

The *Kamasutra* and its Audiences

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The *Kamasutra*, written in the third century, is not only an erotic work: it is also a treatise on the art of living for comfortable city-dwellers, whatever their caste or sexuality--and whether they are stallions, bulls, or hares, elephants, mares, or does.

Reviewed: Wendy Doniger, *The Mare's Trap: Nature and Culture in the Kamasutra*, New Delhi, Speaking Tiger, 2015, 182 p.

In *The Mare's Trap* (2015), the American Indianist Wendy Doniger takes us on a voyage across space and time to discover first century Indian society. In her book, through a reading of Vātsyāyana's *Kamasutra* (third century CE), a Sanskrit text that is both famous and poorly known, she offers us an anthropology of comfortable and cultured city-dwellers in ancient India that focuses on their erotic life, while also searching the text for the words and perspective of women. At the same time, she situates this singular work within a variety of contexts.¹

The work's Sanskrit title means "treatise" (*sūtra*) on "desire/love/pleasure/sex."² *Sūtra* literally means "thread" and, as a literary genre, it refers to a normative text consisting of a series of "lines" that present essential rules relating to particular topics, such as ritual, grammar, and yoga. Contrary to *sūtra* that are aphoristic or written entirely in verse in an extremely condensed style which can only be understood with the help of commentaries, the *Kamasutra* is written in prose, with chapters that often conclude with a couplet or two summarizing their content or ironically reminding the reader of the norms from which the text has strayed. The *Kamasutra* can, moreover, be read independently.

Addressing "Man's Ends"

For anyone seeking to understand what this book is about and what it questions, Doniger's book offers a reliable guide. Like the treatise it discusses, *The Mare's Trap* is divided into seven chapters, which deal respectively with the strange and the familiar, in a way that parallels Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (written between 100 BCE and 100 CE.), Ancient India's great "Handbook of Political Arts": mythology, women, the gender known as the "third sex," the nature of culture and sex, and, finally, the *Kamasutra*'s rise and fall. In the first chapter, Doniger defines the *Kamasutra* as an art of living. Though it presents itself as a textbook, she sees it, at a deeper level, as a dramatic work of art (pp. 26-27). Indeed, as in Sanskrit theater, the text is divided into seven acts. In the first, the hero prepares the room in his home that is dedicated to sexual pleasure. In Act II, he perfects his sexual technique. Next (Act III), he seduces a virgin and lives with a couple wives Act IV). But soon he grows weary

¹ In 2002, Wendy Doniger also published, with the Indian writer and psychanalyst Sudhir Kakar, a complete translation of the *Kamasutra*, supplemented with excerpts from the main commentary of the work by Yaśodhara Indrapada (thirteenth century): Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra: A New Translation*, by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002 (repr. Oxford World's Classics Paperback, 2003 and 2009).

² Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra: A New Translation*, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

of them, so he seduces other men's wives (Act V). When he tires of them, he begins to frequent courtesans (Act VI). Finally, when he is too old to continue without medication, he turns to aphrodisiacs and magical charms (Act VII).

The story of this treatise, which is also a play, is tied to two other great handbooks dealing with man's two primary ends, according to the three comprising the canonical Brahman list: *dharma* (the duty to obey the cosmological and social order); *artha* (power and wealth); and *kāma* ("desire/love/pleasure/sex"), to which was later added *moksa* ("liberation" from the cycle of rebirth). These handbooks constitute the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (the "Code of Manu's Laws," written in verse in the second century CE) and the previously mentioned *Arthaśāstra*.

The three elements of the *dharma-artha-kāma* triad are often ranked. The canonical order places *dharma* above *artha*, with *kāma* at the bottom. The *Kamasutra* respects the traditional hierarchy: Vātsyāyana observes that "when these three aims—*dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*—compete, each is more important than the one that follows." (1.2.14)³. But the very same Vātsyāyana also points out, as Doniger mischievously notes, that it is still possible to have sexual relations that ensure one's lineage (in which case *dharma* depends on *kāma*) or that increase one's political power (meaning that *kāma* determines *artha*) (1.5.1-12)⁴.

As it relates to these issues, Doniger's main argument in *The Mares's Trap* concerns the way in which the *Arthaśāstra* shapes the *Kamasutra*'s content as well as its broader philosophy (p. 35-70). On the one hand, the body of both texts, written in prose, includes pragmatic instructions that disregard *dharma*. On the other, whereas the *Mānavadharmasāstra* admonishes its readers to avoid marginal characters, the two other treatises recommend using their services. Finally, the *Kamasutra* shares the obsession with spying and recourse to middlemen that is characteristic of the *Arthaśāstra*. In the treatise on the political arts, for example the king, or his ministers, asks spies to identify, in an enemy kingdom, discontented men who can be used against their own state. In comparable way, in the *Kamasutra*, a man who desires sexual access to neighboring women makes use of middlemen to find out which of them might be seduced—the long list enumerating them extends from women who gaze at the street from their terraces to those whose husbands travel frequently, by way of those who are married to the oldest brother of a group of siblings—so as to try to persuade them to visit him.

