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Concerning "Kamasutras": Challenging Narratives of History and Sexuality

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## Concerning *Kamasutras*: Challenging Narratives of History and Sexuality

History and colonialism arose together in India. As India was introduced to history, it was also stripped of a meaningful past; it became a history-less society brought into the age of History. The flawed nature of history's birth in India was not lost on the nationalists who pressed the nation-state's claim to the age of history. . . . Consequently, history, flawed at birth, has lived an embattled life in India.

—Prakash 1992, 17

**I** discovered the *Kamasutra* through the eyes of the West. The *Kamasutra* was not an integral part of the lives or the sexual development of adolescents like myself coming of age in India. As Moni Nag (1993) confirms, only a small section of the relatively small English-speaking population in contemporary India is familiar with the English translation of the *Kamasutra*, first published by Richard Burton in 1883 in colonial Britain. That until the 1980s the copy of the *Kamasutra* held by Delhi University Library was locked in a back room and a faculty member could access it only after receiving special permission illustrates the cultural ambivalence toward the text (Nag 1993, 253–54). Growing up in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), I recall the first time that I stumbled on a reference to the *Kamasutra* and learned about its existence. It was in the U.S. best-seller *Audrey Rose* (De Felitta 1975). That what felt like a sexually repressive culture had actually put out a handbook to enhance sexual pleasure was not only astonishing but also paradoxical. How is it that the author of a U.S. best-seller knew about it? Were others in India aware of this book? To say the least, I was intrigued.

At present, multiple, competing representations of the *Kamasutra* prevail in India and across countries such as the United States. In the United

I wish to thank Diane Raymond and Hyun Sook Kim for their insightful comments on drafts of this article. I also wish to acknowledge the careful readings undertaken by the anonymous *Signs* reviewers. Their thorough feedback was useful to the process of revision.

States, popular culture is replete with casual and many detailed references to the *Kamasutra* that are grounded in hierarchical binaries of East and West, of past and present, suffused with imageries of sensualism, eroticism, and exoticism. Where some have indicted the Christian tradition for its deep-seated hostility toward sex, the *Kamasutra* is frequently appropriated as indisputable evidence of a non-Western and tolerant, indeed celebratory, view of sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Glancing through the innumerable citations that are related to the *Kamasutra*, an article in *Cosmopolitan* (1995), for example, begins with the following challenge to the reader: “You keep a copy of the *Kamasutra* by your bed, consider yourself an expert in all things erotic. Still, even the most sophisticated sensualist may have missed out on new findings. Take our quiz.” The remarkable aspect of this introduction is not simply that having a copy of the *Kamasutra* suggests “an expert in all things erotic” but also the banality of the reference. There appears to be nothing out of the ordinary about *Cosmopolitan* including an article on sexuality and making a passing reference to the *Kamasutra*.

If the casualness of the reference underscores the cultural familiarity with this text as a signifier of the erotic expert or the “sophisticated sensualist,” then another article more fully reveals how discourses of history and sexuality are tightly woven to enable representations of the *Kamasutra*. Appearing in a *Redbook* (1995) article on male sexuality, the *Kamasutra* is thus summarized: “Although it was written centuries ago, there’s still no better sex handbook, which details hundreds of positions, each offering a subtle variation in pleasure to men and women. Some require that you be a contortionist to pull them off, but many are twists on themes performed by inspired couples everywhere.” In this account, the *Kamasutra* is represented through the juxtaposition of the ancient past, sex handbooks, pleasure, contortionists, and, elsewhere in the article, Eastern mystics and tantric yogis. Notably, this representation is generated in connection with a discussion on male sexuality within the United States. Promoted as a superior sex handbook, the *Kamasutra* promises pleasure and substance for inspiration. In effect, an unreflexive account of the *Kamasutra* reinscribes oppositions between the ancient East and the contemporary West, between contortionists and inspired couples, but also serves as a link between orientalist fantasy and female and male sexuality in the United States. To wit, the politics of historical, unequal relationships based on discursively constructed differences are elided.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Uta Ranke-Heineman (1991) for her critique of sexuality in the Christian tradition over the past fifteen hundred years. Curiously, historians believe that the *Kamasutra* was also compiled roughly fifteen hundred years ago.

In contrast, in contemporary India, not only is imagery associated with the *Kamasutra* comparatively less apparent in popular culture and far more visible in current academic debates on sexuality, but this imagery invokes a different kind of text. Although, anecdotally, representations of the *Kamasutra* are present in the popular consciousness of the English-speaking elites, by far the greater emphasis is on the *Kamasutra* as a matter of serious and, therefore, scholarly concern. For example, Indira Kapoor (1993), director of the International Planned Parenthood Federation at the South Asian Regional Bureau, legitimizes the *Kamasutra* as a treatise on human sexual behavior dating back to 400 C.E. Neither pornographic nor obscene, the *Kamasutra* is instead elevated as a scientific and serious study of sexual behavior. Kapoor also suggests that the *Kamasutra* is secured on an open and honest view of sexuality characteristic of the ancient Indian past, a reality that regrettably has since changed. She suggests, "Although the evidence of the *Kamasutra* and erotic temple carvings shows an open attitude to human sexuality in South Asia in the distant past, today ignorance and embarrassment cause much unhappiness. More knowledge and sympathy are needed to help young people improve their self-confidence and understanding of their bodies and feelings" (Kapoor 1993, 11).

