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Faith in Japanese Poetry: An Islamic Interpretation of Morality in Matsuo Bashô's *Death Haiku*

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Abstract

Matsuo Bashô's *Death Haiku* is one of the most sorrowful yet beautifully created *Haiku* poems. The poet is a prominent *Haiku* master who played a significant role in the international growth of Haiku poetry. Bashō was a pious poet who often incorporated Buddhist themes into his literary works. Although religions vary, all religious doctrines call for morality. Nevertheless, there have been lots of criticisms and misconceptions about the stance of Islam on poetry. While some critics perceive Islam as a restrictive religion that prohibits all forms of poetry, research shows that all kinds of poetry aiming to develop a morally healthy society are acceptable in Islam. Therefore, this study sought to provide a systematic analysis of religious morality in Matsuo Bashō's *Death Haiku* from an Islamic viewpoint. The current study corroborates evidence from Quranic verses and *Hadith* (prophetic traditions) through an inductive-analytical technique to explore the elements of morality in the selected *Haiku* poetry. The analysis revealed that religious values entrenched in the selected poem can be brought close to Islamic viewpoints on spreading knowledge, good deeds, benevolence, and the purpose of life. The hidden meaning of the poem dramatizes Bashō's spiritual journey concerning morality in the literary world. By reinterpreting Bashō's Death Haiku through the lens of Islam, this study provides evidence that poetry is a potential platform to promote religious values rather than a dispiriting practice.

Keywords: Japanese poetry, Islam, Matsuo Bashô, religious morality

Introduction

Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694) was a prominent Japanese literary figure who played a significant role in the growth of *Haiku* poetry. *Haiku* is an unrhymed Japanese poetry form that advanced in the late 16th century when the reading and writing of poetry was a social requirement in Japanese culture (Yasuda, 2011; Burleson, 1998). Traditionally, *Haiku* is usually written in the present tense, composed in a 5-7-5 seventeen-syllable format, and focuses on a brief moment in time and a sense of enlightenment. This structure makes *Haiku* more accessible as opposed to longer and freestyle poems that are difficult to read or write. However, a *Haiku* poet needs to be able to incorporate deep meaning into a short and condensed expression (Nguyen & Roth, 2019). The poem typically explores the natural world and human condition using plain language (Stibbe, 2007).

A *Haiku* poem was formerly known as *Haikai*, a more extended version of the poem. Bashô contributed to the resurgence of *Haiku* by fusing thoughtful and emotional flair into *Haikai* in the 17th century and producing several poems. Its current name was given by Masaoka Shiki in the 19th century. As a result, *Haiku* subjects expanded beyond the natural themes. In the 20th century, *Haiku* began to be widely recognized and popular outside of Japan, including the English-speaking world (Iadonisi, 2005; Burleson, 1998). Despite changes that occurred over time, *Haiku* remains a means of expressing thought in a few possible words. Several *Haiku poems*, including Bashō's *Death Haiku*, have been translated into other

languages. However, *Haiku* poems are often considered complicated and hard to comprehend by mere reading or focusing on the literal meaning, despite their short length and simplicity.

According to Barnhill (1990), Bashō was a pious poet influenced by Buddhism. His works tend to highlight visits to holy places, and thus he is often called "one of the pilgrim poets of Japan" (p. 277). However, the poet's religious orientation seems complex and contrasts with some conservative understandings of Buddhism. This kind of religious complexity is a long and vital tradition in Japan, where individuals become "both religious and outside the conventional, sectarian religious groups" (p. 275). Bashō tends to incorporate several Buddhist themes into his literary works. In essence, elements of religiosity can be rooted in Bashō's poems. Although religions vary, all religious doctrines call for morality. Nevertheless, there have been lots of criticisms and misconceptions about the stance of Islam on poetry. While some critics perceive Islam as a restrictive religion that prohibits all forms of poetry, research shows that all kinds of poetry aiming to develop a morally healthy society are acceptable in Islam (Hasan, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, previous studies have not investigated how *Haiku* poetry relates to Islamic viewpoints. This gap invites an interpretive encounter between the two traditions. The present article accordingly reads the poet's final verse alongside Quranic and prophetic teaching, asking what moral vision the poem articulates and on what grounds that vision may legitimately be set beside an Islamic ethical framework.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Reading a seventeenth-century Japanese poem through Islamic ethical categories requires an explicit warrant, since the poet neither knew nor addressed the tradition invoked here. This study therefore situates itself within comparative theology as articulated by Clooney (2010), a mode of enquiry that reads across religious borders in order to learn from a second tradition without absorbing it into the first. On this model, the aim is not to establish that Bashō held Islamic beliefs, nor to claim historical transmission between the two traditions; it is to ask what becomes visible in each tradition when the two are held together. The parallels traced below are accordingly analogical rather than genealogical.

