

Matsuo Basho and His Journey in *Oku no Hosomichi*

Aulia Rahman¹

Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

Received: 15-07-2025; Revised: 05-08-2025; Accepted: 21-08-2025; Available Online: 26-08-2025

Published: 31-10-2025

Abstract

This study analyzes Matsuo Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North) through Carl Thompson's travel writing theory. The objective is to explore how Matsuo's poetic travelogue embodies the essential elements of travel writing, such as the narrator's identity, the nature of the journey, cultural encounters, and narrative construction. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research examines selected passages and haiku from *Oku no Hosomichi*, focusing on how Matsuo presents his inner reflections, spiritual quest, and observations of the landscape and people he encounters. The analysis reveals that Matsuo's work documents a physical journey and is a contemplative exploration of self and nature. His style blends lyrical poetry with prose, creating a layered narrative reflecting personal transformation and cultural commentary. Viewed through Thompson's framework, *Oku no Hosomichi* exemplifies key aspects of travel writing, including subjective experience, cultural mediation, and temporal distance. The study concludes that Matsuo's journey transcends mere travel documentation; it becomes a medium for philosophical reflection and aesthetic expression. This research highlights the value of classical Japanese literature as an early and sophisticated form of travel writing, offering insights into how cultural identity, place, and movement are articulated in literary form. The findings also demonstrate the relevance of applying modern theoretical perspectives to traditional texts for a deeper understanding of their literary and cultural significance.

Keywords: Matsuo Basho; *Oku no Hosomichi*; Travel Writing; Carl Thompson

How to cite (APA): Rahman, A. (2025). Matsuo Basho and His Journey in *Oku no Hosomichi*. *KIRYOKU*, 9(2), 559-572. <https://doi.org/10.14710/kiryoku.v9i2.559-572>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14710/kiryoku.v9i2.559-572>

1. Introduction

Poetry is one of the oldest literary works in human history. The content contained within poetry reflects the poet's experiences, knowledge, and feelings, forming a new world that is intended to be conveyed to the reader (Fadli, 2020: 110). Matsuo Basho is one of the most famous poets in Japanese literary history, especially recognized as a pioneer in developing haiku² poetry. When we read all of his haiku, we see Matsuo for who he was: a poet. He was

¹ Corresponding Author. E-mail: akunauli11@gmail.com

Telp: +62 821-6255-2260

² Haiku is a traditional form of Japanese short-form poetry that typically consists of three lines with a syllabic structure of 5-7-5, total seventeen syllables (Ueda, 1991). This concise poetic form often captures a fleeting moment in nature, evokes seasonal imagery, and reflects the emotional or spiritual awareness of the poet in Copyright ©2025, The authors. Published by Kiryoku: Jurnal Studi Kejepangan. This open access article is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

e-ISSN: 2581-0960, p-ISSN: 2599-0497

the poet of weather—of the wind that gets colder, of rain that comes suddenly, of drizzle, hail, and sleet, of snow that changes everything but can also make it hard to see, of hot days, and of ice breaking in jars at night. He wrote about animals and plants, about love and desire, about friendships and sadness, about being grumpy or kind, about city life and the countryside, about being inside and outside, about traveling and staying still, about feeling lonely, and about wanting to be alone (Fitzsimons, 2023: xiii). Born in 1644 in Iga province (now part of Mie Prefecture), Matsuo contributed a literary legacy that not only changed the landscape of Japanese poetry, but also introduced profound aesthetic concepts through his literary works (Shirane, 1998: 63). The haiku he created not only focused on their concise form, but also reflected a profound outlook on life and awareness of nature. One of Matsuo's most significant works is *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North), a travelogue filled with haiku poems describing his journey to the north of Japan. On this journey, Matsuo recorded geographical descriptions and delved into philosophical and spiritual depths through his view of nature. He wrote haiku describing both physical and inner journeys on this journey, blending Zen wisdom with keen observations of nature (Shirane, 1998: 70).

Oku no Hosomichi begins with a reflection on Matsuo's purpose in traveling and continues with an account of his travels to the various places he visited. The structure of the work relies heavily on a combination of haiku poetry and narrative prose, describing each landscape traveled through with great attention to detail. The haiku inserted in the text often expresses moments of personal contemplation or awareness of the natural surroundings. One of the main themes in *Oku no Hosomichi* is man's relationship with nature. Along the way, Matsuo not only records natural sights but also provides philosophical reflections on the meaning of life and the imperfection and impermanence of the world. This is seen in his sensitivity to the changing seasons, sense of beauty in simplicity, and emphasis on moments that seem insignificant but are full of meaning (Matsuo, 2012: 12-18). For example, when Matsuo visits Ouchi Shrine, he muses about the death of a historical figure and how his memory lives on even though his physical form no longer exists. In this way, Matsuo inserts an element of spirituality related to the teachings of Zen, which teaches about transition, uncertainty, and acceptance of the transitory world (Ono, 1991: 84).