If the accounts from *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, and Kapoor show that there are multiple representations of the *Kamasutra* and, possibly, multiple *Kamasutras*, then it is also clear that discursive narratives of history and sexuality commonly reify it as a (trans)historical ancient text—a singular blast from the Indian/Eastern past. Even though the *Redbook* article represents the *Kamasutra* as an inspiring sex handbook, whereas Kapoor represents it as a scientific and serious study of sexuality, both accounts reproduce questionable narratives of ancient India to promise sexual liberation from degrees of extant sexual repression; put differently, narratives of a liberal Indian/Eastern past and repressive present support the discourse of sexual repression, with "the *Kamasutra*" as the mediating factor in these cases. Therefore, the *Redbook* article can promise heightened sexual pleasure through an Eastern handbook, whereas Kapoor can challenge the contemporary cultural discomfort in matters of sexuality that hinders the adequate development of adolescents in India or South Asia. But, if the accounts of the *Kamasutra* in *Cosmopolitan* and *Redbook* need to be challenged for the ways in which they rely on discursive categories of colonialism, then the conflation of "open" and "honest attitudes" with scientific rationality, ancient India, and the pitfalls of modernity in Kapoor's version are no less questionable or unrelated. Both the peculiarities

and the commonalities of the various representations of the *Kamasutra* need to be investigated.

Groups marginal to the dominant politics of sexuality in postcolonial, contemporary India also strategically appropriate the *Kamasutra* as a celebratory narrative of sexuality, rooted in a specific representation of the ancient Indian past. In this setting, where homosexuality is frequently attributed to the corrupting influence of the Moghul empire and Westernization, lesbians, gays, and bisexual women and men constantly encounter assumptions that same-sex sexual desire is foreign to the dominant Hindu-Indian ancient tradition. In response, the *Kamasutra*, along with other Vedic texts, post-Vedic texts, and temple carvings as exemplifications of the Hindu traditions of ancient India, are deployed to argue that past traditions recognized and permitted the expression of homosexuality or gay orientations.<sup>2</sup> The exploration of an ancient precolonial history of sexuality in India becomes integral to the politics of resistance, and the *Kamasutra* becomes central to this project. More than ever, there seems to be a sense of urgency about claiming the past and the *Kamasutra* as ways out of forms of sexual repression.

Precisely because of such widely circulating, competing representations and deployments of the *Kamasutra*(s), which are nonetheless underpinned by shared assumptions of history and sexuality, I am struck by the absence of critical feminist analyses in this area, with one exception (see Roy 1998). In her article, Kumkum Roy undertakes a critical and useful exploration of the *Kamasutra* from when it was believed to be compiled between the second and fourth centuries C.E. to the more recent translations. In so doing, Roy makes known not only the limits of the normative original but also the tensions between the original and its more modern translations. However, by not sufficiently problematizing the relationship between the original and the translation, Roy is unable to challenge the underlying narratives of the “golden past” and “sexual repression and

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the definitive study *A Citizen's Status Report on Homosexuality in India*, the authors analyze the *Kamasutra* for its discussion on “gay sex” (AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan 1991) in a section that is later reprinted in a groundbreaking collection on queer South Asian identities, *Lotus of Another Color* (Ratti 1993). This account serves to refute accusations that homosexuality or gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities are the products of the corruption of an otherwise untainted ancient Hindu tradition. As such, these authors are in a position to frame the oppression of, in general, Indian and, in particular, Hindu lesbian, gay, and bisexual women and men as the result of the degeneration of what is held to be an exalted tradition. In the hands of these authors, a problematic vision of ancient Indian history is appropriated and reinscribed but, this time, as a narrative of resistance.

sexual liberation” that are so central to the premise of the *Kamasutra*. Such an approach also obfuscates the ways in which, as Tejaswini Niranjana argues elsewhere, the translation precedes the “original” and that which is historical is made “natural” (1994, 126). By treating the translations as imperfect renditions of an original and using a Sanskrit (the language of Vedic and post-Vedic authoritative texts) version as synonymous with the original, Roy’s approach does not allow us to question how discursive narratives of history and sexuality came to be intertwined in ways that sustain the seeming relevance of a fifteen-hundred-year-old, post-Vedic document across disparate social contexts; the analysis also obfuscates how the original and the translations continue to circulate under the guise of sexual liberation.

In this article, my concern is with questionable narratives of history and sexuality that underpin contemporary representations of the *Kamasutra(s)*.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as romanticized accounts of “ancient India or East,” intertwined with the binaries of sexual celebration and repression, riddle circulating versions of the *Kamasutra(s)*, I argue that these versions are flawed; these accounts rely on the elision of the politics of colonialism and dominant anticolonial nationalisms that are imbricated with hierarchies of gender, race, nation, and sexuality. For the purpose of this article, however, I focus on two *Kamasutras*: the first one is Burton’s *The Kamasutra of Vatsyayana* (1883), which is considered the “original” translation and continues to circulate as the basis for more contemporary versions (e.g., as sex manuals for heterosexual couples). I then consider a second *Kamasutra* to explore how, despite the peculiarities of each text, specific narratives of history and sexuality remain consistent across these versions. For this, I explore S. C. Upadhyaya’s *Kamasutra of Vatsyayana: Complete Translation from the Original*, which was first published in 1961 and is considered among the best-known scholarly English-language translations in postindependent India. By emphasizing it as an exploration of the “science of erotics” (Upadhyaya 1961, 1) in the Vedic and post-Vedic periods, Upadhyaya’s *Kamasutra* provides a partial counterpoint to Burton’s *Kamasutra*. Yet, the belief that the *Kamasutra* provides a trans-

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this article, I restrict my analysis to English-language translations of the *Kamasutra* since I am particularly interested in representations of the *Kamasutra* within a transnational context. Thus, English seems to be an appropriate choice. Within India, the *Kamasutras* available in the bookstores are likely to be in English as well. Reportedly, other translations in regional languages that use photographic illustrations circulate underground.

parent glimpse into the positive, even exalted, view of sexuality in what was subsequently defined as ancient India is common to these two texts.

