

I wish to thank the Coordinator, Terry-Ann Carter, to have considered my topic to be of interest to this year's conference.

Spring mud –
'it's women's century'
or so they say !

Boue de printemps –
« c'est le siècle des femmes »
à ce qu'ils racontent !

Tsukako SHIRAISHI¹

Whether called 'writing by women', 'feminine creation', 'women's writing', it exists, and therefore undergoes change. To provide a framework for this talk, I shall limit myself to the evolution of the themes found in short poetry² written by living women authors.

This non-exhaustive analysis is based on the only French-language book devoted to francophone or francophile women haiku poets, entitled *Regards de femmes*; the collection brings together work by 86 poets and 283 of their previously unpublished poems. There exists, to my knowledge, five anthologies³ dedicated to women haiku poets having lived from the 17th century to today. Purists might apply a neologism for such works: *gynku* – a hybrid term combining woman (*gyn* from the Greek) and linked poem (*ku* from the Japanese).

Identification of short poems

As I worked on this corpus, I often reflected: What diversity! How many kinds of haiku actually exist? Are they all haiku or "micropoems", as Maurice Coyaud, the translator would call them⁴? I would also recall the words of Corinne Atlan, novelist and haiku translator: "Often, nothing distinguishes a haiku where there is no *kigo* (season-word) from a very short modern poem, or from a senryu, were it not the author's wish to call it a haiku."⁵

This said the basis of our study, *Regards de femmes*, identifies simply four types of three-liners: the traditional haiku paying homage to Nature, the contemporary haiku, often urban, also using a *kigo*, the senryu, and the Western three-liner.

Before getting down to our subject, allow me to mention in passing a few ancients of feminine creation, women poets:

- in Ancient Lower Mesopotamia, Enheduanna (2 300 years BC)
- in the West, Sappho (620 – 565 BC)
- in Japan, MURASAKI Shikibu a novelist mostly (10th century)
- in France, Marie de France (12th century)
- in Belgium, by adoption, Anne-Marie Kegels (1912-1994)
- in Quebec, Simone Routier (1901-1987).

Characteristics of Women's Writing

Hélène Cixous' famous quote comes to mind here: "It is not because signed by a woman's name that the writing is women's writing", to wit, the beloved Marguerite Yourcenar.

What then are the characteristics of women's writing? We shall examine the most recurrent, those defined by Western women theorists since 1974⁶: first person subject, one's own body (here, often dealt with humour), the everyday, and the mother-daughter relationship. These characteristics would appear to affirm, on the one hand, values such as cooperation, community spirit, and solidarity; and on the other, qualities such as sensitivity, compassion, intuition. And then, we'll take up the newer themes

of friendship, environment and society. We shall conclude by submitting that the concept itself of women's writing is constantly evolving.

Nature

Could one speak about Haiku poetry without mentioning Nature? Is Nature a characteristic of women's writing? Haiku has generally been written by men since Bashô, the 17th century poet-monk, considered the genre's father. Would it be rash to believe that male poets reveal their feminine side in haiku? Let's say in passing, to be born a man doesn't necessarily imply producing "masculine" writing – to wit

Marivaux and Flaubert; also worthy of mention, the 10th century Japanese poet, Ki no Tsurayuki, author of a diary, written in the feminine voice, *Tosa nikki*.

In the five imposed themes, 53% of the short poems contain references to season (*kigo*) or to a period of the day (small *kigo*). The themes of friendship and society produced haiku which contained one out of two, and one out of three times, a small *kigo* rather than a *kigo*. Somewhat unusual perhaps, but is it really? An interpretation comes to mind: women poets are keenly aware of moments spent with their friends and in society... notwithstanding the season. For several reasons no doubt: writing is a solitary creative act domestic and professional lives are demanding. Will one ever know?

The chapter with no imposed theme reserves quite a surprise: 80% of its haiku proudly display season-words.

along my arm
climbs a caterpillar
its Himalaya

*le long de mon bras
une chenille grimpe
son Himalaya*

*Huguette Ducharme*⁷, Saint-Pie, QC

First Person Subject

One of the rules of haiku requires the poet to avoid speaking of self; if impossible, the "I" may serve as a link between microcosm and macrocosm.

between heaven and earth
I rock in the hammock
between plums and pears⁸

*entre ciel et terre
je me berce dans le hamac
entre prunes et poires*

Monika Thoma-Petit, Montreal, QC

Women writers in this work therefore only manifest their selves one out of five times; and rarely do they address others. The majority opts for third person telling or uses the way of observation; in so doing, they establish the poem's neutrality – from the individual, it becomes universal. Follows a haiku which transcends personal experience; the content reaches out, when read, to humanity as a whole: the unexpressed relation between time and sand invites reflection.

sand
between tiny tiny fingers
flows flows flows...