The Comfortable Citizens of Ancient India

But who are the *Kamasutra*'s characters? And at what audience is the text aimed? The social universe of the treatise is privileged: the lovers it describes must be rich and have a great deal of free time, while the readers it addresses are clearly princes, top civil servants, and wealthy merchants. That said, in a way that is almost unique in Sanskrit literature, this text, which is more culturally than ideologically Brahman, is largely indifferent to social class (*varna*) and caste (*jati*): all that matters is wealth. If Vātsyāyana disapproves of sexual

³ On these questions, see notably Charles Malamoud, "Sémantique et rhétorique dans la hiérarchie des 'buts de l'homme,'" *Archives européennes de sociologie* 22 (1982), p. 215-238, reprinted in Malamoud, *Cuire le monde: rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne*, Paris, La Découverte, "Textes à l'appui," 1989, p. 137-161—and Friedrich Wilhelm, "The Concept of Dharma in Artha and Kama Literature," in *The Concept of Duty in South Asia*, eds. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty and J. Duncan M. Derrett, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978, p. 66-79.

⁴ Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, New York, Penguin, 2009, p. 204. On this book, see notably the review by Raphaël Rousseleau, "Comment l'hindouisme est devenu une religion," *La Vie des idées*, November 19, 2009 (ISSN: 2105-3030. URL : <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Comment-l-hindouisme-est-devenu.html>).

relations with peasant and tribal women, it is because they could negatively influence the city-dweller's erotic refinement and sensibility (pp. 21-22).

Doniger, who has written a kind of anthropology of these comfortable city-dwellers, probes the text for how they live when they are not busy making love. She sees them as living in the capital or major cities, or at least cities in which one can enrich oneself. Their wives manage their luxurious homes and their mistresses are expected to take care of their own needs. Vātsyāyana's description of the comfortable city-dweller's typical day is one of his *sūtra*'s most inspired passages, written in a polished and refined style, from which Doniger quotes a long excerpt (pp. 23-26).

The Comfortable City-Dweller's Sex Partners

Women are the comfortable city-dweller's primary partners, but they are not his only ones: men can be as well. As for women, part of book three offers virgins advice finding husbands, book four consists of instructions for educated women (primarily courtesans, but also the daughters of kings and ministers), and book six is said to have been commissioned by courtesans from Pataliputra. Vātsyāyana shows himself attentive to women's sexuality and pleasure, having—according to Doniger, who is fond of lengthy comparisons between past and present and East and West—“far more subtle views [than those which] prevailed in Europe until very recently” (p. 99).

Yet even if he, from time to time, allows the women to speak directly, Vātsyāyana nevertheless assumes that he, as a man, possesses a monopoly on legitimate speech and sees sexual harassment as entirely legitimate: powerful men are entitled to any woman they may desire, particularly those who are socially inferior and that they can take with no scruples.

The comfortable city-dweller may also have relations with men having “reverse gender roles” (p. 111). In referring to them, the *Kamasutra* does not use the pejorative term *kliba*, which in Sanskrit refers to any sexually deficient man, but speaks rather of a “third nature” (*tritiyā prakṛti*), in the sense of a third form of sexual conduct, and uses the feminine pronoun to refer to men who have this “third nature.”

After male homosexuality, Doniger turns, in her exploration of the *Kamasutra*, to female homosexuality (pp. 120-121). Vātsyāyana was the only writer of his time to discuss this topic: he not only describes women using dildos, fruits and vegetables that are shaped like erect penises, but also statues of ithyphallic masculine creatures and women who engage in sexual acts with other women.

The Sexual Practices of the Comfortable City-Dweller and his Partners

Whether with women or with men, there are indeed very numerous ways in which the comfortable city-dweller can copulate, which are described systematically in book two. The latter begins with a typology of partner based on the size of their sexual organs: men can be stallions, bulls, or hares, and women elephants, mares, or does—as well as their endurance and temperament. Next comes how to embrace, kiss, claw, and bite, before we get, at last, the positions and practices for which the *Kamasutra* is famous. These gymnastics, which are often improbable or at least best left to experts, can be accompanied by slaps from the man and moans on the part of the woman. The chapter concludes with thoughts about the art of beginning and ending; on passion's different forms, each of which colors sexual acts in a distinctive way; on possible fantasies that may accompany the latter; on the fact that the

comfortable city-dweller may, as we have seen, exercise his skills without the least civility on a peasant or a servant; and on lovers' quarrels.

In the chapter of the book entitled "The Mare's Trap: The Nature and Culture of Sex" (p. 125-146), Doniger claims unambiguously that according to book two, contrary to what contemporary sexology maintains, size matters and that if, ideally, equality is best, it is preferable that the man be better endowed, as the woman is naturally "fatter" (p. 128). The size of sex organs has a major impact on desire, which is further determined by two additional criteria: duration and intensity. Generally speaking, women, as Vātsyāyana understands them, have sexual desire that is eight times as great as that of men and they are, moreover, harder to satisfy. The question for the man is thus that of bringing a woman to orgasm: for this reason, penis size and endurance are, according to the *Kamasutra*, decisive.

