International Journal of Environmental Sciences
ISSN: 2229-7359
Vol. 11 No. 22s, 2025
https://theaspd.com/index.php

Nature and Emotions in Japanese Love Poetry: A Study of the Select Poets

Santanu Mukerjee[1], **Corresponding Author: Dr. Amrita Tyagi**[2] ,Dr. Brati Biswas[3]
[1]PhD scholar, School of Liberal Education Galgotias University, Greater Noida -201310
[2]School of Liberal Education, Galgotias University, Greater Noida -201310.Email: amrita.tyagi@galgotiasuniversity.edu.in
[3]Department of English., Dyal Singh Evening College, University of Delhi, New Delhi

Abstract:
This paper aims to explore the representation of nature in the selected Haiku love poetry. Two poets have been used namely; Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828) and Ryōkan (1758–1831), two famous writers of late Edo-period Japanese poetry. Both poets employed the haiku and waka forms to weave human emotions into the natural world, however, they differed in their tone and perspective. In his work Issa infused with human warmth, humor, and empathy for everyday life, while Ryōkan, expresses love as spiritual communion, usually employing natural imagery as a metaphor for both impermanence and enlightenment. By exploring selected poems, the study shows how nature workout as both metaphor and medium for expressing love, illuminating the Japanese poetic tradition in which human emotion and nature environment are inseparably bound.
Keywords: *Haiku, Waka, Love Poetry, Nature Imagery, Issa, Ryōkan, Japanese poetic tradition, and Zen*

INTRODUCTION

In Japanese love poetry, nature serves as a primary expressive medium for expressing human emotions rather than as a setting. Natural imagery serves as a vehicle for human emotion, especially in the context of love, as demonstrated by the Manyōshū's traditional waka and Kobayashi Issa and Ryōkan's precise haiku. This poetic tradition is profoundly influenced by timeless aesthetic ideas that have shaped Japanese poetry for centuries, including yūgen (mysterious depth), wabi-sabi (beauty in simplicity and imperfection), and mono no aware (the pathos of impermanence).

The Tale of Genji and modern waka poetry, for instance, demonstrate this dynamic by using flowers, autumn foliage, or moonlit landscapes as metaphors for various emotional states (Keene, 1999). Later, Motoori Norinaga proposed that mono no aware is a characteristic of Japanese literature, pointing out that love poetry finds resonance by incorporating sentimental elements into the transient beauty of nature. "To know mono no aware is to know the true path of poetry and of fiction," he writes. Motoori, 1967, p. 37. A more democratic literary culture that was available to the general public was reflected in Edo literature. Though frequently filtered through Buddhist or Confucian ideals, its primary themes are nature, love, and humour. It shaped contemporary Japanese sensibilities by signalling the shift from courtly, aristocratic literature (Heian) to urban, popular, and varied literary forms. Though they treated nature differently, Kobayashi Issa and Ryōkan both used the haiku and waka forms to depict human emotions and nature. Let's first define waka and haiku before talking about how they use nature and emotions in their poetry.

Waka. A classical Japanese poetic form means Japanese poem. The regular type is tanka with 31 syllables in a 5-7-5-7-7 pattern. It was flourished from the Manyōshū (8th Century) to the Kokinshū (10th Century) and persisted as key element of Japanese courtly culture

Haiku. A short poetic form that was developed in the 17th Century, derived from the opening verse (hokku) of linked verse (renga). Standard form includes 17 syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern. Matsuo Bashō, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, and Masaoka Shiki were common poets of this poetic tradition.

Both waka and haiku continue to hold Japanese poetic tradition system. Both used nature as a medium for expressing human emotions, particularly love. From both the forms, love and nature are inseparable. Very beautifully, they portray how the transience of seasons mirrors the fragility of human relationships. The use of different natural imageries offers a refined and subtle way to express complex human emotions without presenting them directly.

Nature as a medium of emotional expression

In Japanese love poetry, nature is a dynamic manifestation of human emotions and sentiments. The idea that the internal and external worlds are inextricably linked and enhance one another's existence is the foundation for this blending of emotional states with natural imagery. Natural change serves as a mirror

for inner expressions, and the heart (kokoro) resonates with the rhythms of nature (Miner et al., 1985; Shirane, 2012). Japanese poets employed natural elements as subtle metaphors and emotional expressions, whereas Western traditions typically capture human passion. This allowed love's feelings of joys, sorrows, and uncertainties to be expressed profoundly but indirectly.

