer.
- ✓ Worked as a journalist with the Press Trust of India, New Delhi
- ✓ He has authored more than 160 articles, 175 book reviews and 46 books, including 20 collections of poem.
- ✓ A prominent voice of Haiku and Tanka poems.
- ✓ Wrote many volumes on Haiku poetry.
- ✓ His poems have been translated into Chinese, French, Spanish, Serbian, Japanese, German, Italian , and others.

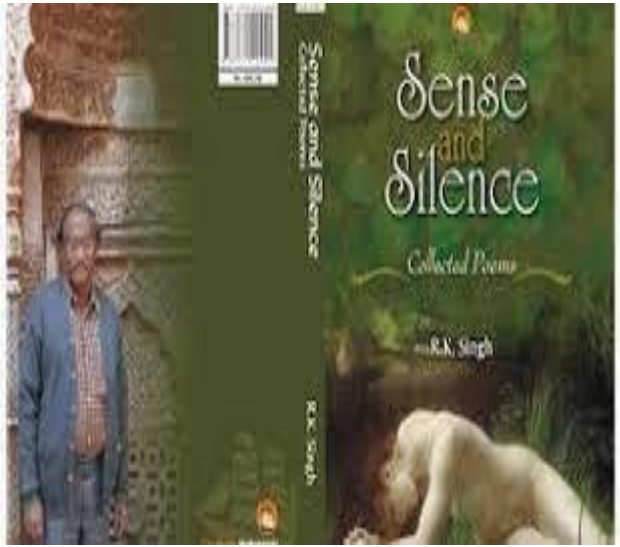
His Poetic Corpus

- *My Silence* (1985)
- *Memories Unmemoried* (1988)
- *Music Must Sound* (1990)
- *Flight of Phoenix* (1990)
- *I Do Not Question* (1994)
- *My Silence and Other Selected Poems : 1974-1994* (1996)
- *Above the Earth's Green* (1997)
- *Every Stone Drop Pebble* (with Catherine Mair & Patricia Prime, 1999)
- *Cover to Cover* (2002)
- *Peddling Dreams, Pacem in Terris* (haiku, English and Italian, 2003)



Contd…

- *Sexless Solitude and Other Poems (2009)*
- *Sense and Silence: Collected Poems (2010)*
- *New and Selected Poems Tanka and Haiku (2012)*
- *I Am No Jesus and Other Selected Poems, Tanka and Haiku (2014)*
- *You Can't Scent Me and Other Selected Poems (2016)*
- *There's No Paradise and Other Selected Poems (2019)*



Contd…

- *Tainted With Prayers/Contaminado con oraciones (English/Spanish, Traductor Joseph Berolo Ramos, Colombia: Editorial Ave Viajera SAS, Spanish Edition, Kindle, 2019).*
- *Silencio: Blanca Desconfianza: Silence: White Distrust (Spanish Edition, Spanish/English, Colombia: Editorial Ave Viajera SAS,(Kindle, 2021).*
- *A Lone Sparrow:Haiku Poems (English/Arabic, Tr. Boubaker Rouagha, ed. Mahmoud Al-Rajabi, Jordan: Haiku From All The World E-Book Publishers, calameo.com, 2021),*
- *Against The Waves: Selected Poems (New Delhi: Authors Press, 2021).*
- *Covid-19 And Surge of Silence/Kovid-19* Hem Sessízlík Tolkînî (English/Tatar, ed. and trans. Taner Murat Arsura, Constanta, Romania: Anticus Press, 2021).
- Silence: A White Distrust (English/Japanese, tr. Rika Inami, Japanese Edition, Kindle , 2021)
- *Changing Seasons: Collected Tanka and Haiku* (English/Arabic, ed. Mahmoud Al-Rajabi, Jordan: Haiku From All The World E-Book Publishers, calameo.com, 2021),

Some Important Lines

I am no Jesus
but I can feel the pains
of crucifixion

as a common man
suffer all what he suffered
play the same refrains

(*Sexless Solitude and Other Poems*)

I seek new strides
In each of your moves
New dreams in your eyes and thighs
....
each time I look at you
I see natural woman
The fount of poetry.

