

Wendy Doniger

*on the
Kamasutra*

The *Kamasutra*, which many people regard as the paradigmatic textbook for sex, was composed in North India, probably in the third century C.E., in Sanskrit, the literary language of ancient India. There is nothing remotely like it even now, and for its time it was astonishingly sophisticated; it was already well known in India at a time when the Europeans were still swinging in trees, culturally (and sexually) speaking.

The *Kamasutra* is known in English almost entirely through the translation by Sir Richard Francis Burton, published

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over a century ago, in 1893. A new translation that I have been preparing, with my colleague Sudhir Kakar, for Oxford World Classics, reveals for the first time the text's surprisingly modern ideas about gender and unexpectedly subtle stereotypes of feminine and masculine natures. It also reveals relatively liberal attitudes to women's education and sexual freedom, and far more complex views on homosexual acts than are suggested by other texts of this period. And it makes us see just what Burton got wrong, and ask why he got it wrong.

Most Americans and Europeans today think that the *Kamasutra* is just about sexual positions. Reviews of books dealing with the *Kamasutra* in recent years have had titles like "Assume the Position" and "Position Impossible." In India, *Kamasutra* is the name of a condom; in America, one website offered *The Kamasutra of Pooh*, posing stuffed animals in compromising positions (Piglet on Pooh, Pooh mounting Eeyore, and so forth). The part of the *Kamasutra* describing the positions may have been the best-thumbed passage in previous ages of sexual censorship, but nowadays, when sexually explicit novels, films, and instruction manuals are available everywhere, that part is the least useful.

The real *Kamasutra*, however, is not the sort of book to be read in bed when drinking heavily, let alone held in one hand in order to keep the other hand free. The product of a culture quite remote from our own, it is in fact a book about the art of living: about finding a partner, maintaining power in a marriage, committing adultery, living as or with a courtesan, using drugs – and also about the positions in sexual intercourse. In the Burton translation, read now in the shadow of Edward Said, it seems to be about Orientalism. Read in the wake of Michel Foucault, it seems to

be about power, and in the wake of Judith Butler, about the control of women and the denial of homosexuals. I do not think these are its primary concerns, but it certainly is about gender, and to that extent Said, Foucault, and Butler are essential companions for us as we read it today.

We can learn a lot about conventional Indian ideas of gender from the *Kamasutra*. The author, Vatsyayana, describes typically female behavior: “dress, chatter, grace, emotions, delicacy, timidity, innocence, frailty, and bashfulness.” The closest he has to a word for our “gender” is “natural talent” or “glory” (*tejas*) [at 2.7.22]: “A man’s natural talent is his roughness and ferocity; a woman’s is her lack of power and her suffering, self-denial, and weakness.”

What happens when people deviate from these norms? The *Kamasutra* departs from conventional contemporary Hindu views in significant ways.

First, it has what appears to be a third gender: “There are two sorts of third nature, in the form of a woman and in the form of a man. The one in the form of a woman imitates a woman’s dress, chatter, grace, emotions, delicacy, timidity, innocence, frailty, and bashfulness. The one in the form of a man, however, conceals her desire when she wants a man and makes her living as a masseur” [2.9.1 – 6]. Though the *Kamasutra* quickly dismisses the cross-dressing male, with his stereotypical female gender behavior, it discusses the fellatio technique of the closeted man of the third nature in considerable sensual detail, in the longest consecutive passage in the text describing a physical act, and with what might even be called *gusto* [2.9.6 – 24].

In addition, the book’s long passage about the woman playing the role of a man while making love on top of a man blurs conventional Indian ideas of gen-

der. Vatsyayana acknowledges that people do, sometimes, reverse gender roles: “Their passion and a particular technique may sometimes lead them even to exchange roles; but not for very long. In the end, the natural roles are reestablished” [2.7.23]. This switch of “natural talents” is precisely what happens when the woman is on top [2.8.6], a position that most Sanskrit texts refer to as the “perverse” or “reversed” or “topsy-turvy” position (*viparitam*). Vatsyayana never uses this term, referring to the woman-on-top position only with the verb “to play the man’s role” (*purushayitva*). Even while she is playing that role, however, she mimes her own conventional gender behavior [2.8.6]: “And, at the same time, she indicates that she is embarrassed and exhausted and wishes to stop.”

A thirteenth-century commentary (by Yashodhara) spells out the gender complications: “She now does these acts against the current of her own natural talent, demonstrating her ferocity. And so, in order to express the woman’s natural talent, even though she is not embarrassed, nor exhausted, and does not wish to stop, she indicates that she is embarrassed and exhausted and wishes to stop.” Now, since Vatsyayana insists [at 2.8.39] that the woman “unveils her own feelings completely/when her passion drives her to get on top,” the feelings of the woman when she plays the man’s role seem to be both male and female. Or, rather, when she acts like a man, she pretends to be a man and then pretends to be a woman.