*le sable
entre ses doigts tout petits
fuit fuit fuit...*

Dominique Champollion, France

A Body of One's Own

A body of one's own, like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of one's own*. This theme, in its treatment by Westerners, has reached maturity. Is this really surprising? For more than a quarter century, every little bit of the female body has been discussed, demystified, honoured, examined in all its seams, by media specializing in women's condition.

Today, woman has taken possession of her desire and her body. She speaks without getting lost in euphemisms. As an adolescent, she discovers the wetness of her sex. Later her cat calms her menstrual cramps. In a public place, one may see a young mother and her naked breast full of milk. Sole owner of her body, paternity may be doubted:

pharmacy night
spotting a man's smile
before so many condoms

*soir de pharmacie
croiser un sourire d'homme
devant tant de condoms*

Jeanne Painchaud, Montreal, QC

before loving the child
the father prefers to check
the blood type⁸

*avant de l'aimer
son père préfère vérifier
le groupe sanguin*

Catherine Belkhodja, Algeria / France

Aging, where is your victory?
grey moon
an old person's head
highlights⁸

*la lune grise
sa tête a des reflets
de vieillard*

Marie Jeanne Sakhinis/De Meis, France

Life expectancy reaches unequalled heights:
chestnut in hand
covering my life line
I am eternal

*marron dans ma main
cachant ma ligne de vie
je suis éternelle*

Monique Coudert, France

Humour

It wasn't so long ago that a woman was taken to task for taking her body too seriously. I wonder why. Today, there's symbiosis between body and spirit. Haiku becomes senryu. Neither neighbours, nor conjugal life are the prime objects of her derision, but rather, herself.

She gains a few pounds? That's no problem. She compares the roundness of forms to a painting by Botero; which doesn't prevent her from remembering her slim waist.

before the mirror
my folds and curves
the imprint of the children⁸

*face au miroir
dans mes plis et rondeurs
l'empreinte des enfants*

Chantal Peresan-Roudil, France

On the road to liberation, she might have considered, for only a moment perhaps

polyandry
far too many socks
to pick up

*la polyandrie
beaucoup trop de chaussettes
à ramasser*

Louise Vachon, Rimouski, QC

All this doesn't in any way negate her femininity... all nationalities taken into account:

golden handbag
black eyeliner red lipstick
her hair under a veil

*sac à main doré
eye-liner noir rouge à lèvres
cheveux sous le voile*

Lydia Padellec, France

The Everyday

On the one hand, the everyday nourishes women, on the other, haiku is a snapshot of the present moment: the synergy between the everyday and haiku is as good as ever. Who will complain?

In the collection under study, we get a glimpse of a baby-boom woman's day. Of her childhood, she says nothing. She barely evokes that of her children. Her adolescence – she relives it when a young girl walks by on the street, or through a song of yesteryear she hears today. She seems to hang on to a certain nostalgia of the past. She remembers a time when her children played with her own parents. She worries still about her daughter, her son, becoming young adults. Mother for a day, mother forever.

summer's end
in my son's room
I try on his shoes

*fin d'été
dans la chambre de mon fils
j'essaye ses chaussures*

Abigail Friedman, USA

Today, she works, or not, outside her home. She is perhaps a young grand-mother, with a grandchild in her arms. In her free time, she relaxes with a glass of wine or breathes in the scent of *Sencha* tea:

woman in a sofa
four o'clock in the afternoon
the smell of green tea⁸

*femme dans un fauteuil
quatre heures de l'après-midi
ça sent le thé vert*

Danielle Shelton, Montreal, QC

Mother-daughter relationships

We have all of us read works, seen films, or heard friends describe the difficulties of mother-daughter relationships. However, it looks like the combination of three generations may bring togetherness.

weaving loom
three generations on the weft
end on end hearts⁸

*métier à tisser
trois âges sur la trame
fil à fil d'âmes*

Christine Gavel, Belgium

Of the 49 poems of the section entitled “Family”, 16 deal with the illness or death of a family member.

