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Global Haiku Traditions
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8 November 2018

Women's Voices in Haiku

Women are creative and powerful forces, but their voices have been stifled throughout the centuries due to sexism. Women are often put into boxes due to religion and societal expectations. However, art has been a medium for women to share their experiences and rebel against the lines they are told not to cross. Haiku has been the preferred outlet for many women to recall their stories and legitimize their struggles as women. Haikus are meant to tell mini stories and describe small but important moments. Feminist and female-centric haiku stay true to this meaning by telling the seemingly unimportant stories many women can relate to. These haikus contain details only women know well, from casual sexism to the constant fear of sexual harassment and assault. Some simply explain the small daily instances where sexism is waved in their faces. Others recall the centuries-long struggle for political and economic equality. Some haiku tell the grim reality of being a female in today's world. Others exalt the accomplishments of women who have led the way for women today to follow their own path. Regardless of the exact topic, feminist haiku highlight the complexity of being a woman and legitimize women's existence as equals to men. In this essay, through analysis of multiple haiku from various female authors, we will explore how women tell their stories through haiku. While haiku in its definition has some structure, female authors use the form in multiple creative ways to highlight the female experience. Authors like Sonia Sanchez and Barbara Sabol use powerful language and imagery to exalt feminist icons and depict the fear of women walking alone at night. Other authors like Karen Sohne and Terri L. French take everyday moments that may seem insignificant to male readers but contain deep meaning to female readers. This essay will focus on how the haikus tell a female-centric story and what techniques the authors use to effectively and creatively contain their accounts to three lines.

Some female focused haiku capture the small moments of women's lives that embody the complex, and sometimes dangerous, reality of being a woman. The haikus' kireji, where readers insert their own experiences, are often specific to women only. These haiku are small stories that tell the tales of countless women. In *The Haiku Anthology*, Karen Sohne writes about a universal experience for many women:

the men on both sides
have taken
my armrests

Karen Sohne, *The Haiku Anthology*, 186

Society has taught women to make themselves small – they should not speak too loudly, take up too much space, make their opinion heard, and move out of the way for men. Sohne's haiku explains a scenario where a woman is expected to allow more space for men. Each line neatly adds to the image of a woman being robbed of her own armrests. The haiku creates a sense of inferiority and insecurity, since the image of men stealing Sohne's armrests is compressed and stifling. Furthermore, Alexis Rotella, a haiku author, recently compiled haiku and other poetry in a book called *Unsealing Our Secrets* as a response to the Me Too movement. One haiku details how women must carefully navigate walking alone in cities:

Manhattan canyons
mini dress and sneakers
I can run in

Miriam Sagan, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 10

Sagan uses wonderful imagery and details that highlight the fear women feel while walking alone. “Manhattan canyons” is a brilliant metaphor that makes the streets and alleys of New York City seem like threatening valleys. The second line puts “mini dress” and “sneakers” together, which throws off the reader since that is an unusual combination. Then, the third line explains the reason for the sneakers. It draws attention to the little things women do to prevent sexual and/or physical assault. Other precautions women take include putting their keys between their knuckles as a weapon, carrying pepper spray, not wearing a ponytail or crossbody bag, and countless others. This may go over the heads of male readers, but any woman would understand the need for precautions, even if it may seem odd. Additionally, in the same book, another author describes a similar experience of walking alone at night:

walking home alone
shops barred shut
his footsteps echo mine

Barbara Sabol, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 16

This haiku perfectly also captures the fear women have while walking alone at night. The first line, “walking home alone”, immediately lets women insert their own fears into the kireji. It is interesting to note that men probably cannot relate to that fear and may not connect with the haiku at all. The second line implies a heightened sense of being alone, since no one is in the shops to save her if she needs it. The last line caps off the building sense of fear and anticipation with the reality that someone is actually following her. The line also uses creative language that place the focus on the follower. The modern wave for feminism and the Me Too movement has also inspired the new online magazine #FemkuMag that highlights the voices of female haiku authors. Its second issue contains a haiku that illuminates the “I’m sorry” trap women are lured into from their childhood to adulthood:

buried alive
another I’m sorry
for nothing

Tiffany Shaw-Diaz, #FemkuMag issue two

For women, “I’m sorry” has become a way of softening otherwise “harsh” or “aggressive” statements. Women are deemed “bossy” or “bitchy” when they assert their opinion or stand up for themselves. “I’m sorry” is a way to fend off these sexist labels by softening themselves. Shaw-Diaz’s haiku highlights how suffocating the phrase can be. By excessively using the phrase, women inadvertently stifle their true voices, which Shaw-Diaz shows in the first line. The use of the word “another” implies that this happens often. The haiku also has a sad tone since she is aware of the “I’m sorry” trap but seems unable to break free from it. Overall, these haiku bring attention to the small daily difficulties women go through. Through specific details of simple situations, these authors leave a lot of interpretation up to the reader. Some details may not relate to male readers, so these haiku are catered towards a female audience. While men may not relate to these haiku directly, the haikus might be able to enlighten them on the female experience that is not told enough. It is exciting and interesting to note that women’s voices in haiku and beyond are being showcased now more than ever, as seen in *Unsealing Our Secrets* and #FemkuMag. ****conclusion sentence

Other feminist haiku tell a small part of a larger story of women’s fight against sexism and the inspiration of when they escape society’s expectations. Empowerment can come from a single moment or longer battle, and the following haiku reflect those ideas. This first haiku recalls where discrimination and misogyny originate. In *Unsealing Our Secrets*, Terri L. French highlights how society teaches young boys and girls that women are inferior from a young age:

Sunday School lesson
we learn about
Eve's curse

Terri L. French, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 79

The Bible often refers to women as inferior and sinful. "Eve's curse" is the punishment of painful childbirth and subservience to her husband for Eve's disobedience to God. French's poem describes how society, and religion especially, contribute to institutional sexism by teaching that women are inferior to men. Young girls learning about Eve's curse may think that they deserve the pain that comes with menstruation and childbirth. Furthermore, it may teach them that they deserve any pain inflicted on them. It also directly teaches them that they must always be subservient to men, which is an outdated and false idea. The haiku may also be commentary on the lack of sexual education girls receive – if their only education on pregnancy and childbirth is from a religious bias, they may be underinformed or misinformed. Despite the unfortunate upbringing of young girls, many female haiku authors exalt the accomplishments of other women to break the glass ceiling or their own self-empowerment. In *Love Haiku: Masaio Suzuki's Lifetime of Love*, Suzuki writes about her life, love, and societal expectations. While society expects her to be one thing, she decides to reject the often-limiting path of being a wife and mother.

firefly light:
I step off the path
of woman's virtue

Masaio Suzuki, *Love Haiku: Masaio Suzuki's Lifetime of Love*, Suzuki, 33

This haiku bleeds rebelliousness. Since the haiku is in present tense, it strengthens her choice to "step off the path". Her use of a singular version of "woman" with no article because it highlights how women are belittled and seen as nothing of value or importance. The use of "firefly light" is intriguing since it can have multiple meanings. One is that since firefly light is obviously not very bright, her choice to step away from gender norms is not well lit or supported by society. Fireflies' light also constantly goes on and off, which represents the uncertainty of her choice to make her own path.

