

Redeeming  
the  
*Kamasutra*



WENDY DONIGER

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# INTRODUCTION

REDEEMING THE *KAMASUTRA*



## A NEW READING OF THE *KAMASUTRA*

Two things happened to change my mind about the *Kamasutra* since I wrote some of the early essays on which this book is based.<sup>i</sup>

First of all, I began reading Kautilya's *Arthashastra* again for a new project, and I saw for the first time how closely Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* is based upon it. This insight led to a new chapter,<sup>ii</sup> but it also coloured all my other perceptions of the *Kamasutra*; it's surprising how many of the puzzles in the *Kamasutra* are resolved when you realize that it is based on the *Arthashastra*. These new insights led me to revise the older essays in the volume, and to my surprise and delight they formed a new book, like pieces of a broken vase in a film that you run backwards to form a whole vase again. The unifying theme was the tension between nature and culture.<sup>iii</sup>

The second thing that changed my understanding of the *Kamasutra* was the rise of a wave of puritanical censorship in India in the past decade. Small but noisy political and religious groups have objected not only to works of art (paintings, books, films) that dealt with aspects of sexuality, but to any public demonstration of desire, even to young

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i Chapters one, three, four, five and seven.

ii Chapter two, 'The Kautilyan *Kamasutra*'.

iii Chapter six, 'The Mare's Trap'.

(heterosexual) couples holding hands in public.<sup>iv</sup> 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. Hence the present volume.

Just recently I happened to stumble across the passage in the *Malatimadhava* (by the eighth century CE playwright Bhavabhuti) in which a woman in private conversation with other women, one of whom has been raped on her wedding night, casually cites the *Kamasutra* verse warning men to be gentle with their brides, lest the women learn to hate sex.<sup>1</sup> It made me realize yet again how well-known the *Kamasutra* had been in India in earlier times, right up to and through the reign of the Mughals, who had had it translated into Persian and had commissioned lavishly illustrated Persian and Sanskrit *Kamasutra* manuscripts. I had hoped that making the text available, in 2002, in a contemporary translation,<sup>2</sup> devoid of the prurient Orientalism that marred Sir Richard Burton's translation, would help to resurrect the *Kamasutra* as a serious book about the sophisticated, cosmopolitan *beau monde* of ancient India. But now, over a decade later, though the new translation has made a mark throughout Europe,<sup>3</sup> the *Kamasutra* is still rarely discussed in India by anyone who has read it. Never one to give up without a fight, I am hoping that Redeeming the *Kamasutra* will have better luck in restoring the *Kamasutra* to its proper place in the Sanskrit canon and, indeed, in the honour role of the literary landmarks of the great Indian heritage.

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iv Chapter seven, 'The Rise and Fall of Kama and the *Kamasutra*'.

THE COURAGE OF THE *KAMASUTRA*

Even in its day, and despite its popularity in many sectors of the ancient Indian world, the *Kamasutra* had to fight against elements of Hinduism that regarded sex with an ambivalence that was to be rivalled only by that of the nineteenth century Victorians (such as Burton<sup>v</sup>). As an example of the unique courage of the *Kamasutra*, consider the way that Vatsyayana challenges the basic dharma of fertility. Where the *Dharmashastra* of Manu says that a man has a duty to have sex with his wife during her fertile period,<sup>4</sup> and the *Mahabharata* and Puranas abound in stories of men who either go to great lengths to fulfil this duty or are punished for neglecting it, Vatsyayana dismisses with one or two short sentences the possibility that the purpose of the sexual act might be to produce children;<sup>vi</sup> for the rest of the book, he ignores fertility entirely and is concerned only with the sexual goal of pleasure (one of the primary meanings of kama). Similarly, Vatsyayana's completely non-judgmental attitude to sexual acts between two men<sup>vii</sup> was even more daring in his day than it was in ours until very recently indeed.