Yesterday’s adolescent, now aging, is both daughter and mother to her parents. She cares with solicitude for the woman who gave her birth –motherhood in reverse:

at my mother’s bedside
I again find the gestures
of a worried mother

*au chevet de ma mère
je retrouve mes gestes
de maman inquiète*

Amel Hamdi Smaoui, Tunisia

New Themes

Contemporary women’s haiku give a glimpse of themes which, in my opinion, will gain in importance in the next few years: friendship, environment, and society.

Friendship

One word on love relationships: an inexhaustible theme both with women and with men. Abundant in senryu⁹ and in Western three-liners, but the rule is “no love in haiku”⁴.

In the corpus under study, preference is given to the neighbouring sentiment... equally forbidden in haiku. “There is in friendship a perfection which is accessible to very few women.” The 17th century woman of letters, Madeleine de Scudéry, would, without a doubt, be touched by the recent development of feminine friendship.

This chapter, the second shortest in *Regards de femmes* with its 33 poems, is, to my mind, more than perfect. Here, friendship lasts and endures, from adolescence to maturity and sometimes an entire life long. Its expression takes on multiple colours: *bonne entente*, dialogues with plenty of silence and unsaid, thoughtfulness, nostalgia in absence, tenderness, constancy.

sounds of snow and ink
rustle of souls and wings
two butterflies in love

*bruits de neige et d’encre
frôlement d’âmes et d’ailes
deux papillons s’aiment*

Clochelune, France

after mass
two friends talk and knit
all wrong⁸

*après la messe
deux amies parlent et tricotent
tout à l’envers*

Lise Robert, Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu, QC

Environment

We’re already aware Nature plays a primordial role in haiku, thanks to the season-word or to a seasonal reference. This tiny poem then becomes an important political poetic arm in defence of Earth.

Rupert River
dam to the North
pylons to the South

*rivière Rupert
barrage au Nord
pylônes au Sud*

Micheline Beaudry, Boucherville, QC

subway entrance
newspapers blowing in the wind
environment makes the headlines⁸

*entrée du métro
des journaux volent au vent
l'environnement à la une*

Anne-Marie Labelle, Montreal, QC

Even though the section entitled “*La planète... son avenir*” (The planet... its future) is the shortest with its 24 poems, 22% of the women poets are concerned with climate change, global warming and environmental pollution.

It's a lot when one considers this theme has only existed in haiku since recently.

It's little, bearing in mind that woman is associated with the planet, if only through the expressions 'mother-goddess' and 'mother earth'; or 'earth-mother' in native American.

It's normal, for politically-seasoned themes aren't part of everyone's poetic taste... they represent probably more of an acquired taste. Be that as it may, some poets believe there is unreasonable human activity:

the cactus is dying
it asks for nothing
and drowns with care

*le cactus se meurt
lui qui ne demande rien
on le noie de soins*

Lisa Carducci, China

Some see disaster dawning, in a kind of zoom-out:

another planet too many earth returns to dust

encore une planète de trop la terre redevient poussière

dorothy howard, Gatineau QC

Others opt for individual and collective consciousness raising in order to encourage responsible consumption and energy efficiency both in the home and the neighbourhood.

Society

It is true that poets of short poems have written about society for three centuries in Japan. But only on rare occasions has the cousin of haiku, senryu, been tender towards humans or their institutions. The purpose or vocation of senryu has been, rather, to mock society's failings.

The haiku poets in this study give a glimpse, in 53 poems, of a social tableau: two out of five times which seems distressing. In what society or societies do we live? It is in this chapter that compassion comes into play: the authors evoke pauperization (twice rather than once), isolation, war, natural disasters.

What global village would one choose to call home? In such a village where there was bread and roses for all. In this respect, the following haiku points to an inclusive lifestyle – tomorrow's society?

she knocks at my door
lost in icy winter
the warmth of a smile

*elle frappe à ma porte
perdue dans l'hiver glacé
chaleur d'un sourire*

Cathy Raynal, France

Evolution of Women's Writing

The present analysis reveals close links between the feminine universe and the haiku world – both taken in their larger meanings.

Creation by women, if only by most its themes, seems to be appropriate to haiku. If one quickly examines other elements associated with women's writing, that is, the place given to the senses, ellipse, non-punctuation and hiatus, one is aware of the same elements in haiku.

No sooner is feminine writing known or recognized as a genre, it begins to evolve. Four centuries before Christ, Plato referred to the androgynous myth. As for me, I wonder, like Virginia Woolf¹⁰ did in 1928, about "the oneness of spirit". Woolf asked what the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge meant...