(*I Do Not Question*, p.41)

General Themes of His Poetry

- Nature
- Women
- Sexuality
- Culture and tradition
- Modern sensibility
- Indian myth, ritual, and religion
- Question of existence

Woman
is the measure
of all things: body, truth
love, spirit, God, society,
peace…."

(Above the Earth's Green)

"I write because I want to feel lighter, liberated or refreshed within. I write to seek a release from myself as much as from others; to feel free by unburdening myself in verses; to experience an inner balance, feeling, probing, sensing, recalling, or whatever." (R.K.Singh)

“The River Returns”

At the river
she folds her arms and legs
resting her head
upon the knees and sits
as an island (10)

When I wanted to change
seats my friend said she can
only if the door is locked
the light out and her moon
in another city (20)

My hand held out
In the dark remained empty
No one reached it
To give joy of
The meeting hands (39)

Ghosts rise to mate
In moonlight tear the tombs
Frighten with fingers
Rhino horns rock the centre
Granite sensation (39)

Roses await
Sun and wind to clear
The baleful fog:
I fear she’ll say no
To my love again (72)

One thousand miles
Travelling together
In tense silence
He and she contemplate
The next round of duel (111)

Ten Tankas

1
butterfly cushions
flutter the skirt
flame flickers
ground to whiteness
for her feast
2
in the park
seeing the green in her eyes
joy wells up:
she feels the silver blue
the leaves breathing her touch
3
looking for image
of divine on the wall
to pray or chant
a mantra or hymn in mind
she leans on him to kiss

4
in the air
I expected romance—
corona:
avoid her kiss
and breathing too
5
light switched off
for love sliding on
window pane
moon too shies away
behind the bare tree
6
intruding
the darkness of bedroom
a tree's silhouette:
she whispers its masked presence
and says no to making love

7
the power goes off
suddenly summer heat chokes
in bed sleepless she turns
undoing a hook or two
of her tight blouse

8
it's not ageing
but eternal delight
you under me
smooth belly, nude necking
slow stroking, parting flesh

9
short nights and long days
sleep loss rustles a friction
echoing in bed
the cycle of cravings
over and over again

10
in the white of night
sighs for supreme delight
steal tender pleasure
manipulating wetness
in bed unmask simple sin

“Peace in Sin”

I thought I'd locate you
in the dark lonely street
but I myself got lost

mind's mazy prompts
shocked me into nakedness
I never perceived

the misleading sun
the unreal reflections
the dumb show

dazzle my eyes
shades of terror in alleys
smell of treachery

at the crossroads
the selfish gene's tarots
of my random choices

in dim blue light
smiling breasts invite
autumn breeze

I chuckle to myself
hearing raps of inverse world
and peace in sin.

“At War”

…..In the ruins
searching her photo:
evening
Standing behind
the window bars observes
darkness in shapes
Awaits his son’s
phone call from the border;
dogs and cats wail
A dead voice
calling up at dawn:
drowsy eyes
Alone
on her bed rings
The cell phone

Characteristic Hallmark of Singh's Poetry

- Experiment with the style and theme
- Prefers speech rhythms over rhyme
- Use of enjambment and juxtaposition
- Philosophy of life at the core of his poetry
- Draws images from nature and surrounding

- "Most of the images in Singh's long poems are conventional, drawn from myth, ritual, and religion, nature and literature, and urban settings, with a small infusion of images and symbols which are synthetical or compounds of the conventional and the fabricated." (Rajni Singh)

Theme of Death

- Questions of existence and death have been discussed by great philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Aurobindo.
- R.K. Singh also delineates this theme in many of his poems.
- He takes a dig at the false notion of afterlife and rituals related to it.
- For him, death is a "metaphor for the meaninglessness, nothingness, falsehood, corruption, manipulation and consequent suffering of life." (Kumari & Singh)

"I don't fear death…..
but I fear I know
what life has been and could be
without fortuity." (*My Silence and Other Poems*)

Theme of Sexuality

- Explores this theme in a frank way in many of his poems.
- He has anti-dogmatic view of sex.
- For him, this should not be a taboo, instead a purifying force.

