

Review of *Kamasutra* by Vatsyayana Mallanaga, trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, *Sagar: South Asia Graduate Research Journal*, vol. 12, n. 1 Spring 2004, 126-128.

### Real Erotik

Vatsyayana Mallanaga, *Kamasutra: A new complete English translation of the Sanskrit text with excerpts from the commentary of Yashodhara Indrapada, the Hindi Jaya Commentary of Devadatta Shastri, and explanatory notes by the translators*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (Oxford University Press: New York: 2002)

The ex-C.E.O.s and unreformed hippies who joined hands in an L.A. version of tantric orgy on HBO's Real Sex the other night certainly make up the ideal readership Wendy Doniger imagines for her new translation: "people who are free to choose their partners." For Doniger this means "it is for us". Doniger and Kakar's wide modern audience has been only one of the many the *Kamasutra* has instructed since Prajapati Brahma ordained the composition of a treatise on *kama* (sexual pleasure) by Lord Shiva's attendant Nandikeshvara, whose one thousand lessons dwindled to 500 in the hands of Uddalaka's son Shvetaketu and then to one hundred and fifty once the Panchala Acharya Babhravya took up the science. Babhravya divided the science into seven domains of inquiry (General Observations, Sex, Virgins, Wives, Mistresses, Courtesans and Esoterica) and bequeathed them to later researchers such as Charayana, Gonikaputra and Suvarnabha, who further reduced the legendary far-flung science to a humanly manageable size and generally specialized in one of the seven domains of the science of pleasure. Vatsyayana's work sought to bring the disparate domains together in one treatise and by affirming sexual pleasure as an end in itself aimed to make it compatible with the two other human ends (purushartha), Dharma (religion) and Artha (power). "Undertake any project that might achieve / the three aims of life, or two, or even just one, / but not one that achieves one / at the cost of the other two", exhorts Vatsyayana. To what degree this moral message may have been observed in Vatsyayana's own third century C.E. India is of course a difficult question, but Yashodhara's thirteenth century commentary, the *Jayamangala*, already tends toward an emphasis of the erotic over other ends. It is not surprising that the 1893 translation by the adventurer Richard Burton is accurate when it comes to sexual positions, but not much else. Such a trend has continued into the present, practically submerging the original text of the *Kamasutra* under a plethora of porn, toys, games, gimmicks, guides, cartoons and condoms. So Doniger and Kakar's restitution of a rich multifaceted text through extensive research in Sanskrit and Hindi sources is no small feat and will certainly be of interest to any audience jaded by all the regular hoopla – and, of course, those forever titillated by it.

Perhaps no other textbook in the history of the world has lent itself to so many fanciful readings and appropriations, including Doniger's own interpretation of it as essentially a dramatic fiction in seven acts or Kakar's view that it is a memento of a real "psychological war of independence" of some two thousand years ago. It would indeed be surprising if one was never lofted into daydream or full-blown heroic fantasy by this textbook's typology of slapping and scratching, its strategies for picking up virgins, or ways of managing wives, courtesans and other men's wives and so forth. Vatsyayana himself gets swept away by it all. At his most original and imaginative, he brings into the purview of fantasy even female sexuality and insists that in the case of sexual climax there is no distinction between the essences of the male and

female subjects. Vatsyayana thus posits a disembodied ecstatic subjectivity at the limits of ethics and scientific knowledge: “When the wheel of sexual ecstasy is in full motion, there is no textbook at all, and no order.” Such is the pursuit of pleasure, or the pursuit of science, that possibilities of moral subversion always loom large. In this manner, the *Kamasutra* often seems the sexual counterpart to the *Arthashastra*’s realpolitik: its vision of *realerotik* is just as uncompromising and its science goes perverse in accounting for all the possible mindsets, against the regulations of Dharma itself. The predatory man-about-town, the calculating courtesan and the self-serving senior wife all tend toward various extremes in their attempts to maximize sexual prowess, and Vatsyayana often ends up having to indicate possible social repercussions. Considering the vast array of sexual fact in the classical epic works, the varying customs associated with marriage, the range of regional sexual appetites and the diversity of sexual pleasure in Indian tradition, Vatsyayana’s delimitation of the object becomes increasingly difficult, especially within the confines of any particular coherent social order. The object’s scientific inexhaustibility ultimately gives way to fantasy and imagination, and in this manner the *Kamasutra* fills in the backdrop for much of classical Sanskrit erotic poetry. Thus we find in Vatsyayana a psychological portrait of the *Amarushataka*’s pining house wife, the common prostitute of Damodara’s *Kuttanimata* and other stock characters such as the libertine, panderer and clown. The inspiration to poetic fantasy for centuries, there is no telling what *Kamasutra* will inspire in new enthusiasts of this new translation, especially in an age when America and India all too often find each other reflected in their respective erotic fantasy.

There is much more for the student of South Asia to take from this work than merely lessons on getting lucky in love or drugging someone in case that is not happening. Doniger and Kakar’s impressive scholarly apparatus raises a series of questions worth pursuing, as it gleans classical and modern commentaries to dig up valuable background information of philological, mythical, philosophical and historical sorts. How do the urban social and moral orders of the *Kamasutra* tally with those of other texts such as Hala’s equally raunchy but bucolic *Gathasaptashati* or the idylls of Krishna and Radha in early modern vernacular poetry? Which works of the Indian tradition build on the sociology and psychology of the *Kamasutra* and which diverge from it? Does traditional knowledge of sexuality in India remain confined to the seven major domains continued by *Kamasutra* and its abridged version, the *Anangaranga*, or did new types of research evolve alongside the new logic, linguistics and other branches of science in early modern India? The selections from Devadatta Shastri’s 1964 Hindi commentary “Jaya” as well as references to other modern Indian language editions bring to the fore questions about the interpretation of traditional knowledge in the wake of colonial and national sexual countenances. Furthermore, the illustrations beautifully reproduced from a Nepali manuscript and presented in the translation reveal some of the conventions of depicting sex in painting. These beg further analysis of the relation between scientific text and illustration, or full-blown sculpture as in the famous temples of Konark and Khajuraho. This is all to say that despite the fame of this text and its role in the contemporary eroticization of India both East and West, very little of a concrete contextual nature seems to be known about traditional sexuality in India or the long history of idioms and practices relating to sex. In contemporary Indian society, sex and sexuality are often veiled by a silence seemingly foreign to the frankness of Vatsyayana’s work. Ignorance of the past and contemporary silence provide a screen upon which a variety of fantasies and understandings of modern Western origin, such as those shared by Doniger, Kakar and members of their “post-moral world,” are so easily projected, and occasionally prove penetrating.