The interpretive movement itself follows Gadamer's (2004) account of understanding as a fusion of horizons. A reader always approaches a text from a determinate position, and meaning arises in the encounter between that position and the horizon of the work rather than in the recovery of authorial intention alone. Reading Bashō from a Muslim horizon is thus a disclosed possibility of the text rather than an imposition upon it, provided the reader's standpoint is declared, and the poem's own Zen-inflected context is respected. Islamic thought offers a complementary warrant: the Qur'an presents human difference as an invitation to mutual knowledge rather than mutual exclusion (Q49:13), which licenses the recognition of moral insight arising outside the tradition's own boundaries. Two constraints follow from this framework and govern the analysis. First, Buddhist and Islamic categories are not treated as interchangeable, and points of divergence are noted alongside points of convergence. Second, no interpretive weight is placed on any resemblance that cannot be grounded in the language of the poem itself.

Analytical Procedure

The poem is examined by means of a general inductive procedure, following the model set out by Thomas (2006), with Quranic verses and prophetic traditions serving as the interpretive reference points. First, a line-by-line analysis of Bashō's *Death Haiku* is performed based on content and context to identify the themes. This is because a logical process to ascertain themes is to look into both contextual and textual content (McKee, 2020). The themes are closely studied and explained based on Quranic verses and *Hadith*. Subsequently, categories are developed from multiple readings of the themes. The inductive-analytical approach aims at generating specific meanings through the analysis of raw textual data (Gasson, 2004). As described by Thomas (2006), the inductive approach "provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings" (p. 237). This approach helps to transform raw textual data into a summary form to generate valid outcomes. The general inductive approach provides an organized and straightforward method of generating findings. All Quranic passages are drawn from Khattab's (2016) English rendering, The Clear Quran, and all prophetic traditions are cited from the collections listed in the references.

Synopsis of Bashō's *Death Haiku*

The death poem authored by the infamous *Haiku* master, Matsuo Bashô, can be regarded as one of the most sorrowful yet beautifully created *Haiku* poems. Bashô wrote the death poem when he was suffering from stomach sickness. He presented the poem in 1694 to 60 of his students who had assembled around his deathbed in Osaka to bid him farewell. He died four days later at the age of 50 (Carter, 2011). As mentioned earlier, Bashô was one of the greatest and most well-known poets in Japanese literary history. He started his journey in the literary world during his childhood as a servant to Tōdō Yoshitada who trained him to compose poems in 5-7-5 syllable formats. According to Elborough (2022), Bashô ended his servant title in 1666 after the sudden death of Todo and traveled to Edo, which is now known as Tokyo, to study poetry in more depth. After completing his training, Bashō became a literature teacher to his young followers and went on to become a highly respected teacher in society. Hitherto, Bashô still felt dissatisfied with his life and decided to build a hut in the countryside to find inspiration to write more poems.

Bashô gradually acquired a reputation as a poet and critic, as most of his literary works were free from biased thoughts and entirely focused on the togetherness of the body. The poet is primarily a well-known Haiku poet internationally. He is recognized not only as a *Haiku* poet but also a master of Japanese prose, both *Haibun* (short pieces of poetic prose) and *Kiko* (travel literature)" (Barnhill, 1990, p. 274). The major theme of Bashō's *Death Haiku* is death. In this poem, Bashô talks about his condition of being "sick" during his life "journey" as a poet. The following is a translated version of Bashō's Death *Haiku*.