"Culture is not repression
but sublimation through expression

why do they police
art for lesbianism
homosexuality
*naked sex or blasphemy? (*Portraits We Fear to See*)*

- The poet discovers meaning in passion; and sex is interpreted as a liberating and purifying factor in Singh's poetic scheme. To that extent the poet exhibits anxiety for tradition and heritage." (P.C.K. Prem)

As a Poet

- ✓ R.K Singh may be regarded as an experimental poet of modern times.,
- ✓ Themes of women, nature, loneliness, alienation, existential search and sexuality dominate his poetry.
- ✓ Both the elements of carnality as well as spirituality are resent in his poems.
- ✓ He is a poet of modern sensibility who explores tradition but with a critical point of view.

From *Against the Waves*

Post-Election

They don't hear
the silent screams of
Millions

tired of misfortune
play games of convenience
innocent voters

sordid life –
Nation's destiny
heaven-fed

"Covid-19"

Punitive
corona viruslépreuse
some say it‟s invasion
the barbarian without

quarantined
I clear my throat
behind the face mask
breathe in unknown viruses
suffer new repressions

now lockdown
cut off life:
castration
Hugo said monasticism
resisting death
O

Contd…

“New Gods”
Meditation –
future uncertainties
beyond crisis

new strains, new virus
villains of the new order
peeking from windows

create new mantras
for life to continue
envision new gods

“Third Wave”
I don‟t recognize
the bright new star in the sky:
a beacon of hope
they say a new age begins
on earth the virus mutates

scaring millions
post-Christmas repeat events
no vaccination
could change astro-calendar
of universal revenge

remains of prayer
now wrapped in gift box, held up
shipping delays
no burial, no third day
total lockdown, here and there

Limitations of haiku and tanka

- “In fact, when I was in search of a ‘form’ for my poems, I discovered haiku and tanka nearer my aesthetics. I had already found ‘ brevity’ and haiku had provided ‘ texture’ to many of my regular free verse poems. Haiku and Tanka suit me because my poetic mood is short-lived, and I prefer to write short personal lyrics , now using short-long-short 3-liners or short-long-short –ling-long 5 liners with native contents and experience….

  One tends to be repetitive and slave to the form in their attempt to produce an excellent verse. In fact, compressed verse writing with limited focus may affect their regular poetry practices. while genuine haiku writing may be spiritually elevating, but slowly one may also end up in silence, with a long meditative, or dried up, imagination.”

from *Tainted With Prayers*

“Depression”

November morning
too many thorns to reach
the only rose
and the tormenting thought
that I am forsaken
if I die today
it won't matter to any
I have no worth
they all care for themselves
search nearest in curved space

Contd…

last night rain
paves way for a clear sky
this morning
the breeze is cool and the sun
adds a new hue to the spring

source of salvation
depository of sins
no cake cutting
in church promise of reaping
if I could sow recovery seed

a dark street
chaos on the road
fear delays
homeward move at nine
lumpens lie in wait

peeping through the fog
the sun feebly comforts
a sparrow's nest
built under the windowsill:
I hear a new-born crying

choking air
in a walled colony:
two tired pigeons
perch on overhead tank
whisper pity on us

when change comes
things change they say sight beyond sight
in the wealthy vacuum
all is well with limping days

Contd…

earthy body
and nightness of silence
fear in mirror
return to the river
echoing hollowed sound

wearied winter
each night bed a living grave:
drying breathing passage
and lonely shadows
delaying disaster

life is beautiful
when you enter another
body... mind
and become one
in each other
with foreign sound

I couldn’t be lasting poem
provisional body
nude smell and white distrust
play freedom in mounds of cloud

Critical Views on Singh's Poetry

- R.K. Singh is a realized soul and certainly his poetry will leave its footprints on the sands of times. (S.L. Peeran)
- "Singh's is not so much a poetry of memory, but is inevitably sparked by what he sees, hears, and feels around himself, it's his way of being faithful to the constantly evolving experience of life in a physical body." (Patricia Prime)
- "Singh is also concerned about man's existence and identity,: the existential crisis in a multilingual, multicultural, multi-religious, and plural society vis-à-vis the ethos of Indian society and inheritance." (P.C.K. Prem)

Summing up

half-fleshed faces
track from behind the window:
rawness of journey

little candles fail
to illumine the deity
or golden dome
in the valley darkness reigns
and god too awaits light

lying listless
on withered creeper
a golden bird (from *God too Awaits Light*)

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Thank You