Yet Doniger sees the text as offering several means for mitigating male sexual deficiency, ranging from the adoption by the woman of special postures and contractions, including the "mare's trap," when she mounds the man (p. 138), to the use of sex toys and an entire pharmacopeia. She also shows how Vātsyāyana more often identifies women with animals than she does men: "the eight kinds of screaming" (2.7.16) that they make during sex are not human in the least, resembling, rather, the cries of birds. These screams, which at times indicate rejection or pain, are not to be considered by the man who, in these circumstances, Doniger explains, adopts the mindset of a rapist (p. 68 and 141).

The text's animal imagery also relates to sexual moves: thus, depending on how vigorous they are, the man's thrusts are described as belonging to a "boar" or a "bull," and love play is compared to the excitement of sparrows. In Doniger's view, all of this, along with the characterization of sexual traits in terms of three animal categories, implies that, in a sense, "sex, even when done according to the book, as it were, is bestial" (p. 141).

But this is true only up to a point, for humans can "use culture" (p. 142). Indeed, Vātsyāyana states from the very beginning that, unlike animals which manage their sexual lives independently and spontaneously, men and women depend upon one another, that their sexual life is more repressed than that of animals and that to best manage it, they need a method and knowledge—in short, a *Kamasutra*.

You Can't Have Anthropology without Myths and Stories

There is another cultural dimension in which the comfortable city-dwellers described in the *Kamasutra* are steeped: that of mythology and stories, which Doniger considers in chapter three of her book, entitled, "The Mythology of the *Kāmasūtra*" (p. 71-91). Indeed, Vātsyāyana attributes the writing of the first treatises on *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* to figures of Hindu mythology. Doniger also shows how Vātsyāyana and his commentator Yaśodhara appropriate various well-known stories from Brahman mythology, some of which are drawn from the two great Sanskrit epics, in order to explain particular situations, offer useful advice, and to issue warnings to men as well as to women.

The Text and its History

In her book's first chapter, it is Doniger's turn to tell a story, that of "The Rise and Fall of Kāma and the *Kāmasūtra*" (p. 147-164). She begins by giving the background of the event that was the first appearance of the *Kamasutra*, recounting the history of the theme of romantic desire in Brahman literature, from the Vedas to court literature by way of the

Upanishads and Tantras. Next, she adds that the *Kāmasūtra* “exerted a profound influence on subsequent Indian literature” (p. 152).

Turning her gaze, in the next section, to the colonial period, Doniger connects the *Kamasutra*'s decline (its “detumescence,” she takes obvious pleasure in writing) to the influence of British Protestantism. In her view, the present-day Hindu movements that she classifies as “neo-Vedantic” are the heirs of this censorship, which has been appropriated by political Hinduism, whose proponents are now in power in India. Yet she notes that some liberal Indian intellectuals attributed the decline of Indian erotic literature to the alleged religious fanaticism of Mughal sovereigns and blamed both Muslim religiosity and Victorianism for the damage it inflicted on Indian eroticism. While Doniger does not entirely reject these arguments, she nevertheless reminds us of the interest of Muslim noblemen and sovereigns in Hindu literature in general and erotic literature in particular. They commissioned Persian translations and explicit pictorial representations. She also reminds us that India had long had “its own homegrown traditions of prudery in opposition to its own sensuality” (p. 154).

In this context, Doniger devotes particular attention to the first great Western translation of the *Kamasutra*: that of Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), one of the most pirated of English books following its publication in 1883, which was first published legally in the United Kingdom and the United States in 1962. This translation, for which Burton was assisted by two Indian *pandits* and an English co-translator, is described by Doniger as a “mistranslation” (p. 156). She criticizes Burton for having made several changes to the text and particularly for his treatment of women: Burton, for example, eliminates or edits passages of the *Kamasutra* in which women are granted important privileges.

The Mare's Trap is undoubtedly the best available introduction to the *Kamasutra*, in Doniger's and Kakar's translation for all those who are not comfortable with Sanskrit. As we have tried to show here, the author manages to cull from the treatise a kind of anthropology of the comfortable city-dweller of ancient India, which she approaches—*Kamasutra oblige*—primarily from the standpoint of erotic life, while giving a large role to his sexual partners, whose voices she tries to recover. She also tries to put the text's distinctive character into perspective, showing how it was often transgressive of social norms.

One also finds in this book some of Doinger's favorite themes—those who are present in her great controversial synthesis, the offbeat *The Hindus: An Alternative History*⁵: the deviants, the excluded, the women, the homosexuals, the animals, sex, violence, and so on.

Thanks to its immense learning, many quotes from the *Kamasutra*, lively style, energetic tone, and unexpected and provocative comparisons between ancient India and the contemporary West, *The Mare's Trap* is genuinely a pleasure to read.

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⁵ Ibid.