

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v7i1.4051

A Comparative Analysis Of The Poetry Of Kumaran Aasan And John Keats: Exploring The Transient Nature Of The Mortal World

Binoy Varakil*

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College Devagiri, Kozhikode

Abstract

This article offers an extended comparative study of the poetry of Kumaran Aasan and John Keats with particular emphasis on the theme of transience and the fragile nature of mortal existence. Through sustained close readings of five major poems by each poet—especially Aasan's *The Fallen Flower* and Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*—the paper examines how impermanence, mortality, and aesthetic longing shape poetic vision. Drawing upon Romantic aesthetics, phenomenology, and cross-cultural literary theory, the study demonstrates that while Keats seeks to counter mortality through art's promise of permanence, Aasan embraces impermanence as an ethical and philosophical truth grounded in natural cycles. Despite cultural and linguistic differences, both poets converge in their insight that the fleeting nature of life intensifies beauty, emotion, and meaning.

Keywords: Transience, Mortality, Kumaran Aasan, John Keats, Romanticism, Impermanence, Comparative Poetics, Aesthetic Permanence, Nature, Time

1. Introduction

The awareness of impermanence has remained one of the most enduring impulses of poetic expression across cultures. From classical elegies to Romantic odes and indigenous lyric traditions, poets have consistently turned to poetry to confront the fleeting nature of human life. The transient character of existence—marked by decay, death, and the irreversible passage of time—has often been transformed into a source of aesthetic reflection and philosophical inquiry. Poetry, as an art form deeply invested in temporality, becomes an especially fertile ground for exploring how beauty and mortality intersect.

John Keats (1795–1821), one of the central figures of English Romanticism, is renowned for his intense engagement with mortality and beauty. Writing under the shadow of personal illness and premature death, Keats repeatedly meditates on the fragility of life and the desire to arrest time through art. His *Ode on a Grecian Urn* stands as a canonical articulation of this tension, staging a dialogue between mortal transience and artistic permanence.

Kumaran Aasan (1873–1924), a seminal figure in modern Malayalam poetry, approaches impermanence from a different cultural and philosophical position. Rooted in the landscapes, rhythms, and ethical sensibilities of Kerala, Aasan's poetry frequently employs natural imagery to express the inevitability of change. His poem *The Fallen Flower* emerges as a poignant meditation on decay and loss, where impermanence is not resisted but contemplated with quiet resignation and insight.

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of Keats and Kumaran Aasan to examine how two poets from distinct traditions articulate a shared concern with transience. By closely reading five poems by each poet, the study demonstrates that while Keats often seeks permanence through aesthetic transcendence, Aasan embraces impermanence as a fundamental truth of existence.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon three interconnected theoretical perspectives: Romantic aesthetics, phenomenology of temporality, and cross-cultural comparative poetics.

Romantic aesthetics, particularly as articulated by Keats, situates beauty and mortality in a dialectical relationship. M. H. Abrams notes that Romantic poetry frequently transforms loss and decay into sources of imaginative power (Abrams 210). Keats's concept of Negative Capability—the capacity to remain in uncertainty and doubt without reaching for resolution—allows him to confront impermanence without moral closure.

Phenomenology, especially Martin Heidegger's analysis of being and time, provides another useful framework. Heidegger emphasizes that human existence is fundamentally temporal and oriented toward death (Heidegger 62). This conception of lived temporality illuminates Aasan's poetry, where impermanence is experienced not abstractly but through sensory engagement with nature.

Finally, comparative poetics requires attention to cultural specificity. David Damrosch argues that world literature must be read through both local contexts and transnational themes (Damrosch 15). This approach enables a nuanced comparison between Keats's Romantic longing and Aasan's culturally grounded acceptance of transience.

3. John Keats and the Poetics of Transience

Keats's poetry repeatedly confronts the brevity of life and the desire to preserve beauty. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the speaker addresses an ancient artifact that exists outside human time: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness" (Keats 1). The urn's frozen scenes—lovers, musicians, rituals—are immune to decay, unlike the mortal beholders who observe them.