Sick on my journey
Only my dreams will wander
These desolate moors

Literary Interpretation

Precisely, literary devices are essential tools used by writers to create meaning, interest, and emotion in their pieces of writing (Safaei & Dastjerdi, 2017). These tools help readers understand and appreciate literary works. In particular, poetry is one of the most popular literary forms where literary devices are used in various poetic forms to demonstrate feelings such as pleasure, sadness, or pride depending on the circumstances (Pratiwi, Nababan & Djatmika, 2017; Sayakhan, 2019). The language used in poetry often goes beyond the literal meaning of words. In the first line of Bashō's death poem, the word "sick" is used to indicate the poet's health condition literally. However, the word also functions as organic imagery, that is, the rendering of an internal bodily sensation, and by extension operates as a symbol of Bashō's life being "cut short" since he died young due to sickness. Imagery denotes the representation of sense experience through language. It should be distinguished from symbolism, in which an image, object, or action signifies something beyond itself; an image may function symbolically, but the two devices are not equivalent. According to Arp and Johnson (2011), imagery consists of the words and phrases through which a text appeals to the senses. The poet used "sick" in this context to give a depiction of pain in this poem.

In the second line, "only" is a restrictive adverb rather than an image; it limits what survives the poet to his dreams alone, emphasising that Bashō solely leaves behind his literary works after death. The kinesthetic imagery of the line resides instead in the verb "wander." Kinesthetic imagery is generated from an experience of movement (Yastanti & Safitri, 2016), and readers register that movement in Bashō's haiku. Also, the word "dreams" refers to Bashō's literary works that would be used even after his death. Whereas, the word "wander" indicates that Bashō's poems would be used frequently in his absence. Subsequently, the third line "these desolate moors" creates visual imagery, allowing readers to form a mental picture of the moors. That image in turn carries a symbolic charge, standing for the lonely society the poet leaves behind. The usage of "desolate" refers to deserted and isolated sites in this context. In the tradition of *Haiku* poetry, Bashō incorporates the elements of nature by pointing to the empty and uncultivated land. The phrase indicates that after Bashō's death, his poems are left behind for this lonely society. In essence, the poem uses imagery in every line to give readers a common sensation that can help them to envision the message conveyed by the poet.

Additionally, the poet uses personification in the second line, "only my dreams will wander," as he gives a human character (wander) to "dreams". Personification is when human attributes and personalities are given to a concept, animal, or object (Siallagan, Manurung & Sinaga, 2017). This is because "dream" represents an abstract noun, while "wander" is a verb that means "moving leisurely from one point to another". These shreds of evidence show that Bashō uses literary devices, particularly figurative expressions,

in his *Death Haiku*. Concisely, literary devices play a massive role in poetry by enabling poets to express their thoughts succinctly. They raise curiosity in the reader's mind and give poets the chance to connect with people.

Hedonism in Basho's Death Haiku

Based on our readings, the third line "these desolate moors" refers to natural lands that have not been affected by human cultivation or activities. Basho travels to places that have not been disturbed by humans to seek deep insight into nature and write poems about these places. This is, perhaps, because Bashō believes human civilization does damage to nature, as humans tend to exaggerate in the process of civilization. Human activities, such as building and deforestation, are potential causes of climate change or global warming. Thus, Bashō's thoughts tend to oppose the principle of hedonists who are inclined to pleasure or worldly desires by all means. In this sense, hedonism is a moral philosophy whereby an individual believes that seeking pleasure is the main goal of our lives (Heathwood, 2006). While motivational or psychological hedonism claims that only pleasure or pain motivates individuals, evaluative or ethical hedonism presumes that only pleasure has value and only displeasure has disvalue (Moore, 2004). Consequently, desires such as fame and money would be the common goal of hedonists. If Bashō is a hedonist, his literary works would be financially motivated. Fundamentally, the message contained in Bashō's *Death Haiku* suggests that the poet is against hedonism as he lives a simple life and spreads knowledge to benefit society. The resemblance drawn here between this outlook and Islamic teaching on worldly desire is analogical, in the sense set out in the theoretical framework; no claim of historical contact between Bashō and Islamic ethical thought is intended.

