



Indian Literature

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The Garden Tantra by Vikram Kolmannskog, Red River, 2024, Pp. 108, Rs. 299/-

My deep fascination with haikai – a genre of poetry that is often associated with Zen Buddhism – is what compelled me to read *The Garden Tantra* by Vikram Kolmannskog. Kolmannskog had posted some of the three-lined poems from his collection that I had found very close to haiku; it was then that I started reading more of his work. I found the title of the book quite intriguing. *Tantra* is an esoteric yogic tradition which broadly relies upon a systematic text, theory, instrument or practice that uses mantras. In Sanskrit, *Tantra* literally means, loom/warp/weave. One might take it as a warp and weft of the poet's experiences within the landscapes of his shared cultural and spiritual heritage. Knowing that Vikram practises Zazen, I was even more fascinated to understand how a poet who follows a meditative discipline views the world around him. How does he perceive transience and impermanence in nature?

One of the greatest American poets and Zen practitioners of our times, Jane Hirshfield has described poetry as the "potential path of awareness." She perceives poetry to be immersed in the mind of openness and connection, as with sitting in meditation. Once in an interview, where Hirshfield elaborated on her experiences with Zazen and Zen, she says that "in zen 'spiritual' isn't something available only to specialists, but something more like water – ubiquitous". Dogen Zenji, a 13th century Zen master, has claimed that "To study the way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, to forget the self is to awaken into the ten thousand things". This means you don't find closeness with others, whether other people or things, by jumping outside your own skin. Intimacy arises with permeability inside your own life. And this *ratna*, I believe, is the soul thread that runs through Kolmannskog's poetry.



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His poems exhibit his unmatched ability to delve deep into nature and illustrate the enduring and intimate relationship between himself and the natural world. The book is more than just a collection of garden verses running through different seasons. In the opening poem, "The Garden Tantra", Vikram writes: "My mother feels rootless, but wherever / she has lived, she has a garden. / In Kisumu, they had frangipani, jasmine, / and magnolia. / In Kolbotn, we had plums. Ba died, / and we planted a cherry tree." When a poet incorporates the spirit of nature into the fabric of his poems, and explores the beauty, complexity and underlying wisdom in nature, such words are born.

In "Squirrel Sutra", he writes, "I am entangled / in human language. / Please teach me / what words to use / about this world. / You sense a threat - / I want to write / a human text. / I let go just enough / to faintly hear you." This creation takes us to the poems of James William Hackett, a pioneer of the English language haiku, who has the largest number of insect and bug haiku to his name. His haiku, such as, "the earthworm wriggles / in confusion, but his head / knows where it is going," and "ladybug you turn / every dew you pass into / an amber jewel," demonstrate the non-dual idea of unity and profound interconnectedness that permeates our being – *Tat Tvam Asi*.

Besides being a writer, a researcher, a human rights lawyer, Kolmannskog is a professor of Gestalt therapy (a form of psychotherapy that emphasizes personal responsibility and focuses on the individual's experience in the present moment). So, when he says, "My cousins spread out, soaking green in sunshine. No wonder I feel at home barefoot on their bodies", "Sometimes you don't notice: / you cross your legs and someone's crushed. / Sometimes you notice and brutally brush them off, / not caring whether they survive or not.", "God is a snail shredding God into smaller pieces, / God is fungi further breaking God down, / God is nitrogen and other nutrients, / God is fertile ground", the readers get to see the imprints of a life-long meditator. He speaks out of his awareness, mindfulness and of this inherent harmony and interconnectedness.

This kind of spiritual awareness, where consciousness and nature flow in and out of each other, teaches one to be within the experience, fearlessly. Kolmannskog attains this state, as he words his thoughts without decorations, in their stark-naked form. They are at times coarse, unrefined, such that they might not appeal to the sensibilities of the purists but "they are unusually refreshing with an unforced clarity," as Arundhati writes in her blurb.

Born to a Norwegian father and a Gujarati mother, Kolmannskog's shared legacy reflects in the language and poetic forms that he explores in this collection. One finds Hindi/Sanskrit words interspersed in his poems.

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Zazen –
a bonsai
absorbing water

Drawing inspiration from a very Indian genre of poetry, *Doha*, a lyrical verse practised by saint poets and bards of sixth century Northern India, he attempts to voice his affirmations, putting a signature "Vira Vikram" to the couplet.

Washing this limb is the way of worshipping Shiva
 What is dirty? What is clean?
 What should be hidden? What should be seen?
 Vira Vikram knows: no shame in awakening

This garden of verses by Kolmannskog flows through different seasons. This again is a very haikai-like attribute, which uses seasonal reference, *Kigo*, in its poetic form. His poems are the fragments and fragrances from his life that seek a sowing, rooting in the soil of their own. They are inward and outward blossoms that have fed on his conflicts and contradictions, his questions and quest. Like a sitting meditation they are seeded in awareness.

Zazen –
 a bonsai
 absorbing water



Teji Sethi