In order to challenge the dual narratives of the golden age of history and sexuality in ancient India, I attempt to contextualize each of these *Kamasutras* from a critical, feminist viewpoint. Rather than evaluating each of these texts against the “original” *Kamasutra* (for such an analysis, see Roy 1998), I aim to unravel the intersecting categories and ideologies of gender, nation, race, and social class embedded in and in turn producing the discourses of history and sexuality that underpin each of these texts. To this purpose, I draw on a variety of sources—Burton’s biographies, feminist analyses of orientalist histories, critiques of science in colonial India, and textual analyses—to show that these texts are products of their times insofar as these *Kamasutras* (re)produce naturalized and glorified narratives of history and sexuality. My purpose is to hold up to scrutiny the discursive threads that organize and make coherent representations of history and sexuality—rooted in vectors of race, nationality, class, and gender.

I locate this analysis within what has been called transnational feminist cultural studies, most prominently developed by scholars such as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Kaplan and Grewal 1994; Grewal 1996). Drawing heavily on the theorizations of Gayatri Spivak, these authors define such an approach as one that integrates the insights of Marxism, poststructuralism, and feminism to facilitate an understanding of postmodernity, global economic structures, nationalisms, issues of race and imperialism, critiques of global feminism, and emergent patriarchies. They reject a humanist approach in favor of mapping linkages across national boundaries that “acknowledge differentials of power and participation in cultural production but also can and must trace the connections between the seemingly disparate elements such as religious fundamentalisms, patriarchies, and nationalisms” (Kaplan and Grewal 1994, 440–41), what they also call “scattered hegemonies.” As evident in the work of other feminists that could broadly be considered part of this approach, the aim is to analyze critically the class-, race-, sexuality-, and gender-based politics of cultural productions while resisting static binaries such as margin and center, colonizer and colonized, and dominant and dominated.<sup>4</sup> For example, in her book, *The Rhetoric of English India*, Sara Suleri (1992) compellingly argues the importance of a feminist approach that sees cultural boundaries as precarious in the context of colonial

<sup>4</sup> Viswanathan 1989; Suleri 1992; Joshi 1994; Niranjana 1994; McClintock 1995; Cooper and Stoler 1997.

exchange and that recognizes the dialogic relationship between colonial and postcolonial narratives.

Drawing on this approach, I consider the notion of the *Kamasutra* as a site of cultural production that is not only the effect of colonial and postcolonial hegemonic narratives of history and sexuality but also rests uneasily at the intersections of national cultural boundaries and of the past and the present. I argue that Burton's "discovery" of the *Kamasutra* cannot be considered outside these discourses of history, which were generated out of the encounter between colonialism and dominant anticolonial nationalisms during the last few decades of nineteenth-century India.<sup>5</sup> Burton's *Kamasutra* foregrounds the question of a past predicated on the exigencies of the present. Under the guise of recovering positive, didactic writings on sexuality, Burton's translation promotes romanticized views of ancient India while effacing tensions of colonialism: discourses of nationalisms, race, sexuality, and gender that are the effects of colonial encounters. Left unchallenged, these discursive narratives of history reessentialize national, racial, sexual, and gendered categories in postindependent India; Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* is the case in point. However, Gauri Viswanathan (1989) also cautions against collapsing the boundaries between different cultural and political contexts; in her analysis of the introduction of English literary education in colonial India, she suggests that it is more useful to consider the relation between colonial India and colonial England as one of complementarity and not one of sameness. Seen from this lens, by emphasizing the trope of nationhood, Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* indicates the limits of colonial discourses on sexuality. Yet ironically, his impulse to reappropriate and legitimate the text through the scholarly, scientific lens only reinforces colonial categories of difference. Both translations collude to inscribe a past that effaces problems of gender inequality and the regulation of sexuality in the present and in so-called ancient India. In other words, the politics of these translated *Kamasutras* are more exactly rooted in the recent history of colonialism and versions of anticolonial nationalism. Indeed, all versions that continue to reproduce romanticized discourses of ancient India and the binaries of sexual repression and liberation, whether North American, European, or Indian, are part of that history.

In this article, I also extend the transnational feminist cultural studies approach by arguing that it is necessary to go beyond unmasking the

<sup>5</sup> Burton's biographer, Edward Rice, claims that Burton "discovered" the *Kamasutra*, a position that is untenable. There is a well-known thirteenth-century commentary by Yashodhara on Vatsyayana, to which Burton also refers. For more on this commentary, see De 1959.



politics of cultural productions and identifying the linkages between “scattered hegemonies.” If, as Gyan Prakash suggests in the article’s epigraph, history, colonialism, and nationalism are intricately linked in India, then it is not enough either to shift emphasis onto the politics of cultural productions or to show how dominant discourses of history and sexuality in colonial and postcolonial India are partly the effects of “Europe” and the “West.” On the contrary, cultural productions such as the *Kamasutra* need to be more thoroughly criticized. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) argues in his discussion of representations of history in postcolonial settings, critical analysis does not make metanarratives such as “Europe” disappear. Similarly, to show how Burton’s and Upadhyaya’s *Kamasutras* are less mere translations of an ancient original and more products of their times will probably not sufficiently disrupt pervasive notions of the celebratory original.

Instead, postcolonial critics like Chakrabarty (1992, 1997) have persuasively argued the importance of disrupting these metanarratives of history by writing counterhistories; this literature suggests that there is a way to claim a position of postcolonial subjecthood that does not rewrite another history of its own colonial paralysis.<sup>6</sup> In other words, there is a different way to rewrite the history of ancient India that thoroughly disputes any possibility of the *Kamasutra* as a celebratory text on sexuality. To more fully disrupt the narratives of history and sexuality that enable representations of the *Kamasutra*(s) (both as original and as translations), I turn to feminist historiographies of ancient India. I argue that these feminist historiographies belie the possibility of celebrating the *Kamasutra* as a sexually emancipatory text or as a text that is merely concerned with techniques of enhancing sexual pleasure. Michel Foucault’s (1977, 1980, 1990) analysis of the matrices of power that enable the production and regulation of sexuality has been most influential in challenging assumptions about sexual repression and sexual liberation; indeed, I draw on his approach throughout this article. But, in this section, I also dispute his analysis that this positive economy of somato-power is evident in the West since the seventeenth century in contrast to what he calls *ars erotica* associated with the East—China, Japan, and India. I argue that, read against the grain of precolonial “Indian” history, the *Kamasutras* reveal that the positive economies of somato-power may not be peculiar to the

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., the discussion on the redefinition of the construct of the “third world” in Mohanty 1991. Also, see the discussion on the history of bourgeois domesticity in Chakrabarty 1992, 1997. For another useful discussion on feminist historiography that avoids writing another history of the “West,” see Sangari and Vaid 1989.

so-called West; rather, these strategies of power might be the effects of systems of social stratification.