“...when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion (of masculine and feminine parts of a being¹¹ actually) takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. (...) In fact one goes back to Shakespeare's mind (and to Marcel Proust's) as the type of the androgynous, of the manwomanly mind...”

Contemporary woman, having mastered the unity of her body, has come to explore the unity of her mind, of her spirit. Siding with androgynous writing, we soon realise that contemporary haiku can be an invaluable mode of expression. Indeed, I believe the short poem invites the cohabitation of a writing which is at once both masculine and feminine though written by the same person.

What are the characteristics of androgynous writing? To start with, it features an absence of stereotypes when it comes to...

... physical aspect:

on patrol
taut buttocks in uniform...
hers or his?¹²

*patrouille
sous les fesses unifermes...
lequel est laquelle?*

isabel Asúnsolo, Spain / France

...femininity:

early spring –
the little old lady whistles
a ribald ditty

*printemps précoce –
la petite vieille siffle
une chanson gaillarde*

Angèle Lux, Val-des-Monts, QC

...masculinity:

sitting in a train
a man holds back his tears
I close my eyes

*assis dans le train
un homme retient ses larmes
je ferme les yeux*

Nicole Gagné, Montreal, QC

...race:

applause
a group of veiled women
for a female skater⁸

*applaudissements
d'un groupe de femmes voilées
pour patineuse*

Liette Janelle, Boucherville, QC

...old age:

near the sand box
two oldsters on a bench
– no shovel no rake

*près du bac à sable
deux vieux sur un banc
– sans pelle ni râteau*

Chantal Couliou, France

Apparently, there is room for both androgynous writing and reading in the world of haiku. It's up to the poets to see that both develop and shine.

I thank you for your attention.

Notes

¹ in *Haiku du XX^e siècle – Le poème court japonais d'aujourd'hui* by Corinne Atlan and Zéno Bianu, 2007. For the gracious authorization to reproduce this poem, I thank 'le département de la Cession de droits de langue française des Services juridiques' of Gallimard. Tsukako SHIRAISHI, a Japanese poetess, born in 1950

² Haiku and senryu: poems of Japanese origin containing more or less 17 syllables (5/7/5) set in three lines

Haiku requires a season-word (*kigo*) or a moment of day (little *kigo*) and a hiatus or cut in the text (*kireji*) giving consequently two images; its content points to, on the one hand, the present moment, and on the other, makes an appeal to the senses rather than the intellect. I would say that there are two types of haiku. The traditional respects the above definition and Nature's importance. Contemporary haiku allies Nature (including urban environment and its modernity) and human nature.

Senryu does not require a season-word, and no cutting-word. Human nature and society are depicted – and the failings of one or the other; often with derision, sometimes with compassion.

The **tercet**, or three-liner finds its origins in the West. It may be rhymed or not. Its verse relies on sense for unity; in other words, there is no hiatus or break in the text. The sentence, not necessarily complete, is set out in three lines. Its aim is often lyrical or imaginative.

³ Kenneth Rexroth & Ikuko Atsumi, *Women Poets of Japan*, aka: *The Burning Heart*, A New Directions Book, New York, 1977

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M. Kemmoku & D. Chipot, *Du rouge aux lèvres – haïjins japonais*, La Table ronde, Paris, 2008 (japonais, romaji & français)

⁴ Preface by Maurice Coyaud in *Chevaucher la lune, anthologie du haïku contemporain en français*, edited by André Duhaime, David, 2001

⁵ in the Francophone literary magazine, *Gong*, January 2007

⁶ Too numerous to name them all, but including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, Madeleine Gagnon, France Théoret, Louky Bersianik

⁷ All quoted poems are contained in *Regards de femmes – haïkus francophones*; collective work directed by Janick Belleau; introduced by the author with an overview of women writing haiku in French entitled « Francophone et féminin, le haïku », Adage/AFH (Montréal /Lyon), 2008

⁸ Adaptation from French by Janick Belleau

⁹ The pearl of collections on this theme: *Haïku érotiques* translated from the Japanese and presented by Jean Cholley, Philippe Picquier poche, 2000. Here, the word 'haïku' must be taken in its generic sense... because intimacy is quite obvious

¹⁰ in *A room of one's own*, 1929; reprinted by Harvest Books, PA, USA, 2005

¹¹ Double identity, bisexual identity, psychic bisexuality or sexual ambivalence within every human being; such are the expressions used by women writers of the 20th century in association with creative genius

¹² Translated from French by Maxianne Berger.

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