In addition to the physical aspects of travel, *Oku no Hosomichi* also chronicles Matsuo's inner journey. In many ways, this journey can be considered a spiritual quest, with Matsuo describing each place he visits as an opportunity to explore more profound meaning. This experience is closely related to the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, which is the appreciation of beauty that arises from simplicity and imperfection. In this journey, nature is not just an object of observation, but also a mirror for Matsuo's feelings and thoughts about life, death, and impermanence (Reichhold, 1999: 24).

In his book *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Matsuo* (1998: 134), Shirane highlights that Matsuo used travel to deepen the concept of *fuuryuu* (風流), a classical Japanese aesthetic that emphasizes appreciation of natural beauty and transience. For example, he describes the place when Matsuo visits Risshaku-ji temple and writes a haiku

response to that moment. The strength of haiku lies in its brevity, clarity, and depth, distilling complex human emotions or philosophical insights into a few carefully selected words (Higginson, 1985).

Copyright ©2025, The authors. Published by Kiryoku: Jurnal Studi Kejepangan. This open access article is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

e-ISSN: 2581-0960, p-ISSN: 2599-0497

about silence and the sound of cicadas. He reaches a deeper awareness of humanity's relationship with nature. Shirane argues that in this moment, Matsuo undergoes an inner transformation as he realizes that silence and transience are part of the essence of life. Makoto in *Matsuo and His Interpreters* (1991: 210) highlights that Matsuo's journey was heavily influenced by Zen teachings, especially the concept of *wabi-sabi* (侘寂), the acceptance of imperfection and transience. In many parts of the text, Matsuo faces physical hardships-fatigue, bad weather, and a journey full of obstacles. However, these are accepted with poise and translated into poetry that reflects spiritual awareness.

Keene in *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era 1600-1867* (1976: 275) argues that *Oku no Hosomichi* reflects Matsuo's search for the meaning of life through travel. According to Keene, Matsuo not only seeks the beauty of nature but also wants to understand history, culture, and the traces of humans in the past. One notable example is when Matsuo visits Hiraizumi, the former capital of the Fujiwara clan, which is now only a ruin. Nelson in *Travel as Transformation in Japanese Literature* (2014: 87) discusses how travel in Japanese literature is often ritualistic. He relates Matsuo's journey to the tradition of *Henro* (遍路), a pilgrimage to sacred shrines in Japan. According to Nelson (2014: 89), Matsuo consciously shaped this journey as spiritual, similar to Buddhist pilgrims walking to temples for enlightenment. Matsuo's journey taught him about the beauty of nature and fortitude, simplicity, and acceptance of an ever-changing life.

Based on previous research findings, it is often revealed that Matsuo made trips. So, to explore this more deeply, the theory of travel writing by Carl Thompson (2011) analyzes how Matsuo builds a travel narrative and how elements of experience, observation, and personal reflection are packaged in the text. Travel writing has become a literary genre that has attracted the attention of many scholars because of its complexity and cultural dimensions. Over time, the genre has evolved from a mere adventure narrative to a cultural expression that reflects ideologies, social values, and political dynamics. In his book *Travel Writing* (2011), Thompson presents an in-depth look at the genre, emphasizing the narrative and interpretive aspects of travel writing. In addition, Young in *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (2013) argues that travel writing has historical roots deeply connected to colonialism and exploration. Youngs argues that travel writing is often a medium for expressing worldviews from the perspective of colonizers or rulers, who seek to document and construct the world they encounter. This makes travel writing not just a matter of physical exploration, but also an exploration of power and cultural domination. Youngs emphasizes that a lot of travel writing influences how we view other cultures, even though the biases and stereotypes of the writer often shape it.

Additionally, Jonathan Raban in *Coasting* (1991) offers a more subjective perspective on travel. Raban writes about travel as a way to experience freedom and overcome cultural and social limitations. In his book, he explains how travel, more than just physical, opens up space for writers to experience profound personal change. Raban focuses more on the introspective aspect of travel writing, which allows writers to understand themselves through their experiences in the outside world. Then there is Catherine P. Belsey in *Narrative and the Travel Writer* (2002), who sees travel writing as a complex form of narrative, which is always related to the dynamics of power and identity. Belsey states that travel writing often shows the tension between individuals and the foreign cultures they encounter, creating a narrative that is

Copyright ©2025, The authors. Published by Kiryoku: Jurnal Studi Kejepangan. This open access article is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

e-ISSN: 2581-0960, p-ISSN: 2599-0497

simultaneously reflective and evaluative of the writer's home culture. This brings a critical dimension that shows that travel is about more than just exploring the physical world, the social and psychological world. Finally, Paul Theroux in *The Great Railway Bazaar* (2003) reveals that in travel writing, writers often experience ethical dilemmas when describing the cultures they visit. Theroux notes that while travel leads writers to profound personal experiences, they must also be careful to create a picture that does not demean the culture or place they describe. This work reflects the author's awareness of the ethical challenges of documenting unfamiliar places and their interactions with locals.