Put succinctly, this article challenges representations of the *Kamasutra* as an ancient Indian celebratory treatise on sexuality. It does so by problematizing notions of originals and translations and by reading two *Kamasutras* as transnational cultural productions that are enabled by and, in turn, become the mechanisms for reproducing questionable accounts of history and sexuality in ancient India. At issue in these texts is how representations of history and sexuality implicitly reinforce categories of gender, race, class, and nation as transhistorical and elide the power differentials thereof. To argue further against dominant representations of the *Kamasutra*, I critically examine the stratified social context of "classical" India, the period to which it is attributed. This reading suggests how the *Kamasutras* that rely on hegemonic narratives of history and sexuality associated with what orientalists called ancient India are less about sexual activity and more about the regulation and control of sexuality in a social context stratified by gender, class, and caste.

### **Of "translated" texts**

#### ***Burton's "discovery" of the Kamasutra***

In his biography of Burton, Edward Rice (1990) claims that Burton discovered the *Kamasutra*. More accurately, Burton is largely responsible for the first English edition issued in 1883, which perhaps explains why Burton's name remains strongly associated with the *Kamasutra*. This text was the first publication of the Kama Shastra Society, which was set up by Burton's collaborator, F. F. Arbuthnot; the society included himself, Burton, the printer, and a small circle of supporters (Brodie 1967; Rice 1990).<sup>7</sup> The purpose of this society was to publish erotica from the East for the sexual liberation of Victorian society (Fowkes 1987; Rice 1990). The facade of the Kama Shastra Society was deemed necessary to protect the society members from the Obscene Publications Act that was passed in Britain in 1857 and the general puritanical ire prevailing in Victorian England at the time (Brodie 1967; Burne 1985; Rice 1990). The Kama Shastra Society published three major translations of erotic works: the most well-known, the *Kamasutra* (1883), which translates as *Aphorisms on Love*; the *Ananga Ranga*, or *The Stage of the Bodiless One*, in 1885;

<sup>7</sup> Rice suggests that one of the members of this society was the infamous Henry Spencer Ashbee who, under the pseudonym Pisanus Fraxi, compiled bibliographies of pornography. For an analysis of Ashbee's compilations, see Marcus 1964.

and the *Perfumed Garden of Sheikh Nefzaoui* in 1886. The *Ananga Ranga* was reportedly available in regional languages on the Indian subcontinent and is attributed to the sixteenth-century poet Kalyanamalla; the *Perfumed Garden of Sheikh Nefzaoui* is a fifteenth-century Tunisian work.

From his biographies, Burton emerges as the quintessential European traveler whose desire for the exotic, for adventure and risk, was enabled by the colonial empire.<sup>8</sup> One biographer describes him as the foremost orientalist of his time (Dearden 1937). Indeed, Edward Said (1978) considers Burton the first in a series of fiercely individualistic and rebellious orientalists who traveled to the East and among those orientalists who took seriously the assertion that one can know the Orient only personally, authentically, sympathetically, and humanistically. But, Said suggests, Burton was paradoxically able to rebel against the constraints of his culture only as a potential agent of authority in the East; not coincidentally, Burton identified the East as a place of freedom from Victorian moral authority. In effect, Burton cannot revel in the mysteries of the Orient outside the orientalist framework; whether an individual or a rebel, Burton is nonetheless implicated in the collection and cataloging of knowledge about the Orient in the *Kamasutra*, the *Ananga Ranga*, and the *Arabian Nights*.

With regards to India, Burton was part of that second round of orientalists who shaped sympathetic but enduring discourses of Indian history for the benefit of Europe, particularly England. These orientalists, working in the second half of the nineteenth century, drew extensively on the legacy of predecessors such as William Jones and H. T. Colebrooke, who contributed to the notion of a “golden age” in their attempt to recuperate a national past for the colony (Chakravarti 1989; Niranjana 1994). While this orientalist framework initially presented the past as an undifferentiated whole, it was gradually stratified, with authority being invested in brahmanic texts. In an influential essay, Uma Chakravarti (1989) argues that the need to justify colonial domination over India tempered this orientalist history; the degeneration of the ancient civilization, the abject position of women in nineteenth-century India, and the inability of effeminate Indian men to rule themselves provided the necessary justification and impetus to this discourse of history. Nationalist Indian elites, writing under colonial domination in an attempt to provide themselves with a national, select tradition, wholeheartedly embraced this notion of a glorious ancient India and also attempted to recuperate, debate, and interpret it. Despite prevailing differences in interpretation, what

<sup>8</sup> Dearden 1937; Farwell 1963; Brodie 1967; Rice 1990.

is particularly noteworthy about the narratives of ancient Indian history is that both orientalists and nationalists secured the link between history, nation, and gender—that the elevated status of women in ancient India was a crucial indicator of a once-civilized nation and that the colonization of India was a reflection of its present degeneration and on the dubious masculinity of Indian men.

