



SHAMANIC POET

Tainted With Prayers: A Review

This is an ambitious collection written by Ram Krishna Singh III, an accomplished poet, journalist, writer and academic. It's ambitious in that, according to his own words, "*My book is dedicated to a person who recognizes the real truth and has been working for humanity, now under tremendous stress.*" (I want to ask more about 'the real truth', and who of us, if any, have access to such a treasure, but that would be beyond the bounds of a review such as this).

There are forty poems in this collection, some of which are beautiful, some sober, and some are properly hard-hitting in either political, spiritual or materialistic contexts. In addition, there is a handful of 'micropoems' at the end; though none of these are haiku, they do hint at the authors' self-proclaimed love for, and experience with, this form. The last one in the series I found particularly potent;

*"end of May-
scorching heat follows
rain and hail
before iftaar this Friday
prayer promises bliss"*

I do want to address something right up front that I did find distracting throughout *Tainted With Prayers*, and that is Singh's choices around punctuation. For the most part, he uses very little – certainly there's a paucity of periods and commas, though apostrophes and question marks generally take their proper places. Now, I've written poems myself with little or no punctuation; I find it effective in making a poem stand out and it can create deliberate ambiguity with regard to meaning or flow. However, the choice to hardly use any punctuation at all across this entire collection is problematic for two reasons. First, I personally find the minimal punctuation quite exhausting, at times monotonous, and often frustrating because I'm reading and re-reading words that I'm sure are there to convey some deep meaning, but because I can see more than one potential meaning, the power (that I assume is intended) is somewhat lost as a result. Poem 23, *Pollution*, is a great example;

*"Who sees the smoke
of the thumb-sized flame"*

the body burns

*the ashes of silence
float on the holy breast
tears pollute”*

I can read this in a number of ways, punctuating in my head differently each time, and each time getting an entirely different poem.

Here’s my Version A;

*“Who sees the smoke
of the thumb-sized flame?
The body burns.*

*The ashes of silence
float on the holy breast;
tears pollute.”*

Or how about Version B?

*“Who sees the smoke
of the thumb-sized flame
the body burns?*

*The ashes of silence
float on the holy breast.
Tears pollute.”*

One more?

*“Who sees the smoke
of the thumb-sized flame?
The body burns*

*the ashes of silence.
Float on the holy breast.
Tears pollute.”*

Which one of these conveys the intended meaning? Do any of them? Are there meant to be multiple meanings hidden herein? Is the original the only valid version to consider? (It is, after all, the one the poet wrote!) Does it even matter?

The second issue with punctuation here is that it’s not always consistent.

A good example is *Aftermath*, Poem 16, which stands out because it starts with a number of distinct phrases, each closed with a full stop, and this is the first time we see such conventional punctuation;

“Between the mossy and thorned pathways

*shadows slant. He trumps the press and praises PM
wisdom splashed in gonzo arguments
cocks the walk. Others too feel his sting but prefer
silence. They know the caged parrot's free
to shame seven decades of democracy groomed
differently."*

Then, without warning, the poem ditches this refreshing shift in style and the last third reverts to a stream of unpunctuated thought, the like of which we see throughout this book;

*"They know how weak they are
to stop the burning forest's ash from reddening
now aberrations clot in the mind
await Ram's hanging before the wounded converts
count the cries, lashes and piercings"*

The reader in me sees the ghost of a period after 'reddening', and my inner editor itches to end the poem with one, too, after 'piercings'. The fact they are missing distracts from the poem, rather than adds to it, creating within the piece an unwelcome internal inconsistency. Again, if this was deliberate to create ambiguity and uncertainty, then there would be a reason for it and a logic behind it. Unfortunately, it just comes across as being somewhat slap-dash.

Leaving the punctuation issues to one side now, there are some undoubtedly wonderful pieces here. I love Poem 29, *Self neglect*, which begins;

*"Meditation-
living long but failing
to live wide
says Seneca we are
fugitives from ourselves"*

I could spend a happy evening just contemplating that one verse. Then in Poem 32, *Energy block*, Singh uses his economic style to powerfully lay out, in relatively few words, some of the downsides of aging;

*"things get hairy, scary
with body failure
ailments pop up
spirit dries up
mind disconnects"*

In a beautiful, moving and touchingly humorous close to the book, Poem 40, *Profile*, reflects on this poets' non-acceptance in the world of "...back-scratchers / or goody-goody poetic / academia or press" but ends on a triumphant note;

*"but long after I'm dead
buried or burnt to ashes
I may rise again"*

*a tiny phoenix mapped in
fresh DNA of silence
from google's graveyard"*

(Even here, I want to put a comma at the end of the first three lines, capitalise Google, and end with a period. I just can't help myself...)

The Punctuation Problem arises in a third form, for me, in the Micropoems at the end. Since these, too, are largely devoid of punctuation, they appear, at first glance at least, as if they are multiple verses of a single poem, because many of the preceding poems look like this, too.

The collection comes in a bi-lingual format, with the Columbian poet Joseph Berolo expertly translating (or, in his word, interpreting) Singh's poems. I am, alas, a monolingualist, and am therefore unable to review the Spanish versions.

Interestingly, in an accompanying piece, Berolo directly addresses the punctuation himself, saying, "... *I have been deeply moved by the sensual and spiritual sense of his poetry, his fluidity, free of points and commas, that make it run like water through ritualistic idiomatic sinuosities that sometimes demand explanation, or imagination.*" What I see (mostly) as a weakness, Berolo sees as a strength – a splendid illustration of the beauty and variety in the ways in which poetry strikes and resonates differently with different people at different times.

Having read through *Tainted With Prayers* a few times now, and jumped around within it while writing this review, I'm left with a sense that I'll be returning to this collection several more times before the month is through. There is clearly a lot going on in some of these pieces, and you would be well advised to spend time with them, allowing them space to simmer and percolate in their own time, and at their own pace.

February, 2020

www.shamanicpoet.com