Therefore, in this research, the theory of *Travel Writing* introduced by Carl Thompson will be used, because this research will emphasize the narrative aspect and direct involvement of Matsuo in translating his vision of the surrounding nature encountered in his journey. Furthermore, *Oku no Hosomichi* was chosen as the object material for the research because this work is not just a physical travel record, but also a profound expression of Japanese spiritual and aesthetic experiences known as the concept of *wabi-sabi*.

2. Methods

This research uses a qualitative method with a literary analysis approach. The primary data used is the original *Oku no Hosomichi* by Matsuo Basho, translated by Sam Hamilton. The analysis will focus on the text's narrative structure, language style, and travel elements. Carl Thompson (2011), in his book *Travel Writing*, explains some essential aspects of travel writing:

1. Travel Narrative Structure - Travel writing usually has a pattern of departure, exploration, and return (Thompson, 2011: 2).
2. The Role of the Observer as Narrator - Writers often take on the role of cultural and environmental observer (Thompson, 2011: 110).
3. Tension between Fact and Fiction - Travel writing often mixes documentation elements with subjective reflection (Thompson, 2011: 120).
4. Travel as Transformation - Travel in writing is often used as a metaphor for inner change (Thompson, 2011: 140).

In addition, Thompson in Azhari (2015) also argues that three main elements characterize travel writing: a) Personal Factors; Travel writers often bring a personal perspective in describing their experiences. The writer's identity and background strongly influence the decision to travel and how they approach the new world. Thompson emphasizes that this experience cannot be separated from the subjective perspective of the writer, b) Creation of Representations of Other Worlds: Travel writing often introduces readers to cultures or places considered "foreign". However, Thompson reminds us that this representation is always through the writer's filter, who often projects their cultural prejudices and stereotypes. Therefore, travel writing is often not only a reflection of the world explored, but also a reflection of the writer's social and cultural understanding of that world, c) Conflict with Cultural Understanding: Along with creating representations of other worlds, travel writing also often reflects tensions between the writer's culture and the cultures they encounter. This tension is often seen in the comparisons the writer makes between the values and practices of the culture they consider familiar and those they encounter in the place they are visiting.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Narrative Structure of Travel in *Oku no Hosomichi*

Matsuo embarked on a journey from Edo (now Tokyo) to the interior of Japan. The structure of this journey matches the pattern described by Thompson (2011: 102), where there are stages of departure, exploration, and return.

3.1.1 Departure

Matsuo's journey began in the spring of 1689. In the early part, Matsuo reveals the motivation for his journey and his farewell from Edo:

弥生も末の七日、あけぼのの空朧々として、月は有明にて光をさまれるものから、富士の峯かすかに見えて、上野・谷中の花の梢またいつかはと心ぼそし。
Yayoi mo sue no nanoka, akebono no sora oboroboro to shite, tsuki wa ariake nite hikari o samareru mono kara, Fuji no mine kasuka ni miete, Ueno, Yanaka no hana no kozue mata itsuka wa to kokorobososhi.

"On the 27th day of the Third Month (late March), at dawn, the sky was hazy. The waning moon still hung in the sky. I could make out the peak of Mount Fuji in the distance, and the treetops in blossom at Ueno and Yanaka stirred in me a wistful sense of farewell." (Matsuo, 2012: 3)

This passage captures the moment of Matsuo's departure from Edo and beautifully blends natural observation with emotional resonance. The waning moon, hazy sky, and distant Mt. Fuji all contribute to a tone of melancholy and impermanence. At the same time, the cherry blossoms at Ueno and Yanaka serve as symbols of ephemeral beauty. The phrase "またいつかはと心ぼそし" (*mata itsuka wa to kokorobososhi*) conveys a poignant uncertainty—*will I ever see these sights again?*

It marks the beginning of a geographical and spiritual journey, where Matsuo crosses physical landscapes and thresholds of identity, memory, and poetic tradition.

月日は百代の過客にして、行きかふ年も又旅人也。

Tsukihi wa hyakudai no kakaku ni shite, yukikau toshi mo mata tabibito nari.

"The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on" (Matsuo, 2012: 9)

This quote shows that Matsuo invites readers to see life as a journey in constant motion, where time, nature, and humans are all travelers who never stop. This becomes the premise for the *Oku no Hosomichi*, a record of a physical journey and an inner journey towards a deeper understanding of life.