Islamic Interpretation

In his literary works, Bashō tends to reveal "a vision and a way of life that is profoundly religious" (Barnhill, 1990, p. 274). The first line, "Sick on my journey," in Bashō's *Death Haiku* reveals how the poet envisages that death approaches him and his life is cut short. However, the subsequent lines indicate the poet's belief that his good deeds (literary works) will continue to benefit society. Based on our readings in the previous sections, the meaning of Bashō's *Death Haiku* corresponds with some major Islamic ethics, particularly the elements of spreading knowledge, good deeds, benevolence, and the purpose of life. For instance, the poet reveals that the knowledge he spread in society through poetry and other literary works will continue to be beneficial and used by people even after his death. This principle has been emphasized in several Quranic verses and prophetic traditions. Allah (the Exalted) states that the believers need not march forth all at once, and that a party from each group should remain behind to gain religious knowledge and then enlighten their people upon returning to them (Q9:122). Similarly, the messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) was reported saying, "God is the most generous, then I am the most generous of mankind, and the most generous of them after me will be a man who acquires knowledge and spreads it" (Al-Tabrizi, 1979, Hadith No. 259).

Bashō considers his poems, metaphorically represented by the phrase "my dreams" in the *Death Haiku*, as good deeds or benevolence. The knowledge and thoughts he spread through poetry, books, and teaching continued to be used. Likewise, these morals are considered significant parts of Islamic teachings (Monagheb, Mirdamadi, & Tahmasbi, 2015). Allah (the Exalted) mentions in the Quran, "So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it" (Q99:7). As the poem reveals, "only my dreams will wander", Bashō believes that only his good deeds will remain after his death. This belief is also similar to the teaching of Islam. In this respect, the messenger of Allah was reported to have said: "When a man dies, his deeds come to an end, except for three: A continuous charity, knowledge by which people derive benefit, or a pious son who prays for him" (Muslim, 1993, Hadith No. 1631). The Prophet (peace be upon him) enjoined mankind to do many good deeds, saying "Take on only as much as you can do of good deeds" (Ibn Majah, 1952, Hadith No. 4240).

Considering the last line, "These desolate moors", Bashō's symbolization of society as a lonely, empty, and uncultivated land shows that people tend to incline to worldly pleasures, forget the main goal of life, and overlook being good to others. This description indicates that the poet disagrees with hedonists who are inclined to pleasure or worldly desires. In this regard, Bashō's belief concurs with religious tenets to shun worldly desires. According to Islamic teachings, jinn and humans are created to worship God (Q51:56). Allah (the Exalted) further describes the life of this world as nothing more than the enjoyment of delusion (Q57:20). Similar doctrines have been reported in several prophetic traditions. For instance, the messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) mentioned, "Do not crave for property lest you should be absorbed in the

desire of worldly life" (Al-Nawawi, 1969, Hadith No. 478). In another narration, the Prophet (peace be upon him) mentioned, "Remember, as much as you can, the one thing (fact or reality) which (always) brings an end to all worldly joys and pleasures (meaning death)" (Ibn Hajar, 2003, Hadith No. 532).

Conclusion

This study drew an analogy between the elements of religious morality in Matsuo Bashō's *Death Haiku* and Islamic teachings. According to the analysis, religious values entrenched in the selected poem can be brought close to Islamic viewpoints on spreading knowledge, good deeds, benevolence, as well as the purpose of life. The analysis revealed the hidden meaning of the selected poem, which dramatizes Bashō's spiritual journey concerning morality in the literary world. By reinterpreting Bashō's *Death Haiku* through the lens of Islam, the study presented evidence of how poetry is used to enhance religious morality through analysis. The knowledge spread by Bashō through poetry three centuries ago continues to be read and digested in the present society. It is proven that poetry is a potential platform to promote religious values rather than a dispiriting practice. However, the current study is limited to an inductive analysis of religious morality in a single Japanese *Haiku*, and its findings are offered as analogical resonances between two ethical vocabularies rather than as evidence of historical influence. Therefore, further research may consider a collection of *Haiku* poems written by different authors and adopt linguistic methods to provide an in-depth analysis of how poetry integrates the elements of religious teaching.

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