If the early orientalists produced notions of ancient Indian glory alongside the “woman question,” then later orientalists such as Burton were influential in foregrounding categories of race and gender in the orientalist narrative of history. These orientalists strengthened the romanticized images of history by transforming ancient India to a glorious Aryan past framed by notions of race, vigor, and the gendered narratives of conquest and subjugation, and they reinforced ideas of the past as the heyday of Indian womanhood (Chakravarti 1989). Along with Burton, these latter orientalists, such as Max Müller and two European women, Mrs. Speier and Clarisse Bader, also reinforced the links between nation and gender through the feminization of the East—as a source of civilization, culture, and spirituality that offered an antidote to the ills of a rapidly changing, seemingly material and superficial Western society (Jayawardena 1986; Chakravarti 1989). While there were some differences between and among these orientalist and nationalist accounts, in general these narratives of history were dominated by gendered and racialized notions of an early Aryan conquest, a glorious civilization, an exalted Vedic tradition, spirituality, and the high status of women. Yet, as many historians have pointed out, these orientalist and nationalist narratives of ancient Indian history had “Europe” as their subject.

What is equally noteworthy is that orientalist discourses of Indian or Eastern sexuality that were generated through texts such as Burton’s *Kamasutra* were also written from a colonial subject position inflected with tensions of categories of gender, race, and nation. Said suggests that, after 1800, “Oriental sex” (1978, 190) gradually came to be a commodity in Europe obtainable through mass culture. Indeed, according to Said, virtually no European traveler could travel to the Orient without writing about sex. This connection between the Orient and sex, specifically licentious sex, that was firmly established by orientalists working in the nineteenth century allowed Burton to assert his beliefs against the narrow confines of official Victorian sexual discourse while positing the East as a liberatory alternative. According to his biographers, it enabled him to translate such erotic literature out of concern with the lack of knowledge about sex in the Western world, and in England in particular, and its

consequences in the lives of men and, especially, in the lives of women (Burne 1985; Rice 1990).<sup>9</sup> As Rice (1990) indicates, he was intent on promoting the sexual emancipation of Victorian women. Indeed, Glen Burne (1985) suggests that Burton was writing this erotic literature at the height of the period in England when suppression, distortion, repression, and the lack of sexual desire in women dominated the English understanding of sexuality. Arguably, Burton's *Kamasutra* can be considered a handbook for the emancipation of middle-class English sexuality, and the exigencies of Victorian society are the real subject of a narrative of ancient sexual history in nineteenth-century India.

Rice (1990) reports that Burton was involved first in the translation of the *Ananga Ranga*, which was commissioned by his collaborator Arbuthnot, and later in the translation of the *Kamasutra*. Exemplifying the impossibility of translation as an apolitical and transparent process, it appears that Burton enthusiastically worked the draft of the *Ananga Ranga* into "more acceptable and polished language" (Brodie 1967, 294), greatly changing the nature of the original. This enabled Burton to express his deeply rooted notions that it was a man's duty to pleasure women sexually. Indeed, Rice states that many sections of the *Ananga Ranga* come from Burton's fertile brain, away from what Burton believed to be the "peculiarities of Hindu thought" and "verbosity of Hindu style" (1990, 428). In this colonial encounter, the English translation is held to be superior to the poorer and more pedantic original. The text and the culture are forced to submit to the trick of translation in order to produce and deploy desired knowledges.

Burton and Arbuthnot came across the *Kamasutra* while pursuing the *Ananga Ranga*. Burton's biographer Brodie (1967) suggests that, although Arbuthnot tried to throw off the censors by arguing that the translation was done entirely by Indian pundits, the idiomatic English indicates that the two Englishmen were the ones responsible for the final product. Brodie believes that the translation of the *Kamasutra* has a boldness and vigor that is characteristic of Burton. W. G. Archer, who edited and wrote the introduction to the first publicly printed British edition of the *Kamasutra*, reportedly holds that, while Arbuthnot grappled with the original and molded the translation, Burton later improved the rhythm and style (Brodie 1967). Rice suggests that the "authoritative, witty, polished and thoroughly annotated" (1990, 446) tone of the *Kamasutra* makes it clear that Burton played a major role in editing the work. In

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of Burton's concern with the emancipation of Victorian women, see Burne 1985, 123.

fact, Burton appears to have borrowed material concerning the functioning of the harem in Damascus in editing the *Kamasutra*. Although Rice appears somewhat more critical of the nature of Burton's translated *Kamasutra*, these biographers do not seem to be discomfited by the politics of empire that make this translation possible and Burton the man most closely associated with the *Kamasutra*. Indeed, this leads Rice to claim that Burton discovered the *Kamasutra*!

But the issue is not simply a matter of a poor translation, the result of a less-than-vigorous intellectual approach. Instead, Burton's *Kamasutra* destabilizes any convenient distinction between an original and its translation. In this case, the original quite literally came into being for the purpose of translation. Rice reports that, although the *Ananga Ranga* was freely available in regional languages such as Marathi, the Sanskrit scholar Bhagvanlal Indrajī, commissioned by Burton and Arbuthnot to translate the *Kamasutra*, had to collate manuscripts from libraries in Benares, Calcutta, and Jaipur. Undoubtedly, translations are contingent on the appearance of original texts, their authors, and their meanings. Yet the authorship of these ostensibly original texts must be carefully concealed precisely to preserve the legitimacy of the translation (Crapanzano 1986). In this way the names Burton (the translator) and Vatsyayana (held to be the author/compiler of the original) become interchangeable, while Arbuthnot becomes obscure.

The belief that Burton's is merely the first English translation of the *Kamasutra* is untenable. Not only does this view neutralize the role of the English language in the history of the empire, but it also obfuscates the relations of power underlying Burton's *Kamasutra*. "Translations" and "originals" are part of a larger discourse of making and dispersing unequal histories within the colonial context. These narratives of histories are the effects of transnational discourses that effectively and complexly racialize, gender, and sexualize colonial relations. As Niranjana (1994) suggests, translations into English are part of the process of subjection and subjectification that shape and take shape within asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism. Not only do these relations eventually shape Upadhyaya's quest to recover the "science of erotics" in ancient India, but, at the same time, the sexualization of the East ensures the circulation of Burton's *Kamasutra*. According to Rice, the first edition of the *Kamasutra* was prohibitively priced at £2 10s, and pirated copies quickly circulated within England and elsewhere in Europe. Print capitalism coupled with strong official Victorian normative codes on the issue of obscenity made the circulation of Eastern sex, new editions, and illegal copies more appealing.