But by far the most significant of Vatsyayana's acts of defiance of dharma is his attitude to adultery. Manu regards adultery as a legal crime, as does the *Arthashastra*,<sup>5</sup> though they differ about the punishment of the adulterous couple. Manu says, 'If a woman who is proud of her relatives or her

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v See chapter five, 'The Third Nature', and chapter seven, 'The Rise and Fall of Kama and the *Kamasutra*'.

vi See chapter four, 'Women in the *Kamasutra*'.

vii See chapter five, 'The Third Nature'.

own qualities deceives her husband with another man, the king should have her eaten by dogs in a place frequented by many people. And he should have the evil man burnt on a red-hot iron bed, and people should pile wood on it, and the evil-doer should be burnt up.<sup>6</sup> The *Arthashastra* is only slightly more lenient, though less imaginative:<sup>7</sup> 'If the husband were to forgive her, both [the woman and her lover] should be set free. If she is not forgiven, the woman's ears and nose should be cut off, and her paramour shall be put to death.'<sup>8</sup>

None of this is in the *Kamasutra*, which devotes a whole book (Book Five) to minute and psychologically acute instructions to the man who wishes to commit adultery, detailing hundreds of stratagems by which he may sleep with the wives of other men. But Vatsyayana pulls back at the very end with verses warning the man not to do it, and to guard his own wife:

A man who knows texts and considers, from the text,  
the devices whose tell-tale signs are detailed  
in the discussion of the seduction of other men's wives,  
is never deceived by his own wives.  
But he himself should never seduce other men's wives,  
because these techniques show only one of the two sides of  
each case, because the dangers are clearly visible,  
and because it goes against both dharma and artha.  
This book was undertaken in order  
to guard wives, for the benefit of men;  
its arrangements should not be learned  
in order to corrupt the people.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of all that has preceded this passage in the rest of the chapter, we might be inclined to dismiss it as mere

hypocrisy, an attempt to avoid possible prosecution for preaching a doctrine directly contrary to Indian law at the time.

But there is other, more subtle evidence that Vatsyayana may be more genuinely conflicted about adultery. Even when the *Kamasutra* tells stories that the go-between is instructed to tell to the target woman in order to persuade her to betray her husband, the actual content of the stories is better designed to warn her off, as the women in the stories invariably suffer and/or come to a bad end.<sup>viii</sup> The stories, like the verses, are taken from an older, moralistic corpus; the new material contradicts it. But which one expresses Vatsyayana's own opinion?

#### IF FREUD HAD MET VATSYAYANA

Sigmund Freud had a great deal to say about sexual ambivalence, and if Freud had met Vatsyayana, and analysed him for us, he might well have helped us to decode what Vatsyayana was censoring, both consciously (in order to avoid running afoul of the enforcers of dharma) and unconsciously (in his own mixed feelings about much of what his goal of totality<sup>ix</sup> forced him to write about). On the other hand, the chronology of the lives of Freud and Burton does allow for the historical possibility that Freud might have had the opportunity to analyse Burton's ambivalent sexuality:<sup>x</sup> Burton lived from 1821 to 1890, Freud from

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viii See chapter three, 'The Mythology of Kama'.

ix See chapter five, 'The Third Nature'.

x See chapter five, 'The Third Nature' and chapter seven, 'The Rise and Fall of Kama and the *Kamasutra*'.



1856 to 1939. Therefore in 1890, when Burton, at the end of his life, was sixty-nine, Freud was thirty-four, and had been pursuing his research in ‘nervous disorders’ for five years; he might easily have made the trip from Vienna to London... We will, alas, never know.

In any case, I think Vatsyayana knew more about sex than Freud did (and certainly more than Burton did). You don’t need Freud to understand the sexual symbolism of the *Kamasutra*,<sup>xi</sup> nor to appreciate the self-deceptions that drive the man-about-town in his pursuit of women. And I doubt that Freud would be of much use in helping us to understand the deep post-colonial insecurities and religious ambivalences that are keeping contemporary Indians from appreciating the *Kamasutra*. I think Vatsyayana is the only one who can inspire them to overcome their self-doubts and rejoice in this great cultural masterpiece.

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xi See chapter six, ‘The Mare’s Trap’.

# 1

## THE STRANGE AND THE FAMILIAR IN THE *KAMASUTRA*<sup>1</sup>