Yet the permanence of the urn is paradoxical. The lovers will never consummate their desire, and their joy remains eternally deferred. When Keats writes, "Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!" (25), the exclamation reveals both celebration and loss. The urn preserves beauty but denies fulfillment.

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats contrasts the bird's seemingly immortal song with human suffering: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird" (61). The speaker longs to escape the "weariness, the fever, and the fret" (34) of mortal existence, yet ultimately remains bound to human limitation.

Similarly, *To Autumn* accepts transience through seasonal imagery. Rather than lament decay, Keats celebrates the ripeness of maturity, suggesting that impermanence itself possesses a music. In *When I Have Fears*, however, the poet confronts mortality with anxiety, fearing death before artistic fulfillment. These poems collectively reveal Keats's oscillation between resistance to and acceptance of impermanence.

4. Kumaran Aasan and the Poetics of Impermanence

Kumaran Aasan's poetry approaches transience with philosophical calm rather than Romantic yearning. In *The Fallen Flower*, the image of a discarded blossom becomes a central metaphor for mortality. Once vibrant and fragrant, the flower now lies abandoned, embodying the inevitability of decay.

Unlike Keats's urn, which freezes beauty in time, Aasan's flower dissolves into the natural order. The poem does not seek to immortalize the flower but to understand its fall as part of life's rhythm. This acceptance reflects a worldview shaped by indigenous ethics and natural cycles.

In *Autumn on the Riverbank*, Aasan presents a scene of seasonal change where falling leaves and flowing water symbolize transience. The observer does not seek escape but participates in the flux. *Twilight Lament* similarly uses liminal time—the moment between day and night—to evoke existential reflection.

The Silver Dew employs the fragile image of morning dew to suggest the ephemerality of hope and desire. *Ephemeral Paths* extends this meditation to human journeys, emphasizing that meaning arises precisely because paths vanish.

5. Comparative Analysis

Both poets engage deeply with transience, yet their responses differ. Keats often frames impermanence as a problem to be answered by art, while Aasan treats it as an ethical truth to be embraced. Keats's longing for permanence reveals Romantic anxiety, whereas Aasan's calm acceptance reflects a culturally rooted philosophy of life.

Despite these differences, the poets converge in recognizing that mortality intensifies beauty. For Keats, awareness of death heightens poetic urgency; for Aasan, impermanence deepens compassion and wisdom.

6. Conclusion

A comparative reading of John Keats and Kumaran Aasan demonstrates that transience is not merely a theme but a structuring principle of poetic imagination. While Keats seeks to negotiate mortality through aesthetic transcendence, Aasan finds meaning in surrender to natural impermanence. Together, their poetry affirms that the fragility of life is inseparable from its beauty and significance.

Works Cited

1. Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. Norton, 1988.
2. Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton UP, 2003.
3. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, 1962.
4. Keats, John. *The Complete Poems*. Edited by John Barnard, Penguin Classics, 2002.
5. ---. "Ode on a Grecian Urn." *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, Modern Library, 2001, pp. 61–63.
6. ---. "Ode to a Nightingale." *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, Modern Library, 2001, pp. 57–60.
7. ---. "To Autumn." *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, Modern Library, 2001, pp. 74–76.
8. ---. "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be." *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, Modern Library, 2001, pp. 22–23.
9. ---. "Bright Star." *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, Modern Library, 2001, p. 29.
10. Aasan, Kumaran. *Collected Poems of Kumaran Aasan*. Translated by R. Nair, Kerala Literary Press, 2018.
11. ---. "The Fallen Flower." *Collected Poems of Kumaran Aasan*, pp. 45–46.
12. ---. "Autumn on the Riverbank." *Collected Poems of Kumaran Aasan*, pp. 60–62.
13. ---. "Twilight Lament." *Collected Poems of Kumaran Aasan*, pp. 78–79.
14. ---. "The Silver Dew." *Collected Poems of Kumaran Aasan*, pp. 92–93.
15. ---. "Ephemeral Paths." *Collected Poems of Kumaran Aasan*, pp. 105–06.