While little is known about the reception of the *Kamasutra* in colonial England, a reading of this text reveals the embedded tensions of gender, sexuality, social caste, and class.<sup>10</sup> Unraveling these tensions not only challenges Burton's assertion in the "Concluding Remarks" of the text that the *Kamasutra* is a valuable treatise on men and women and their relationship and connections with each other, but it also indicates the hierarchical status of women of various class and caste groups and the regulation of their sexuality in the contexts of nineteenth-century colonial India and colonial England, and, as projected, in ancient India. Furthermore, uncovering these tensions also indicates why, despite its seeming foreignness, Burton would attempt to use this text to foreground issues of heterosexual relations and middle-class women's sexual pleasure in Victorian England. In the absence of a more thoroughgoing critique of gender, class, and caste hierarchies in the text, it was conceivable to introduce these issues without necessarily disrupting prevailing hierarchies of gender and social class in colonial England. Although the discussion on sexuality in Burton's *Kamasutra* is located in an entirely different cultural and historical context, the wealthy male citizen at the center of the text, the text's acknowledgment yet circumscription of women's sexuality, and the normalization of heterosexual relations provide a dubious framework for the sexual liberation of its readers in Victorian England.

Burton's *Kamasutra* is organized into seven parts, which is fairly typical of many versions of the texts: "Index, and General Consideration of the Subject," "Of Sexual Union," "About the Acquisition of a Wife," "About a Wife," "About the Wives of Other People," "About Courtezans," and "On the Means of Attracting Others to One's Self." In contrast to some Sanskrit versions, this text includes and blurs the organization of the content into prose and verse.<sup>11</sup> As Roy (1998) argues, this distinction is an important one because while the verses sometimes summarize the preceding, stylized, and jargon-filled prose, at other times the verses qualify or contradict the prose, leading to more complex interpretations. However, in Burton's text the format makes prose and verse less easily distinguishable and, thus, the tensions less distinct.

In chapter 4 of part 1, Burton describes at length the life of the citizen who is being asked to consider the various aspects of sexual activity—including acquiring a wife, how a wife should conduct herself, and

<sup>10</sup> As Roy (1998) also confirms, there is little by way of reception or circulation studies with regard to the *Kamasutra* in colonial England.

<sup>11</sup> On the importance of the differences between prose and verse in the *Kamasutra*, see Roy 1998.

how to attract others to oneself. The chapter encourages the wealthy, male citizen to marry and set up a household: "Having thus acquired learning, a man, with the wealth that he may have gained by gift, conquest, purchase, deposit, or inheritance from his ancestors, should become a householder, and pass the life of a citizen" (*Kamasutra* 1883, 17). The ensuing detailed description of what this life should look like confirms that the discussion is primarily relevant to propertied male citizens only.<sup>12</sup> It is especially notable, as Roy (1998) insightfully suggests with respect to another Sanskrit version of the *Kamasutra*, that, whereas men are consolidated into this almost homogenous category of citizens, women are carefully distinguished from one another and from men on the basis of their accessibility to men. In effect, according to Roy, this somewhat homogenized, undifferentiated citizen emerges at the center of the text and as the pivot of all sexual relations.

In Burton's text, as well, the citizen's sexual relations with women are primarily expected for pleasure and progeny; and, remarkably, not only are women categorized accordingly but also in relation to the male subject. Chapter 5 of part 1 describes women as *nayikas* (Burton translates this in a footnote as a woman "fit to be enjoyed without sin" [*Kamasutra* 1883, 23]) and categorizes them as maids, twice-married women, and public women. Sexual relations with virgins of the same caste are encouraged as a means of acquiring progeny, but such relations with women of higher castes and women "previously enjoyed by others" (23), such as twice-married women, are forbidden. However, sexual relations with women of the lower castes, with women excommunicated from their castes, and with public and twice-married women are acceptable only for the purpose of pleasure. Relations with the wives of other men are specified for instrumental reasons on thirteen special occasions that do not involve "mere carnal desire" (25), such as relations with a wife who has gained the heart of a powerful enemy who is the enemy of the citizen, with a wife who can turn the mind of her powerful husband in favor of the citizen, and other such scenarios. Therefore, the desires for progeny, pleasure, and self-interest provide the incentives for sexual relations for the wealthy male subject, and women are relationally categorized within a system stratified by gender, caste, and class.

Although, as I noted earlier, Burton's *Kamasutra* continues to be disseminated as a sex handbook, the part that details sexual techniques represents only forty out of approximately 175 pages. These pages permit

<sup>12</sup> The exception to this privileging of the citizen in this text is the section that is addressed to courtesans.



and speak to women's sexual pleasure in relation to the citizen, but the parts on the acquisition and the topic of wives are far more revealing about the ways in which the sexual pleasure of women as wives is managed and circumscribed. These parts clarify that, while female sexual activity and pleasure are important aspects of sexual relations with male citizens, these desires should be channeled according to social norms. Therefore, a desirable wife would come from a good family, would be three or more years younger than the citizen, and would be wealthy, beautiful, and healthy, among other qualities; if she is no longer a maiden—has had sexual relations with others—then she is unacceptable. The text details how the husband should approach and seduce his wife at marriage, but the description of what it means to be a virtuous wife is devoid of any consideration of her sexuality. Chapter 1 in part 4 is quite detailed about how a virtuous woman should conform to her husband's wishes, take care of and serve his family, keep house, plant seeds, prepare certain foods at home, and conduct herself in the absence of her husband. The section is remarkably thorough about the plants and flowers that should be planted but silent on her sexual desires. What comes across from a reading of Burton's text is not just that women's sexual pleasure is acknowledged but also that it is sought to be normatively managed and regulated.

