

the heart of a haiku

a space for a little poem
to weave its magic!

part 6 seasonal reference the kigo

Being poetry of seasons and nature, haiku makes extensive use of seasonal references, although one *can* write haiku about nearly anything and one can write a haiku without a seasonal reference. But 'kigo', the seasonal reference, and kire (the cut) are the two most important tools you need to understand before stepping deeper into the art of writing haiku. (Refer to the Monday columns on kire, the cut [16th August], and kireji, the cut-marker [22nd August].)

As a poetic tool, the seasonal reference or kigo creates a backdrop against which the action takes place. Kigo can be the name of a season (autumn, spring), or it can use words specific to a particular season, such as blanket, suggesting winter, or blossom, suggesting spring.

Season words collected for over a thousand years appear in a dictionary of sorts called the 'Saijiki' in Japan. I've heard that when a Japanese student goes to a 'sensei' (guru) to learn how to write a haiku, s/he is first given the saijiki to read and is expected to internalise how seasonal changes affect moods and the way that moods reflect the world around one — a great starting point for learning how to show respect and love for mother earth. (Click here to understand more about Japanese kigo words: *The Five Hundred Essential Japanese Season Words*: <http://www.2hweb.net/haikai/renku/500ESWd.html>)

But seasonal references appropriate to Japan may not resonate in India or other parts of the world.

Susumu Takiguchi, of World Haiku Club, states:

The real issue is whether or not finding local season words pertaining to specific climatic and cultural zones or countries in the rest of the world would be possible, plausible, desirable, useful or necessary in terms of making what is written as haiku more like haiku or better haiku. The fact that many poets have thus discarded or dismissed kigo (some have even condemned it as being no more than a weather forecast and not poetry) as inapplicable or irrelevant has damaged haiku outside Japan and denied it cultural and historical depth.

India has always been associated with nature - be it our harvest festivals such as Kojagiri Poornima and Sankranti, or other festivals such as Holi and many more around the year. Many well-known Indian classical ragas are associated with natural phenomena; for example, raag Malhar with rain, raag Deepak with heat, and raag Basant with spring.

Adding seasonal references and cultural memory — bringing something very Indian into your haiku — will create greater resonance for all your readers who understand the cultural

connection. Here is an example: amavasya (no-moon night) comes every month, so how do we place the haiku (below) in a particular season? From the flowing rivers, the reader will know *which* no-moon night I am talking about – the one immediately after our monsoons. Can you picture Ganga gushing and curving down the mountain slopes?

amavasya ...
the river flows on sounds
 the river makes

— Kala Ramesh

the long night ...
an old woman's loneliness
follows me home

— Karen Cesar, USA

the long night refers to winter — when the sun sets early and takes its time to rise. Note how lines 2 & 3 resonate with the seasonal reference in line 1 (the long night). The poem leaves things unsaid for the reader to make the *connect*.

deafening rain —
to think it has no sound
of its own

— Kashinath Karmakar

In this haiku, which won third prize in a major Japanese haiku contest, the phrase “deafening rain” tells us it is monsoon. In India, we are familiar with this word and all that it evokes for us -- our rivers begin to flow like raag Malhar; the hills turn green; there are smiles on farmers' faces; and school begins in many Indian cities when monsoon hits the headlines!

Now enjoy a few haiku which show strong seasonal references: Can you notice how well the seasons are woven into the story and into the scene? If the kigo is just added on, superficial, synthetic, not natural and intrinsic to the poem, then it becomes like a ‘kireji’ (~~the~~ cut-marker/~~the~~ punctuation) that is just added to a fake ‘kire’ (cut). The images resonate with the kigo word and elicit the readers' seasonal and cultural memory. Beauty arises from the balance of images in the subtle, nuanced art of storytelling.

I've chosen a few of my favourites for you to ponder ...

nagasaki ...
in her belly, the sound
of unopened mail

— Don Baird

winter starlight
the sound of the tuning fork
goes on forever

— Lorin Ford

cold evening —
changing my teacup
to the other cheek

— A. Thiagarajan

steeping tea
the time it takes to lose a street
to snow

— Ben Moeller-Gaa

poppy garden ...
in and out of the flowers
the child's red cap

— Keiko Izawa, Japan

spring dawn
I put on
my gender

— David G. Lanoue

By the way, did I hear you say 'haikus'? Haiku is both singular and plural. A hundred haiku remains a hundred haiku!

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cold evening: *The Heron's Nest* IX.2

steeping tea: *The Heron's Nest* XV:2

poppy garden: *The Heron's Nest* VIII.2

spring dawn: *Modern Haiku* 44:3

Passionate about taking haiku to everyday spaces, Kala Ramesh initiated the 'HaikuWALL India,' where she gets graffiti artists to paint haiku on city walls. As part of the TRIVENI: World Haiku Utsav 2016 Kala is holding a full-day haiku & haibun workshop for college students on 22nd September at the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Viman Nagar.