The relationship between love and nature has been portrayed as one of the defining features of Japanese poetic tradition since the early collections of poetry such as the Man'yōshū and Kokinshū. These works portray blossoms, autumn winds, moonlight, and dew not only as to enhance the background beauty but as active participants in the emotional representation of love and longing. By the late Edo period (1603–1868), this aesthetic tradition was embedded into the haiku, a seventeen-syllable form that compressed profound emotion into a single natural image.

The author selected Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828) and Ryōkan (1758–1831), exemplify these distinct approaches to the interplay of love and nature. Issa, known as the "poet of the people," captured tender human emotions through playful and compassionate observation of small creatures and natural phenomena. Ryōkan, a Zen monk and hermit, combined spiritual depth with intimate longing, producing poems where nature becomes a medium of both enlightenment and romantic intimacy. Their works show how nature remained inseparable from the articulation of love, even in the shifting social and religious contexts of Edo Japan.

Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828), one of the four great masters of Japanese haiku, is usually called "the poet of the people" (Ueda, 1994, p. 15). In his study, Dew on the Grass: The Life and Poetry of Kobayashi Issa (Brill, 1994), Ueda describes Issa as "the poet of the people,". (1984)

due to his tender feelings, small animals, and profound empathy for everyday life. In his poetry, nature and love are inseparably linked. Issa's expression of affection are straightforward, tender, and grounded in everyday life, unlikely to courtly or highly stylized love poetry of the past. He frequently reflected human emotions like tenderness, longing, loneliness, and suffering with images of nature snails, sparrows, fireflies, and dewdrops.

Issa very effectively presents each and every smallest details of life. The snails, sparrows, dews are used as reflections of both human tenderness and suffering. In the following lines, Issa evokes fragile clustering of life and emotion through the dew:

For example, in This haiku, he writes:

The world of dew
Is a world of dew,
And yet, and yet…
This dewdrop world
Is a dewdrop world,
And yet, and yet… (Issa, cited in Blyth, 1952, p. 190)

the transitory aspect of nature (dew) with a profound human sorrow, suggesting love and attachment that persist despite impermanence is very reflected in the above example.

Through the blending of the smallest details of the natural world with intimate feelings, Issa created poetry that speaks to both human affection and Buddhist awareness of uncertainty of life, makes his love poetry distinguished and meaningful in Japanese poetic traditions.

Issa's life was marked by hardship. he lost his parents early, endured poverty, and suffered the deaths of several children. Yet his poetry is characterized by warmth, humour, and empathy. His haiku often transform ordinary natural images into mirrors of human feeling. This shows transforming nature of his poetry. In the following lines, the world of nature reflects the human world

The world of dew
and within every dewdrop,
a world of sorrow.
(trans. David G. Lanoue, 1991)

In point of view the fragility of dew, an image already common in classical Japanese poetry, becomes a direct expression of human grief. The natural phenomenon is not a decorative metaphor but a condensation of Issa's personal experience of loss. The sorrow of love and attachment, sharpened by impermanence, is thus embodied in the most delicate of natural images. The verse resonates with the Buddhist concept of mujō (impermanence), yet its emotional accessibility derives from its intimacy with nature.

