

REVIEW: In the Fire of Dancing Stillness

REFLECTIONS WITH VIMALA THAKAR, A FILM BY RENATA KELLER

110 MINUTES; RELEASED MAY 2020 | ENGLISH AND GERMAN LANGUAGE/SUBTITLES

REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH DEBOLD

Vimala Thakar is a spiritual and social revolutionary for our time. She defies categorization, as she saw no difference between the urgency to transform our inner selves and the outer world. Yet her crucial insights might have been lost to us without this important film by Renata Keller.

Keller brings the power of this courageous Indian woman back to life. Vimala died in 2009, yet, as Keller shows so clearly, her words are only more relevant now than they were when Vimala was teaching in the last decades of the 20th century. One of the startling aspects of the film is the recognition that we have not responded to the crisis that Vimala was pointing to—and that not doing so has led to the metacrisis that is unfolding in so many dimensions in our midst.

Weaving together Vimala's extraordinary life story, her powerful message to us all, and Keller's own engagement with Vimala, Keller's loom is the silence that Vimala calls us to. A boatman repeatedly sinking his pole into the water, the banks of the river Ganga, an eagle soaring in the blue sky, and the meticulous precision of a sand painting of the goddess Durga being drawn on the floor of a temple, all open a space in the film that invites the viewer to slow down and sink into depth.

Vimala was always an unusual person. Born to a very progressive, high-caste intellectual family, Vimala was encouraged by her fa-

ther to inquire into life and not fall under the authority of any belief system or any authority. Fiercely independent, Vimala refused to marry and as a young woman joined the Gandhian land gift movement. This movement, as the film rightfully points out, was a bloodless revolution that may be unique in human history: led by Vinoba Bhave, Vimala and others went throughout India on foot to ask wealthy landowners to give allotments of land to the poor. Keller shows us remarkable archival footage of the movement—with photos of the petite Thakar walking next to Bhave followed by throngs of Indians.

The film touches upon Vimala's fateful meeting with the spiritual sage, J. Krishnamurti. Knowing that Vimala was plagued by tormenting ear pain following a car accident, Krishnamurti—who has never been known as a healer—cured her. The film creates a re-enactment of a conversation between the sage and the young woman, where he calls her to step forward and wake people up. Uncertain about how to express the realizations that she apparently was having, Vimala demurred. But, eventually, she began and for thirty years she traveled the world giving talks and holding meditation camps.

The presentation of Vimala's teaching career is particularly striking. Keller has actual footage of Vimala teaching—her voice, loud



The director with schoolgirls in the house of Vimala Thakar.

and clear, ringing out a message of urgency about the crisis of separation and inner and outer violence created by the human mind. She calls us—even now—to discover the wholeness of life beyond the mind and its knowledge. She invites us into the security of the vast unknown.

Witnessing the unique power of this rare woman teacher, it's hard not to feel sadness that she wasn't more well known. Her former assistant, Kaiser Irani, is experimenting with innovative eco-gardening technologies. While she speaks to Keller in the film, it's clear that she herself has no real interest in continuing Vimala's lineage. Keller visits the house where Vimala lived for thirty years. It's now almost a ghost house. However, there is a bright spot: in the floor below Vimala's abandoned rooms, there is a girls' school. Some of the girls, curious, come to see what Keller and one of Vimala's friends are doing—and ask who this woman was who had lived there before. In the exchange, and the mutual delight in the meeting between generations, there is a hint of what may follow. Could Vimala, and what she represented as a teacher and a woman, become a beacon for a younger generation? Fortunately, we now have Keller—both through the film and in her commitment to Vimala's legacy—to seed that possibility. 

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