3.1.2 Exploration

During his travels, Matsuo visits various historical places and beautiful nature, while recording his experiences in prose and haiku. An example of the exploration section is when Matsuo visits the ruins of Hiraizumi:

夏草や兵どもが夢の跡

Natsukusa ya tsuwamono-domo ga yume no ato

"Summer grasses, all that remains of great soldiers' imperial dreams." (Matsuo, 2012: 17)

This haiku reflects Matsuo's reflections on transience and history, as mentioned by Thompson, that exploration in travel includes physical space and the deep meaning of the places visited. This haiku was composed during Matsuo's visit to Hiraizumi, once the seat of the powerful Fujiwara clan. By the time Matsuo arrived in 1689, the area had long fallen into ruin, overtaken by nature. All that remained of the once-mighty warlords were summer grasses, quietly growing over their forgotten battlegrounds (Shirane, 1998). The image of these grasses, thriving in silence, contrasts sharply with the violent ambitions of the warriors who once ruled the land.

Here, Matsuo functions as a traveler or historian and a poetic observer of cultural memory. According to Haruo Shirane (1998: 134), Matsuo's haiku engage deeply with "landscape as a repository of cultural memory," turning the physical site into a space for emotional and historical reflection. The contrast between nature's endurance and human impermanence reinforces the Buddhist worldview that nothing in life is permanent, and that even the grandest dreams fade (Keene, 1976: 75).

Carl Thompson (2011: 02) argues that travel writing often goes beyond describing physical movement to explore the emotional and symbolic landscapes encountered along the way. Matsuo's encounter with Hiraizumi demonstrates this, as his writing moves from simple observation to a reflection on the transience of power, memory, and human ambition. His use of the word *yume* ("dream") signals the unreality and fading nature of past glory, much like a dream that dissipates at dawn.

Moreover, as Thompson (2011: 120) discussed, the tension between fact and poetic fiction is visible here. While Matsuo visited Hiraizumi, the narrative is crafted to evoke a spiritual and emotional effect, rather than simply recording factual history. As Ueda (1991: 210) notes, Matsuo does not recount history for its own sake but reimagines it through the lens of poetic intuition, inviting readers to feel the past through natural imagery rather than intellectual analysis. The scene also represents a pivotal moment in Matsuo's spiritual transformation. In this context, travel is not just physical movement but a journey of inner growth and awareness. Thompson (2011: 140) describes this as a core feature of travel writing: the idea that external exploration leads to internal insight. Matsuo's reflection at Hiraizumi demonstrates how encounters with the decaying remnants of history can deepen one's sense of life's fleeting nature and the importance of mindful presence.

Finally, Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones" (1992: 7) helps understand Matsuo's interaction with Hiraizumi. While Pratt originally applied the term to colonial encounters, her insight that travel writing involves moments where cultures, histories, and identities intersect is highly relevant. Matsuo's reflection becomes a form of dialogue—not with living people, but with the ghosts of history, the mute testimony of a place speaking through its decay.

3.1.3 Return

After his long journey, Matsuo finally returns with a new awareness of life. The final section of *Oku no Hosomichi* emphasizes Matsuo's understanding that travel provides new experiences and changes the way one sees the world.

蛤のふたみに別れ行く秋ぞ

Hamaguri no futami ni wakare yuku aki zo

"A clam torn from its shell, it departs for Futami, in the autumn." (Matsuo, 2012:101)

This is the last line of the prose in *Oku no Hosomichi*. It's intentionally understated. There is no mention of "return" or "arrival home." Instead, Matsuo's journey arrives at a quiet spiritual resting place, near the sacred site of the Meoto Iwa (Wedded Rocks) in Futami.

3.2 The Observer's Role as Narrator

In *Oku no Hosomichi*, Matsuo is an active observer of culture and environment, as described by Carl Thompson (2011: 110). Matsuo describes the places he visits and reflects on each location's cultural significance, history, and emotional atmosphere. Here are some key aspects of Matsuo's role as an observer, along with sample data from the original text.

3.2.1 Observation of Natural Beauty

Matsuo often recorded the beauty of nature on his travels, describing how the scenery affected his feelings and thoughts. One of the most famous examples is his haiku about Matsushima, an island chain known for its beauty:

松島や ああ松島や 松島や

Matsushima ya aa Matsushima ya Matsushima ya Matsushima ya

"Matsushima ya, ah Matsushima, Matsushima!" (Matsuo, 2012: 15)

In this excerpt, Matsuo can barely find the words to describe the beauty of Matsushima. Repeating the place's name three times, he shows his fascination with the scenery he witnessed. This reflects the role of his observation of the incredible natural landscape.