Issa also explored love in a lighter vein, often blending affection with playful natural imagery. In this verse haiku he writes:
Come and play with me,
the year's first butterfly
my dear, we are married!
(trans. R.H. Blyth, 1955)
From verse lines, the butterfly, a symbol of transformation and renewal, here represents both the freshness of spring and the delight of conjugal intimacy. By linking natural rebirth with marital playfulness, Issa terminates the distance between the world of nature and human affection. His haiku thus presents dignity to everyday domestic emotions by couching them in natural imagery. Unlike the aristocratic waka of the Heian court, Issa's love poems belong to the lives of ordinary people, expressed through insects, blossoms, and children's games. Yet they preserve the older aesthetic of mono no aware, the sensitivity to impermanence, that has long defined Japanese love poetry.
Ryōkan, nearly Issa's contemporary, offers a strikingly different voice. A Zen monk who lived as a hermit, Ryōkan combined religious devotion with profound sensitivity to human intimacy. His both waka and haiku characterized by simplicity and humility. While his religious training might suggest detachment from worldly love, his poems in general reveal a deep seme of personal engagement with affection, longing, and tenderness. in one of his wakas, love and tenderness is represented as:
Though the world of men
is wide beyond measure,
still in my heart
there is no place to dwell
but your sleeve's warmth. (Ryōkan,1996)
He fused spiritual insight with intimate emotional expression, frequently intertwining love, longing, and natural beauty. For Ryōkan, nature becomes a mirror of the inner self: its beauty evokes tenderness and longing, while its transience reflects Buddhist truths of change and non-attachment.
In one famous verse, he writes:
In this world
we walk on the roof of hell,
gazing at flowers.
(Ryōkan: Zen Monk-Poet of Japan, trans. Burton Watson, 1996, p. 71)
In another verse, Ryōkan writes:
The full moon
coming to rest
on every leaf.
(Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf: Zen Poems of Ryōkan, trans. Watson, 1992, p. 77)
In this verse moon is used as one of the key images in Japanese poetry. It serves two-fold purposes as at the surface it represents enlightenment, the knowledge and understanding. At the same time, the poem gestures toward intimacy, the act of pointing at the moon becomes a shared moment of recognition, suggesting that love, like enlightenment, needs mutual illumination.
In the second poet, Ryōkan's verse, nature is not only a mirror of love but also its a condition of possibility. Ryōkan's love poetry is perhaps most poignant in his waka exchanges with his young disciple Teishin. In one well-known verse he writes:
Meeting you—
along the mountain path,
the fragrance of plum blossoms
on my sleeves,
lingering still.
(trans. William LaFleur, 1983)
The plum blossoms in Japanese tradition in general symbolize early spring and renewal of life, become here a metaphor for the lingering memory of encounter. The natural image conveys both sensual intimacy (the fragrance clinging to the body) and the bittersweet awareness of transience. Like Issa, Ryōkan employs seasonal imagery, but his tone is more lyrical and contemplative, often obscuring the border between religious awakening and romantic yearning.
So, the poetry of Kobayashi Issa and Ryōkan demonstrates that love and nature in Japanese literature are complementary to each other and cannot be separated. Nature at times becomes, the medium to represent

from the language of nature. For Issa, the fleeting presence of dew, the fragility of blossoms, or the cry of insects becomes a mirror of human tenderness and loss. His haiku often capture the directness of affection in the most ordinary images, turning everyday scenes into profound reflections on love. As David Lanoue (1991) writes, Issa's "haiku celebrate life on a living planet with gratitude, empathy and good jest" (125), drawing the reader into the plight and affection he felt for all beings. Blyth repeatedly stresses that Issa's haiku embody a childlike sympathy for all creatures. He writes that Issa "sees with the eyes of a child, loving the smallest and most trivial beings, the flea, the snail, the fly" (391).

Ryōkan, by contrast, offers a different register of intimacy. His poems, whether haiku or waka, blend Zen simplicity with profound emotional resonance. Burton Watson (1977) highlights that Ryōkan's verse stands at the threshold of spiritual detachment and human longing: the moon, the plum blossom, and the mountain paths are at once natural images and symbols of inner states. His love poems to the nun Teishin exemplify this double movement rooted in natural symbolism but also meditations on transience and desire. William LaFleur (1983), in The Karma of Words, stresses that Ryōkan's treatment of love and nature represents a uniquely Buddhist poetics, where the transient beauty of the world itself becomes a medium for intimacy.

The Zenpeacemakers blog, reflecting on Ryōkan's poetic legacy, highlights his final bestowal as a profound expression of poetic intimacy with the natural world:

"In the spring, cherry blossoms, in the summer the cuckoo.
In autumn the full moon, in winter the snow, clear, cold."

And of Ryōkan's last poem:

"What shall be my legacy? The blossoms of spring,
The cuckoo in the hills, the leaves of autumn." (Ryōkan: Zen Monk-Poet of Japan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 65.)

In this poem ... the most usual figures and the commonest of words are tied together ... and so they transmit the very essence of Japan. And it is Ryōkan's last poem that I have quoted.