In the fourth issue of #FemkuMag, Tiffany Shaw-Diaz tells an empowering and bittersweet tale that reflects the struggles of victims of sexual assault and rape:

no more grey
I finally call it
rape

Tiffany Shaw-Diaz, #FemkuMag issue four

This haiku simultaneously blends a tragic reality women face and female empowerment. Society often blames sexual assault victims for what happened to them – they were drinking, flirting, dressed provocatively, or "asking for it". Society also gaslights victims of assault by doubting their reality and raising suspicions against the victim instead of the accused assailant. Shaw-Diaz's haiku rejects the culture of not believing victims in the first line. The second and third lines make an empowering statement that is often ignored. "Rape" is its own line because it needs to show the power that word has. While it is tragic and horrific, in this context, it empowers the author to accept their reality as true and speak their truth. By accepting what happened to her, she can begin to heal or take legal action if she chooses. Another haiku from #FemkuMag highlights the fight for equality:

pay equity
she swims against

the current

Debbie Strange, #FemkuMag issue one

The haiku starts off strong and gets straight to the point. It continues to build its strength with the image of a woman swimming against a current. The haiku takes an empowering and optimistic look at the gender wage gap. The first line is “pay equity”, not inequity. The positive take on the word makes it seem like a tangible goal. The swimming image is also rather hopeful and powerful. She is fighting against inequality instead of letting the tide drown her. Moreover, Sonia Sanchez recalls her experience as a woman of color navigating her education and road to achieve despite gender and racial discrimination. In her book, *Morning Haiku*, she dedicates haiku to influential women that lit the way for her and other women to break barriers and live empowered lives.

(Shirley Chisholm)

We saw your
woman sound footprinting
congressional hallways

Sonia Sanchez, *Morning Haiku*, 72

Shirley Chisholm was the first African-American woman in Congress in 1968. She was also the first woman and African-American to pursue the presidential nomination from a major political party in 1972. During this campaign, racial discrimination blocked her from participating in televised primary debates (<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/shirley-chisholm>). This haiku is an ode to this trailblazer. The haiku utilizes powerful and direct language (“woman sound” and “congressional hallways”) to emphasize the historical significance of Chisholm’s accomplishment. Sanchez also invents the word “footprinting” in the haiku. This new word reflects the new milestone Shirley Chisholm accomplished. Sanchez invented a new word as Chisholm invented a new path for herself. Furthermore, a footprint is a mark. By using this word instead of “stepping” or “walking”, Sanchez highlights the impact Chisholm made and that her legacy has left a mark on politics and history. In another section of the book, Sanchez dedicates poems to an influential artist, Elizabeth Catlett:

a woman’s
arms climbing with
colored dreams

Sonia Sanchez, *Morning Haiku*, 59

Elizabeth Catlett used her art to advocate for social change in the U.S and Mexico in the twentieth century. She was denied entrance to the Carnegie Institute of Technology due to her race, and she was the granddaughter of former slaves (<https://nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/elizabeth-catlett>). The language in this haiku is beautiful and reflects the beauty of woman following their dreams. The use of the word “colored” has multiple meanings in this poem: Catlett was an artist, so it represents the colors she utilized in her work. It is also an indication to Catlett’s race, since her dreams contained difficulties because of the color of her skin. These haiku tell the ups and downs of women’s centuries-long struggle for equality and freedom. They take specific instances of women’s successes that represent the slow and steady progress towards equality. They also take anecdotal instances that relate to how sexism is taught to children from a very young age and how sexual assault victims are often stifled and ignored. These female authors demand to make their stories heard and bring attention to the sexism they have faced their whole lives.

Women’s struggle for equality has often been ignored. Art is a medium to express one’s own experience, and haiku has become a way for women to express their pain, hope, battles, and stories. While women are

often ignored or looked over, haiku is an artform where women can share their unique voices through artful and considerate technique, shown in these haiku. Sexism and discrimination are institutional systems, but women talk about the moments where these systems are present through haiku. Some haiku in this essay pluck real world experiences that highlight a larger problem. These female authors use delicate and powerful details that show the reader what is it like to be a woman today. They also celebrate the triumphs they have accomplished in order reflect on how far they have come through strong imagery and language. They take the larger movement of feminism and describe steps take by themselves or other women that have furthered the cause (in big or small ways). The female voice is unique, and it deserves to be heard. Women's stories deserve to be told, and haiku is a format where it can be done successfully and beautifully.

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