

Book Review

Wendy Doniger, *Redeeming the Kamasutra*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780190499280. Price: \$ 24.95. Hardback. 182 pages.

Wendy Doniger, Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, and arguably the *doyenne* of Sanskrit literature and Hindu religion, has produced another of her signature work of translation and exegesis of the much misunderstood (and abused) Hindu erotology, the *Kāmasūtra* of Mallanāga Vātsyāyana (4th century BCE) —at once a handy no-nonsense academic work for lay readership and a serious discourse (albeit with the familiar “twinkle of Doniger’s” prose) on this ancient book.¹ She intends to carry out a number of corrections in the work of the pioneering English translator the great Victorian Orientalist Sir Richard F. Burton², compare and contrast the *Kāmasūtra* with an even older treatise, the *Arthaśāstra* (3rd century BCE) of Cāṇakya Kauṭilya (350-275 BCE), Emperor Chandragupta Maurya’s (320-296 BCE) mentor and minister, and thus demonstrate the relevance of Vātsyāyana in the postmodern present. Doniger’s primary objective is somewhat political as well as polemical. Responding to the current rise of Hindutva movement, she declares: “This made me realize how important it was to try to remind contemporary Indian readers that the *Kamasutra* was an occasion for national pride, not national shame, that it was a great and wise book, not a dirty book” (12).

In clear and crisp prose, the author provides a new reading of the *Kamasutra* that (i) brings out the closeted erotica into open, (ii) debunks all detractors of human sexuality, and above all,

¹The quoted phrase is borrowed from Fears (April 7, 2011). Online: eroticreviewmagazine.com/review/kama-sutra (accessed 6/14/2017).

² Burton (1883).

(iii) includes a spirited comparative analysis with the *Arthaśāstra* with a view to making both Indian authors converge on numerous ideas on human sexuality. Doniger's second chapter titled *Kautilyan Kamasutra* seeks to demonstrate the influence of the *Arthaśāstra* on the *Kāmasūtra*. Although this is not an absolutely novel idea, its systematic elaboration is admittedly new. Indeed, in several instances, both writers' opinions on sex and sex workers converge. Another novelty of Doniger's study consists in her postmodernist and postorientalist conclusion in which she writes about emasculation of primarily phallic Hindu religion and sacred texts because of the cultural surgery of the British evangelicals and about the resurfacing of Hindu erotica in post-independent India, reminiscent of the resurrection of the reconstructed god of lust Madana following his incineration by the lord of *liṅgam*, (164).³

Arguably, Professor Doniger is a renowned Sanskritist and one of the most engaging scholars as well as interpreters of Hindu religion, mysticism, and religious folklore, witness the massive bibliography of her published scholarship. Sadly however, in the book under review, apparently researched in haste and composed more in zest than in earnest, she makes, unwittingly, some "sweeping generalizations and flippant insertions."⁴ According to her, Vātsyāyana's descriptions of male gay lovemaking was distorted in Richard Burton's puritanical rendering of oral sex of eunuch shampooers. The issue at stake is the identity of the people of the *tr̥tīya prakṛti*

³ Doniger believes that the Protestant missionaries were responsible for popularizing prudery among the free-spirited Hindus. One needs to peruse the Bengali polymath of Oxford, the late Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *Bāmālī Jībane Ramanī* [Woman in Bengali Life], 1399 BE and *Ātmaghātī Bāmālī* [Suicidal Bengali], 1399 BE to gauge the extent of missionary influence on the sensual and sexual sensibilities of the Bengalis, the first group of Indians to come under Western power and culture. Also, Doniger writes about the "Protestant habit of censorship" (163) whereas, historically speaking, it was the Catholic Church that instituted it as the notorious *Index librorum prohibitorum* (1559). The evangelicals never sermonized on wholesale boycott of sex but preached against excessive, obsessive, and illicit sexuality for its deleterious physical and moral consequences on individuals and on society at large. On the other hand, it's a Hindu priest of the goddess Kālī who, in the late nineteenth century, popularized almost a fetish of life without *kāminī-kāncana* [lust and lucre]. See Sil (2009): ch. 4.

⁴ See Debroy (2016). On p. 23 of *Redeeming the Kamasutra* the correct Sanskrit word for a "man-about-town" should be *nāgaraka* (or *nāgarika*), not "nagaraka," which is non-sensical. Doniger similarly confuses *klība* with *klaibyaṃ* while citing Canto 2 verse 3 of the *Bhāgavadgītā* (114). See Ravikumar (2014): Indiafacts.org/wendy-donigers-ignorance-bhagavad-gita (accessed 7/2/2017).

[third nature] whom Burton categorized as eunuch to Doniger’s utter chagrin: “Why...did Burton use the word ‘eunuch’ to translate *Tritiya prakrti*? Why did he not recognize the text’s reference to sexually *entire men* who happened to prefer having (oral) sex with other men? (119; emphasis mine).