3.2.2 Observation of Historical Places

Matsuo also noted the changes in time in the historical places he visited. One example is the ruins of Hiraizumi, the former center of the Fujiwara clan's long-vanished glory:

荒海や佐渡によこたふ天の川

Araumi ya Sado ni yokotau ama no gawa

The rough sea, stretching out toward Sado, the Milky Way. (Matsuo, 2012: 17)

This haiku reflects how Matsuo sees history as ephemeral. He observes that a place once filled with activity and glory is now left with only weeds as silent witnesses of the past. This is an example of how he visually observes a place and captures its historical significance, a place associated with exile and loneliness. The image of the Milky Way over stormy seas connects the earthly with the celestial, vast, remote, and introspective.

3.2.3 Observation of Traditions and Social Life

Copyright ©2025, The authors. Published by Kiryoku: Jurnal Studi Kejepangan. This open access article is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

e-ISSN: 2581-0960, p-ISSN: 2599-0497

Matsuo was interested in the landscape and history and observed the customs and lives of the people he encountered on his travels. On a trip to Niigata city, he recorded interactions with fishermen and their simple lives:

潮風のしみ入るや 魚の声

Shiokaze no shimiiru ya uo no koe

"The sea breeze seeps in-the sound of fish can be heard." (Matsuo, 2012: 81)

Here, Matsuo shows how natural elements such as the sea breeze can mix with the sounds of human life, especially the fishermen who depend on the ocean for their livelihood. This shows his interest in the relationship between humans and their environment.

3.2.4 Observations on Spiritual and Emotional Elements

In addition to physical observations, Matsuo often reflects on the spiritual aspects of his travels. One notable moment occurred when he visited the Risshaku-ji temple in Yamadera:

静けさや 岩にしみ入る 蟬の声

Shizukesa ya iwa ni shimiiru semi no koe

"Lonely stillness, a single cicada's cry sinking into stone." (Matsuo, 2012: 125)

In this haiku, Matsuo observes how the silence he feels at the shrine mixes with the sounds of nature, creating an atmosphere of meditation and tranquility. This confirms that his journey was not just about the place, but also about inner contemplation.

3.3 Tension between Fact and Fiction in *Oku no Hosomichi*

One of the essential aspects of *Travel Writing* theory proposed by Carl Thompson (2011: 120) is the tension between fact and fiction in travel writing. Travel writing not only serves as a documentation of the physical journey, but also reflects the writer's subjective experience, imagination, and personal interpretation. In *Oku no Hosomichi*, Matsuo Basho mixes elements of factual documentation with poetic and subjective reflections, which makes it more than just an ordinary travelogue.

3.3.1 Fact-based Travel Documentation

Matsuo recorded his route, the places he visited, and the events he experienced. He also mentions the geographical and climatic conditions along his journey in some sections. An example of fact-based travel documentation can be found at the beginning of the text, where Matsuo explains his departure from Edo (now Tokyo):

行春や鳥啼魚の目は泪

Yukuharu ya tori naki uo no me wa namida

"Spring passes and the birds cry out, tears in the eyes of fishes." (Matsuo, 2012: 100)

In this section, Matsuo documents the moment of his departure with a surreal springtime atmosphere, where birds chirp and fish seem to cry. This poetic image depicts departure as something melancholic. In addition, Matsuo also records his physical journey chronologically, such as when he arrives in the city of Hiraizumi and witnesses the ruins of the Fujiwara clan. The information about the places he visited in the text corresponds to real, identifiable locations

Copyright ©2025, The authors. Published by Kiryoku: Jurnal Studi Kejepangan. This open access article is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

e-ISSN: 2581-0960, p-ISSN: 2599-0497

in Japan today.

3.3.2 Subjective Reflection and Imagination in Texts

However, *Oku no Hosomichi* does not only contain factual accounts, but also contains Matsuo's personal reflections, symbolism, and imagination. In many passages, Matsuo treats facts with a poetic touch that makes the reality in his work feel more subjective and symbolic. One clear example is when Matsuo visits the town of Kisakata and describes the scenery by comparing it to Seishi, a legendary woman from China known for her beauty:

象潟や雨に西施がねぶの花

Kisakata ya ame ni Seishi ga nebu no hana

"Kisakata rain, the legendary beauty Seishi, wrapped in sleeping leaves" (Matsuo, 2012: 43)

In this haiku, Matsuo not only documents the scenery of Kisakata that he saw, but also includes mythological references that create a particular emotional atmosphere. The comparison with Seishi³ shows a sense of transient beauty, reflecting the theme of transience that often appears in Matsuo's work.