That heterosexual relations between citizens and their appropriate women partners are at the center of this text is clearly apparent. It is not that the text does not acknowledge possibilities of same-sex sexual relations, but these descriptions occupy a much more ancillary position. Overwhelmingly, the discussion presumes and focuses on sexual relations between women and men, and the clearest discussions on same-sex relations are included in the chapter on "Mouth Congress," which is in the part that describes sexual techniques, and in the chapter entitled "About the Women of the Royal Harem; and of the Keeping of One's Own Wife" in part 5. In the latter discussion, women are said to pleasure each other not out of mutual desire but because of the inadequacy of heterosexual relations—one husband is unable to keep several wives sexually satisfied. In contrast, the discussion on "mouth congress" seems to refer more directly to class and caste hierarchies since it primarily appears to be the preserve of unchaste, wanton women, female attendants and serving maids (those who are unmarried and live by "shampooing"), and courtesans. According to the text, eunuchs may be disguised as females, in which case the mouth is said to be the sexual orifice, or they may also be disguised as males and provide such services to citizens in their roles as "shampooers." Although Burton's text does not prescribe any negative sanctions, it also makes clear that this practice is prohibited in the case of

married women. Nonetheless, toward the end of the section, the verses indicate that some citizens who know each other well and some women of the harem, when they are amorous, may practice this form of sex on each other. Despite this qualifier, the text finally suggests that there is no reason why this form of sex should be practiced except in particular cases. Therefore, for the most part, this discussion is elaborated within a dual sex/gender framework; finally, this form of sexual activity is accommodated rather than authorized.

Thus far, I have tried to show how Burton's *Kamasutra* is both an effect and, in turn, a crucial marker of the colonial orientalist discourses of history and sexuality, which are rooted in binaries of gender, race, sexuality, and nation. I have also argued that the text is replete with the hierarchies of gender, (hetero)sexuality, and social caste-class. But gender is thoroughly implicated and the sexualization of the East is literally inscribed in Burton's *Kamasutra* in at least one more way. As noted above, Burton's biographers emphasize that he was particularly concerned with the sexual repression of Victorian women. The *Kamasutra* and the *Ananga Ranga* were instrumental to Burton's attempt to redress the sexual ineptness of English men and the ignorance of English women. But Burton's *Kamasutra*, a potentially subversive work in Victorian England, was contingent on the marginalized positions of groups of women in colonial India, including the mistress and the courtesan. According to Rice (1990), Burton preferred brown- and black-skinned women to his countrywomen and believed in the "Búbú system," which was a common practice among English officers at a time when there were few white women. In the heavily racialized, sexualized, and classed context of British India, Burton defines the Búbú or the "black wife" as a temporary wife to English officers and administrators (Rice 1990). Burton specifies the advantages: "The 'walking dictionary' is all but indispensable to the Student, and she teaches him not only Hindostani grammar, but the syntaxes of native life. She keeps house for him, never allowing him to save money, or, if possible, to waste it. She keeps the servants in order. . . . She looks after him in sickness, and is one of the best nurses, and, as it is not good for a man to live alone, she makes him a manner of home" (quoted in Rice 1990, 50). Rice (1990) suggests that Burton's "walking dictionary" was not only an instructor of sexual techniques but also his introduction into native life because such a household consisted of a range of her women relatives and an attendant lifestyle, which included native food, music, religion, and customs as well as exposure to numerous educated women of the courtesan classes who provided a variety of entertainments. Indeed, Rice claims, the women Burton lived with in his seven-year stretch in India provided him with material that he worked into his books (including

the *Kamasutra* and the *Ananga Ranga*) through introductions, footnotes, commentaries, and elucidation of passages in the original (Rice 1990, 43–53).

In sum, the sexual objectification of socially and economically marginalized women in colonial India is the basis for the potential emancipation of sexually deprived middle- and upper-class women in Victorian England. Neither does a critical reading of the text support a celebratory reading of Burton's *Kamasutra*. Enabled by the existence of the colonial state and networks of capital, Burton's project to liberate Victorian society through the construction and appropriation of other cultural histories is a manifestation of the colonial regime of power. But this project cannot be viable without inadvertently destabilizing unequal, colonial categories of difference. In effect, not only is it impossible to isolate Burton's *Kamasutra* from its colonial conditions of production, but it is also necessary to situate it in a transnational context, across the metropole and the colony; Burton's *Kamasutra* is neither "Indian" nor "Victorian." Yet, if the oppositions of race, gender, nation, and class within a transnational, colonial context shape Burton's *Kamasutra*, then Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* is no less immune from this enduring legacy of history and sexuality in post-colonial India. But just as the political contexts are not the same across the latter half of nineteenth-century colonial India and postindependent India, neither are the two texts.

**Postindependent nationalism and the ascendancy of the scientific tradition: Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra***

Moti Chandra, then director of the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai, prefaces Upadhyaya's 1961 translation of the *Kamasutra* into English with a foreword. The first paragraph reads,

Dr. S. C. Upadhyaya is an erudite scholar of Sanskrit and Indian art whose knowledge of *ars amoris* of the ancient Indians requires no commendation. It is, therefore, in the fitness of his ripe scholarship that he has produced an up-to-date and literal translation of Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, which without any doubt, is the most important treatise on love. Vatsyayana had not only incorporated various schools of thought on the science of love but also arranged his material in such a way that it was handy to poets, artists and above all to those lovers for whom the *Kamasutra* was the very life-breath of existence. The entire range of the topics of love has been laid bare with a cold scientific thoroughness unparalleled in Sanskrit literature. Vatsyayana's aphorisms are models of brevity. From his ob-

servant eyes nothing seems to have escaped. The art of love-making, the psychology of sex, the courtesans and their victims, the routine of accomplished lovers, etc. have been treated with precision and scientific view-point. (Upadhyaya 1961, v)

Chandra secures Upadhyaya's translation on two intertwined claims. First, he legitimizes this translation on the basis that it is a literal rendition of the original, that is, the Sanskrit version; contrary to Burton's enthusiastic finesses for the benefit of Victorian society, Chandra suggests that Upadhyaya's translation is faithful to an original. A testimony to Upadhyaya's erudite scholarship confirms the value of the translation; to wit, the value of the original needs to be confirmed as well. As a result, Chandra characterizes and endorses Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* as an unparalleled Sanskrit treatise on love enabled through a (cold) scientific viewpoint. With this dual movement, Chandra establishes the legitimacy of Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* for its literalness and the essentially scientific nature of the text(s) while reinscribing the chronology of the original and, subsequently, the translation.