The professor either overlooked or interpreted in her preferred way what the text writes about the advances a eunuch makes toward its male gay customer for a fellatio [*aupariṣṭaka*]: the “eunuch shampooer” “touches the joints of his [customer’s] thighs and his jaghana, or central portions of his body.” (*Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*, 7.ii.155)⁵ Vātsyāyana is actually writing about *Hijḍās* who are far from “sexually entire men” not happening “to prefer having oral (sex)” but perform using their two orifices—anus and mouth—for earning a living. This is neither pederasty (in the Greek sense) nor “sexual acts between two *men*” (emphasis added). Professor Doniger is attempting to transform an ancient Hindu *paṇḍit*, who averred that while composing the *Kāmasūtra*, he was “leading the life of a religious student, and wholly engaged in the contemplation of the Deity,” (*Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*, 7.ii.155) into a modern gender expert revealing “attitudes to women’s education and sexual freedom, and non-judgmental views of homosexual acts, that are strikingly more liberal than those of other texts in ancient India—or, in many cases, contemporary India” (151).⁶

Doniger seeks to excavate titillating erotic messages and passages similar to the *Kāmasūtra* from Kautilya’s (350-275 BCE) *magnum opus* the *Arthaśāstra*. It is noteworthy that Kautilya makes homosexuality as culpable as sex with a woman not through her *yoni* [*striyamayonau gacchataḥ pūrvaḥ sāhasadaṇḍaḥ puruṣamadhimehataśca*] and the culprit is required to pay the

⁵ Burton (2016/1883): IX, 51

⁶ Professor Doniger reveals astonishing innocence of Indian LGBT porn websites that would have made Vātsyāyana look like a Manu!

first amercement (Book IV, Chapter xiii, verse 40).⁷ In the chapter titled “Of the Ways of Exciting Desire, and Miscellaneous Experiments and Recipes” in the *Kāmasūtra*, Vātsāyana reminds his readers somberly that “This work is not intended to be used merely as an instrument for satisfying our desires. A person acquainted with the true principles of this science, and who preserves his Dharma, Artha, and Kama, and has regard for the practices of the people, is sure to obtain the mastery over his senses. In short, an intelligent and prudent person, attending to Dharma and Artha and attending to Kama also, without becoming the slave of his passions, obtains success in everything that he may undertake.” (*Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*, 7.ii.155).

A disappointing part of the book under review is the author’s failure to use a number of scholarly studies on the Kauṭīliya, British imperialism, or the Bengal Renaissance (the pioneering movement of the Anglo-Bengali colonial contact and impact). Doniger writes that “the highly Anglicized Indian elite...developed new forms of Hinduism, particularly the movement known as the Bengal Renaissance or the Hindu Renaissance” and “following the British lead, these Hindus largely wrote off the dominant strain of Hinduism that celebrated the passions of the gods” (152). There is no reference to the Brāhmos. Had she mined the contemporary sources and some modern studies she would have enjoyed reading about the Anglicized Indian (Bengali) youths (Young Bengal) who exhibited a large appetite for fashion, feast and fun that included, for some, sartorial indulgence, dallying with married women, game of dice, and pigeon flying [*pāsā-pāyrā-paradār-poṣāk*], and for some others, merrymaking, partying, whoremongering, and extravagant spending [*khusī-khānkī-khānā-khairāt*].⁸

Doniger’s take on Kautilya and Machiavelli is based on the jaded and faded cliché Nick the Lucifer and Cānakya the *kūṭīlamati* [crooked minded] Kauṭīliya. There exist critical studies

⁷ See Kangle (1969).

⁸ See Sil (2017); See also Bandyopadhyay (1259 Bengali Era).

based on a close reading of these two authors' texts. It is now possible to think of both men in human and historical terms with the result that reverses their venerated stereotypes. Kauṭilya now emerges as a politician who was a realist, though essentially a moralist and Machiavelli, a thinker with a profoundly personal sense of right or wrong in political life. "They join hands not as two notoriously crooked politicians, but as moralists *par excellence*."⁹

The book's chapters on Kauṭilya and the Third Nature began with some promise but ended up with the author's personal opinion and agenda presented as academic research. Her purposive disregard of other scholars in the field (maybe due to her personal academic practice of citing from the primary sources mainly), has rendered her research skewed and her interpretation of the sources dubious. Especially her failure to use a pioneering analysis of the *Arthasāstra*'s discussion of life and love nearly half a century ago (but still considered a magisterial study) is unconscionable.¹⁰ Nirad Chaudhri's two seminal studies on Bengali women in late colonial India (see footnote 2) provide an erudite and entertaining insight into the rise of *prema* [romantic love] as well as *kāma* [lust] in colonial Calcutta, the primary site of Mughal India's contact with the West.

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⁹ See Sil (1985): 101-142, here at 101. See also Sil (1989): ch. 3.

¹⁰ See Chunder (1970).

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