Matsuo not only documents the rain-drenched natural scene of nebu flowers in Kisakata, but also invokes Xi Shi (Seishi), a legendary beauty from ancient China. Xi Shi (西施) is one of the Four Beauties of Chinese mythology, known for her stunning appearance and tragic story—so beautiful that even fish were said to forget how to swim upon seeing her. Her beauty, however, is inseparable from melancholy and impermanence, as she was ultimately used as a political pawn and faded into myth (Shirane, 1998:141-142).

By comparing the delicate nebu blossoms in the rain to Xi Shi, Matsuo imbues the natural scene with a mythic aura, transforming it from a mere visual impression into a meditation on ephemeral beauty. The fragile flowers are further softened by rain, mirroring Xi Shi's sorrowful grace. As Ueda (1991: 214) notes, the allusion to Seishi introduces a layer of pathos and classical refinement, showing Matsuo's sensitivity not just to landscape, but to the emotional histories embedded in nature.

This cultural layering is also a reflection of Matsuo's cosmopolitan literary style. In the Edo period, educated poets like Matsuo often incorporated Chinese cultural references as a mark of literary sophistication. According to Haruo Shirane (1998: 143), Matsuo deliberately linked Japanese places to transcultural symbols like Seishi to transform local geography into sites of cultural memory.

Thematically, this haiku aligns with the Buddhist notion of impermanence (無常/*mujou*). Seishi's beauty is legendary, but ultimately fading and unattainable, much like the fleeting beauty of the nebu blossoms. Matsuo uses her as a metaphor for the transience of human life and natural splendor (Keene, 1976: 277–278).

³ Seishi is understood to be a mythical or spiritual maiden associated with purity and divine inspiration, believed to have appeared at Shirakawa to offer guidance or protection to travelers venturing into the unknown (Matsuo, 1966)

This moment exemplifies what Carl Thompson (2011: 140) describes as a hallmark of travel writing: travel as internal transformation. The encounter with Kisakata becomes more than a visual observation—it is a spiritual and emotional experience, intensified through literary myth. Thompson also emphasizes that travel writing involves physical landscapes and symbolic terrains (2011: 02), and Matsuo's work here reflects exactly that. He navigates not only the physical terrain of Japan but also a deeper landscape of cultural memory, emotion, and impermanence.

In the end, Matsuo's use of the Xi Shi reference functions as a poetic device to transform the act of travel into a reflective engagement with history, myth, and mortality—a quintessential expression of both *travel writing* and *haiku aesthetics*.

3.3.3 *Haiku as a Bridge between Fact and Fiction*

Matsuo often uses haiku to clarify his experiences, but these haiku also serve as a tool to enrich the travel experience with personal reflections.

五月雨をあつめて早し最上川

Samidare o / atsumete hayashi / Mogami-gawa

Gathering the rains of summer, how swiftly flows the Mogami River! (Matsuo, 2012: 69)

This haiku, composed during Matsuo's journey down the Mogami River in the Touhoku region, showcases how haiku can straddle the line between factual travel narrative and poetic imagination. This poem compresses geography (a real river), meteorology (seasonal rain), and subjective response (awe) into a seventeen-syllable moment that feels both authentic and elevated—thus operating as a poetic bridge between physical reality and Matsuo's inner experience.

3.3.4 *Awareness of Narrative and Imaginative Construction*

As a poet, Matsuo understands that travel is not just about a chronological record of places visited, but also about how the experience is narrated. As Thompson (2011: 120) says, travel writing often cannot be completely objective because narrators always filter their experiences through personal viewpoints.

For example, in one part of the journey, Matsuo describes how he rested under a tree and felt like a hermit living in seclusion:

旅人と我名よばれん初しぐれ

Tabibito to wa ga na yobaren hatsu shigure

"A wanderer, so let that be my name, the first winter rain." (Matsuo, 2012: 128)

In reality, Matsuo does travel as a pilgrim and poet. Still, in his poetry, he constructs a self-identity as a more mystical figure, a spiritual wanderer who crosses the world in search of the meaning of life. This shows that *Oku no Hosomichi* is not just an ordinary travelogue, but also a deliberately constructed narrative with deeper layers of meaning.

3.4 *Travel as Transformation in Oku no Hosomichi*

According to Carl Thompson (2011: 140), one of the key concepts in Travel Writing

theory is that travel in writing is often used as a metaphor for inner change or spiritual transformation. The physical journeys writers undertake frequently reflect changes in their worldview, emotions, and meaning of life. In *Oku no Hosomichi*, Matsuo not only traveled geographically across the northern region of Japan, but also experienced a profound inner transformation, which is reflected in his haiku and prose narratives.