In this way, Vatsyayana acknowledges a woman’s active agency and challenges her stereotyped gender role. He is also a strong advocate for women’s sexual pleasure and for the importance of ensuring that she has her orgasm before he has his [2.1.10 – 23 – 6, 30]. He even

knew about the G-spot: “When he is moving inside her, and her eyes roll when she feels him in certain spots, he presses her in just those spots” [2.8.16]. The commentator clarifies the passage: “When she feels him moving in a certain spot inside her, the pleasure of that touch makes her eyes whirl around in a circle. . . . There is some argument about this. Some people say that, when the man is stroking inside her, whatever place the woman looks at, either specifically or vaguely, that is the place where he should press her.”

In his translation of this passage, Sir Richard Burton makes a basic mistake that plagues his entire translation: when the text puzzles him, as it often puzzles all who read it in Sanskrit, he translates the thirteenth-century commentary and presents it as the text. In this passage, he also gets the commentary wrong:

“While a man is doing to the woman what he likes best during congress, he should always make a point of pressing those parts of her body on which she turns her eyes.” There is nothing about what “he” likes either in the text or in the commentary; this is Burton’s fantasy.

In fact, Burton’s translation distorts gender issues throughout. His main contribution was the courage and determination to publish the work at all; he was the Larry Flynt of his day. To get around the censorship laws, Burton set up an imaginary publishing house, The Kama Shastra Society of London and Benares, with printers said to be in Benares or Cosmopoli. Even though it was not formally published in England and the United States until 1962, the Burton *Kamasutra* soon became one of the most pirated books in the English language, constantly reprinted, often with a new preface to justify the new edition, sometimes without any attribution to Burton.

His translation remains precious, like Edward Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat*, as a monument of English literature, though not much closer to Vatsyayana than Fitzgerald was to Omar Khayyam. For the Sanskrit text simply does not say what Burton says it says.

In general, Burton gets the gender wrong. For instance, at 4.1.19 – 21 Sudhir Kakar and I have translated the text like this:

Mildly offended by the man’s infidelities, she does not accuse him too much, but she scolds him with abusive language when he is alone or among friends. She does not, however, use love-sorcery worked with roots, for, Gonardiya says, “Nothing destroys trust like that.”

The Burton translation here reads:

In the event of any misconduct on the part of her husband, she should not blame him excessively, though she be a little displeased. She should not use abusive language towards him, but rebuke him with conciliatory words, whether he be in the company of friends or alone. Moreover, she should not be a scold, for, says Gonardiya, “there is no cause of dislike on the part of a husband so great as this characteristic in a wife.”

Notice how Burton has watered down the passage, padded it, and made it almost twice as long as our more direct translation. He mistranslates the word for “love-sorcery worked with roots” (*mulakarika*), which he renders as “she should not be a scold.” His use of the English word “misconduct” is not so much a mistranslation as a serious error of judgment, for the word in question (*apacara*) does have the general meaning of “misconduct,” but in an erotic context it usually takes on the more specific meaning of “infidelity,” a choice that is supported both by the remedy that the

text suggests (and rejects) – love-magic – and by the commentator’s gloss (*aparadha*). But the most serious problem with Burton’s translation is his use of the word “not,” which negates the wife’s right to use abusive language against her straying husband, a denial only somewhat qualified by the added phrase, “rebuke him with conciliatory words.” (Was this an innocent error or does it reflect a sexist bias? We cannot know.)

Most unfortunately, Burton adroitly managed to escape the smell of obscenity by using the Hindu terms for the sexual organs, *yoni* and *lingam*, throughout. This decision was problematic in several ways. First of all, these terms do not represent Vatsyayana’s text, which only rarely uses the word *lingam*, and never *yoni*. Instead, Vatsyayana uses several different words, primarily gender-neutral terms (*jaghana*) that can be translated as “pelvis,” or “genitals,” or “between the legs,” or other terms (such as *yantra* or *sadhana*, “the instrument”) that are neither obscene nor anatomically precise. In some places, he circumvents, by indirection or implication, the need to employ any specific word at all. Where Vatsyayana does use *lingam* [at 2.1.1], the context suggests, and the commentator affirms, that it is [like *jaghana*] gender-neutral, meant to apply to both men and women.

More significantly, Burton’s decision to use *yoni* and *lingam* had Orientalist implications for most English readers. The use of a Sanskrit term in place of an Eng-

lish equivalent anthropologized sex, distanced it, made it safe for English readers by assuring them, or pretending to assure them, that the text was not about real sexual organs, *their* sexual organs, but merely about the appendages of strange, dark people, far away, who have *lingams* and *yonis* instead of the naughty bits that we have. This move dodged “the smell of obscenity” through the same logic that allowed *National Geographic* to depict the bare breasts of black African women long before it became respectable to show white women’s breasts in *Playboy*. It enabled the authors to pretend that the book was not obscene because it was about India, when they really thought it was about sex, and knew that English readers would think so too.

In fact, the Burton translation is most accurate in the sections that deal with the sexual positions, the topic for which the book became famous. Was this because this was what Burton cared about most, or worked on most carefully? Or was it because sex is easier to understand, being universal, than the cultural information that is specific to India?

Whatever the answer, the *Kamasutra* deserves its classic status, not just because it is about essential, unchangeable human attributes – lust, love, shyness, rejection, seduction, manipulation – but also because we learn from it deeply intimate things about a culture that could well be described as long ago and in a galaxy far away.