For him, nature served as a bridge between physical affection, spiritual intimacy, and poetic expression in 18th–19th century Japan. Too lazy to be ambitious,
I let the world take care of itself.
Ten days' worth of rice in my bag,
a bundle of twigs by the fireplace
why chatter about delusion and enlightenment?
(Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf: Zen Poems of Ryōkan, trans. Watson, 1992, p. 27)

This commentary instisted how Ryōkan uses the simplest natural imagery not as ornamentation, but as his ultimate legacy, communicating love and connection through the elemental beauty of nature.

Thus, a comparative analysis of Issa and Ryōkan reveals two interwoven but separate traditions of love in late Edo poetry: one rooted in Zen contemplation and spiritual intimacy, and the other in the humour and sentiments of daily life. However, the classical Japanese aesthetics of mono no aware of the fragility of things traced from the Kokinshū through The Tale of Genji are inherited and expanded upon by both poets. Their waka and haiku transform into more than just personal sentimental expressions; they become a part of a lengthy cultural sequence that holds that human love is inextricably linked to the rhythms of nature.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study of nature in the love poetry of Issa and Ryōkan demonstrates the persistence of an aesthetic mode that bridges the personal and the cosmic. Their works remind us that to speak of love in Japanese literature is also to speak of nature as well, for the two are merged in a poetic tradition that sees no division between human emotion and the living landscape. Critics from Blyth to Watson have emphasized this point, and the present study affirms that Issa's tenderness and Ryōkan's meditative intimacy together illustrate the richness and diversity of Japanese poetic responses to love through nature.

The love poetry of Kobayashi Issa and Ryōkan displays the enduring Japanese poetic principle that love and nature are inseparable. While Issa demonstrates the fragile tenderness of human relationships through the imagery of dew, insects, and blossoms, Ryōkan elevates love to a spiritual plane, merging intimacy with Zen insight and seasonal beauty. Together, they extend the legacy of earlier anthologies such as the Kokinshū, while adapting it to Edo sensibilities of common life and spiritual reflection. Their works display us that in Japanese poetry, to speak of love is to speak of nature, and to speak of nature is to speak of love.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study. No author, supervisor, institution of funders has professional interests that could have influence in designing and analysing of the study. All contributions were made solely for academic purpose.

REFERENCES

1. Blyth, R. H. (1950). Haiku: Vol. 1. Eastern culture. Hokuseido Press.
2. Blyth, R. H. (1952). Haiku: Vol. 3. Summer–Autumn. Hokuseido Press.
3. Blyth, R. H. (1955). Haiku: Vol. 2. Spring. Hokuseido Press.
4. Carter, S. (1991). Traditional Japanese poetry: An anthology. Stanford University Press.
5. Cranston, E. A. (1969). A waka anthology: The gem-glistening cup. Stanford University Press.
6. LaFleur, W. R. (1983). The karma of words: Buddhism and the literary arts in medieval Japan.
7. University of California Press.
8. Lanoue, D. G. (1991). Issa: Cup-of-tea poems. Unitarian Universalist Haiku Network.
9. Miner, E., Odagiri, H., & Morrell, R. E. (1985). The Princeton companion to classical
10. Japanese literature. Princeton University Press.
11. Motoori, N. (1967). Mono no aware and literary criticism. In H. H. Honda (Ed.), Monogatari
12. and Japanese aesthetics (pp. 45–67). University of Tokyo Press.
13. Ryōkan. (1992). Dewdrops on a lotus leaf: Zen poems of Ryōkan (B. Watson, Trans.).
14. Shambhala.
15. Ryōkan. (1996). Ryōkan: Zen monk-poet of Japan (B. Watson, Trans.). Columbia University
16. Press.
17. Shirane, H. (1998). Traces of dreams: Landscape, cultural memory, and the poetry of Bashō.
18. Stanford University Press.
19. Shirane, H. (2012). Japan and the culture of the four seasons: Nature, literature, and the arts.
20. Columbia University Press.
21. Ueda, M. (1994). Dew on the grass: The life and poetry of Kobayashi Issa. Brill.
22. Watson, B. (1977). Ryōkan: Zen monk-poet of Japan. Columbia University Press.
23. Zen Peacemakers. (2025, August 26). Japan, the beautiful and myself. Zen Peacemakers
24. International. https://zenpeacemakers.org/zpi-publishing/japan-the-beautiful-and-myself/