According to Ueda (1991: 195), Matsuo begins the journey with the mindset of a wandering monk, suggesting that the physical travel is part of a spiritual discipline to experience life directly, in all its impermanence. As Matsuo moves deeper into remote regions, he encounters harsh environments and the humble lives of ordinary people, cultivating a sense of humility and identification with the broader world. Keene (1976: 274) explains that Matsuo's recognition of his smallness in the vastness of nature is a key element in his spiritual evolution, aligning with Zen concepts of emptiness and surrender. According to Ueda (1991: 202), Matsuo's heightened sensitivity to nature and his deepening Zen consciousness—a merging of observer and observed, where the poet becomes part of the silence he perceives.

Carl Thompson (2011: 140) would categorize this as a classic example of travel as transformation: Matsuo begins as a poet searching for inspiration, but along the way, becomes a pilgrim of impermanence, his identity subtly remade by landscape, memory, and solitude. As Shirane (1998: 147) notes, Matsuo ends with a quiet return to ordinary life, suggesting that the journey continues literally and metaphorically. The absence of finality reflects the Buddhist belief in ongoing flux and learning. Thompson (2011: 144) argues that this open-endedness is a hallmark of authentic travel writing, where the transformation process is never complete.

3.4.1 *Travel as a Release from the Old Life*

At the beginning of *Oku no Hosomichi*, Matsuo shows that his journey is not just an ordinary expedition but a spiritual quest. In the opening paragraph, he writes:

行く春や鳥啼き魚の目は泪

Yuku haru ya tori naki uo no me wa namida.

"Spring is passing, the birds cry, and in the eyes of fish are tears." (Matsuo, 2012: 6)

This haiku was composed at departure, just after Matsuo left Edo. It reflects his emotional separation from the familiar life, not with joy or excitement, but with a quiet sorrow. Yet this sorrow is also a necessary release, a moment of detachment from his old world, allowing him to embrace the unknown ahead. Though the haiku is brief, it contains deep layers of sentiment, illustrating how travel is not just a change of location, it's a letting go of personal attachments, identity, and past routines. This moment is a clear poetic representation of travel as release from the old life, which prepares the spiritual ground for Matsuo's transformation throughout the journey.

3.4.2 *Travel as Test and Self-Change*

In many parts of the text, Matsuo faces physical and mental challenges that change his outlook on life. One passage that illustrates this inner change occurs when he experiences exhaustion on his long and arduous journey:

風の音、身にしみて心細し

Kaze no oto, mi ni shimite kokorobososhi.

Copyright ©2025, The authors. Published by Kiryoku: Jurnal Studi Kejepangan. This open access article is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

e-ISSN: 2581-0960, p-ISSN: 2599-0497

"The sound of the wind pierces the body, making the heart feel small." (Matsuo, 2012: 37)

In this section, Matsuo faces loneliness and exhaustion, reflecting the spiritual trials he has to go through during the journey. As his body grows tired, he realizes how small he is compared to nature and life, which are constantly in motion. However, this experience also shaped him into a stronger person and made him more aware of the transience of life. He began to accept that suffering is part of the journey and that the beauty of life lies in human uncertainty and limitations.

3.4.3 *Haiku as Reflection of Transformation*

One crucial aspect of *Oku no Hosomichi* is how Matsuo uses haiku to describe his inner changes. In many cases, the haiku he writes before and after the trip show a significant shift in perspective.

One of the most famous haiku in the text was written when Matsuo visited Hiraizumi, the former capital of the Fujiwara clan that had fallen into ruin:

蛤のふたみに別れ行く秋ぞ

Hamaguri no futami ni wakare yuku aki zo

"A clam torn from its shell, it departs for Futami, in the autumn." (Matsuo, 2012:101)

This haiku captures the moment Matsuo ends his long poetic pilgrimage. The symbolism is powerful and multilayered, reflecting inner transformation through the metaphor of a clam separated from its shell. Rather than returning unchanged, Matsuo ends the journey with a haiku that reveals a quiet inner shift. He doesn't dramatize this transformation; he accepts it as part of life's natural flow, just like the seasons and tides. It is a deeply Zen, understated moment.

3.4.4 *Journey to Spiritual Enlightenment*

In the latter part of the trip, Matsuo further demonstrated that this trip was not just an exploration of places but a search for the meaning of life.

雲の峯幾つ崩れて月の山

Kumo no mine ikutsu kuzurete tsuki no yama

"Countless cloud peaks collapse, and there rises, Moon Mountain. (Matsuo, 2012: 85)

Composed during Matsuo's ascent of Mt. Gassan (literally "Moon Mountain"), one of the Three Sacred Mountains of Dewa (出羽三山). The movement from impermanence and confusion (clouds) to illumination (moon) mirrors the Buddhist idea of awakening (*satori*). Though rooted in natural observation, this haiku is a metaphor for Matsuo's inner pilgrimage—shedding worldly concerns and arrival at a more enlightened awareness.

