

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

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## Abstract

Matsuo Bashō'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 growth of *Haiku* poetry internationally. Bashō was a pious poet who tends to incorporate several Buddhist themes into his literary works. Although religions vary, all religious doctrines call for morality. Nevertheless, there have been lots of criticisms and misconceptions of the stand 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 Bashō; religious morality

## Introduction

Matsuo Bashō (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 that advanced in the late 16<sup>th</sup> 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, usually 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. Bashō contributed to the resurgence of *Haiku* by fusing thoughtful and emotional flair into *Haikai* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and producing several poems. Its current name was given by Masaoka Shiki in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, *Haiku* subjects expanded beyond the natural themes. In the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 *Haikus*, including Bashō's *Death Haiku*, have been translated into other languages. However, *Haiku* poems are often considered as 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 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 of the stand 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. Therefore, using an inductive-analytical method, 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 using the general procedure described by Thomas (2006). First, a line-by-line analysis of Bashō’s *Death Haiku* is performed based on content and context to identify the themes of *Amal Jariah*. 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.

### **Synopsis of Bashō’s *Death Haiku***

The death poem authored by the infamous *Haiku* master, Matsuo Bashō, can be regarded as one of the most sorrowful yet beautifully created *Haiku* poems. Bashō 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, Bashō 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), Bashō 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 succeeded to become a highly respected teacher in society. Hitherto, Bashō still felt dissatisfied with his life and decided to build a hut in the countryside to find inspiration to write more poems.

Bashō 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, Bashō 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 pieces 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 could also be an organic imagery symbolizing Bashō's life being "cut short" since he died young due to sickness. Imagery, concisely, refers to a technique that uses strong sensory words or expressions to create a vivid mental image for readers to view an object or situation based on the writer's thoughts. According to Arp and Johnson (2011), the imagery represents a word or phrase that appeals to our senses, especially when read loudly. The poet used "sick" in this context to give a depiction of pain in this poem.

In the second line, the word "only" in this context represents a kinesthetic imagery emphasizing that Bashō solely leaves behind his literary works after death. Kinesthetic imagery is generated from an experience of movement (Yastanti & Safitri, 2016), and readers can imagine an entity's movement from the word "wander" 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" symbolizes visual imagery that can help readers have a mental image of the state of moors, representing our lonely society in this world. 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 buildings and deforestation, are the 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 for 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 spread knowledge to benefit society.

#### ***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 cuts 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) mentioned that "The believers should not march forth altogether. If a section from every troop remains behind, then they could devote themselves to acquiring a sound knowledge of the faith and teach their people when they return to them, haply they may beware" (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) mentioned in the Noble Quran, "So whoever does a good deed equal to the weight of an atom shall 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 much of 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 away worldly desires. According to Islamic teachings, jinn and mankind are created to worship God (Q51: 56). Allah (the Exalted) says, "whereas the life of this world is only a deceiving enjoyment" (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 and Recommendations

This study drew an analogy of the elements of religious morality in Matsuo Bashō's *Death Haiku* with 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 on 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*. 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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