3.4.5 *Homecoming as a New Beginning*

According to Thompson (2011: 140), in travel writing, homecoming often signifies that the traveler has changed and is no longer the same as before departure. This is also the case in *Oku no Hosomichi*, where Matsuo returns with a deeper understanding of life and mortality. Matsuo himself does not give an explicit closure in his text, as if to suggest that his inner journey does not end. He returns to everyday life with a new awareness he has gained from his journey.

4. Conclusions

Travel writing is a narrative of the writer's personal experience and an essential medium for creating a global understanding of the world. In the context of globalization, travel writing plays an indispensable role in shaping people's perceptions of other places and cultures. On the one hand, travel writing can bridge mutual understanding and appreciation of diversity. Still, on the other hand, it can also reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against certain groups or cultures.

Through *Oku no Hosomichi*, Matsuo introduces a work that transcends the limitations of physical travel into an inner journey filled with spiritual quest and philosophy of life. Matsuo conveys his views on nature, impermanence, and the search for meaning in human life through prose and haiku. Before embarking on his journey in *Oku no Hosomichi*, Matsuo Basho held a philosophical understanding of life's impermanence, rooted in Buddhist concepts such as *mujou* (無常). Though he was already deeply respected as a haiku poet in Edo, he experienced a sense of restlessness and spiritual incompleteness, feeling confined by the artificiality and predictability of urban life, and yearning instead for an existential renewal that could only be found through physical and spiritual detachment from worldly concerns.

However, as Matsuo advances through Japan's harsh, remote northern landscapes, sleeping in humble inns and walking in the rain with minimal provisions, his theoretical reflections on impermanence gradually become embodied experiences, and he begins to internalize the truths he had once only intellectually embraced.

Later, in his iconic moment at Risshaku-ji temple, Matsuo achieves a state of meditative clarity, where the boundaries between self and environment dissolve, and he becomes fully present within the moment, listening not as an observer but as a participant in nature's quiet revelations; it is here that he experiences the spiritual culmination of his journey, not in dramatic epiphany, but in the subtle realization that truth is found not in grasping or knowing, but in observing and surrendering.

Thus, by the end of his journey, Matsuo no longer seeks inspiration from nature to compose verse or validate poetic tradition, but instead comes to see poetry itself as a fleeting trace of an encounter with the ever-changing world—a way of bearing witness to transience rather than resisting it—and in doing so, he transforms from a poet in search of meaning into a pilgrim who has found meaning in the very absence of permanence, in the quiet, uncelebrated moments that reveal the unity between self, time, and nature. This work is not only crucial in the context of Japanese literature but also provides universal insights into man's relationship with nature and the search for meaning in life.

References

- Azhari Nasution, A. (2015). GAMBARAN DIRI ANDREA HIRATA DALAM NOVEL EDENSOR: KONSEP TRAVEL WRITING CARL THOMPSON. *Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.v3i1.10425>
- Belsey, Catherine P. (2002). "Narrative and the Travel Writer." *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, edited by David Herman. London: Cambridge University Press.

- Fadli, Z. A., & Salsabila, L. (2020). Struktur Fisik Dan Batin Puisi Kimi Shinita Mou Koto Nakare Karya Yosano Akiko. *KIRYOKU*, 4(2), 110-117. <https://doi.org/10.14710/kiryoku.v4i2.110-117>
- Fitzsimons, Andrew. (2023). *Basho: The Complete Haiku of Matsuo Basho*. California: University of California Press.
- Fujii, Koji (1993). *The Haiku of Matsuo: An Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Higginson, W. J. (1985). *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku*. New York: Kodansha International.
- Keene, Donald. (1976). *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600-1867*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Matsuo, Basho. (1966). *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*. Translated by N. Yuasa. London: Penguin Books.
- Matsuo, Basho. (2012). *The Narrow Road to the Interior and Other Writings*. Translated by Sam Hamill. Boston & London: Shambhala.
- Nelson, Kazuaki. (2014). *Travel as Transformation in Japanese Literature*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Ono, Yoshiko. (1991). *Matsuo Basho: Master of Haiku*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pratt, M. L. (1992). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge
- Raban, Jonathan (1991). *Coasting*. New York: Viking Press.
- Reichhold, Jane. (1999). *Matsuo and His Haiku*. Kyoto: Kobodo.
- Shirane, Haruo. (1998). *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Matsuo*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Theroux, Paul. (2003). *The Great Railway Bazaar*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Thompson, Carl. (2011). *Travel Writing*. New York: Routledge.
- Ueda, Makoto. (1991). *Basho and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*. Stanford: University Press.
- Youngs, Tim. (2013). *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*. London: Cambridge University Press.