But the dual claims of translation and science are anachronistic. The discourse of science, linked with the expansion and consolidation of the colonial state, is used to claim the legitimacy of a text that is fixed in the past—defined as the so-called classical period of India. Unlike the nineteenth-century orientalists, who were clearly working within a scientific discourse as they laboriously accumulated and cataloged the Orient, Chandra is claiming a scientific tradition that is internal and integral to the period of so-called ancient India. The historicity of science is appropriated to characterize nationhood in the postindependent 1960s. In this view, science is no Western import but is characteristic of that which is ancient India, exemplified by Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*. Indeed, for Chandra it is noteworthy that sexuality is the topic of scientific observation. As such, Chandra contextualizes Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* as the most important treatise of the various schools on the "science of love" (Upadhyaya 1961). Science is imbricated with the Orient in Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra*.

Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* and its recourse to the authority of science rests securely within the framework of anticolonial androcentric nationalist impulses that sought to establish a compatibility between a select national tradition and Western, colonial modernity. The discourse of science was instrumental to the consolidation of the colonial state as well as to dominant anticolonial nationalists. Indeed, India was the first part of the British Empire where a conscious effort was made to introduce what may be appropriately described as Western science, and elite nationalists quickly

appropriated it as a way to move colonial India into the period of modernity (Sangwan 1991; Prakash 1999). Although science was instrumental to the expansion of colonial forces, Claude Alvarez (1991) argues that the scientific method and its metaphysics are inherently expansionist as they are unable to coexist with oppositional forms of knowledge—which science defines as ignorance, insanity, and irrationality. In his analysis of science, colonialism, and modern India, Prakash (1999) argues that, paradoxically, the idiom of science and its claim to universality had to be translated and indigenized, and not merely adapted, in order to assert its authority. According to Prakash (1999), not only was the dissemination of science therefore contingent on the undoing of binaries (universal truth/untruth) and borders (self/other) that authorize its discourse, but this undoing also enabled Indian elites to challenge the contradictions of colonialism and shape an Indian modernity that was defined in predominantly Hindu and Sanskritic terms.

Extending the discourse of science to recover ancient texts appears to be especially useful for the selective preservation of narratives of the glorious past that are employed for the purposes of an emergent, official national identity. Prakash (1999) suggests that, in an effort to counter the rationalizations of British rule over India and allegations of outdatedness, these elites argued that scientific knowledge had originated with the ancient Hindus; they sought to reinterpret the rationality of classical texts in light of the authority of science. Representing an essentialist, elitist precolonial tradition was deemed necessary to characterize an emergent nation and to project a past and a future free from colonial rule.<sup>13</sup> Prakash (1999) argues, however, that this attempt to remake the Indian nation, lost to myth and superstition, in the image of Hindu science also ended up inscribing images of a universal and singular archaic Hinduism and of the nation as homogenous, whole, and Hindu. The claim to the scientific, rationalist nature of the Vedas, and of Vedic and post-Vedic tradition, was a means to establish the universality of Hindu culture against the colonial presence.

Translating in postindependence India, Upadhyaya appears to frame his text within the history of the nationalist discourse of science, and the manner in which he organizes his *Kamasutra* supports Chandra's claims about the scientific nature of the text. By way of an introduction to his translation, Upadhyaya undertakes a sixty-four page exegesis entitled "Development of the Science of Erotics in the Vedic and Post-Vedic Periods" (1961, 1). His introductory sentence tellingly reads, "During the Vedic

<sup>13</sup> Jayawardena 1986; Chakravarti 1989; Niranjana 1994; Prakash 1999.

period, schools of different sciences developed.” By placing what he alternatively calls the “science of erotics” and the “science of love” within this context, Upadhyaya attempts to set a tone for the ensuing translation. In the introduction, his primary aim seems to be to convince the reader that it is important to claim ancient Indian treatises of “erotic science” as a rich heritage. This is followed by six parts in which he carefully discusses subjects such as tumescence in Sanskrit literature; detumescence in Sanskrit literature; postures for congress, including the man supine and woman astride position for congress, cunnilingus, and fellatio; and the use of artificial devices for congress and autoeroticism. He liberally includes illustrations from sculptures and paintings across a wide temporal spectrum.

Given the framework of science, this introduction not unexpectedly takes a taxonomic approach. Subjects such as cunnilingus and fellatio and postures for congress are carefully organized and thoroughly detailed. For example, Upadhyaya exhaustively cites Sanskrit sources on the issue of tumescence by addressing matters such as kissing, scratching, and courtship, among others, with mind-numbing technical and jargon-filled detail. What is especially interesting is that Upadhyaya arbitrarily includes references to the Western contexts and to the Muslim tradition in order to bolster his claims about the importance and scientific nature of the erotics. Not surprisingly, he also mentions modernists such as Havelock Ellis in his discussion. Furthermore, Upadhyaya does not hesitate to use tables to organize his discussion of male organs or postures of congress as detailed in other sources. There is no question: Upadhyaya’s introduction to the translation of Vatsyayana’s *Kamasutra* is a treatise by an expert who takes seriously the systematic classification of the “science of the erotics.”

Perhaps in keeping with scientific objectivity, when he briefly discusses the *Kamasutra* (pages 53–54 only) in the “Introduction,” Upadhyaya notes that the date of Vatsyayana’s *Kamasutra* cannot be conclusively decided and reconciles the multiple names associated with the *Kamasutra* as the various names of Vatsyayana. Notably, Upadhyaya raises doubts about the state of the present text.<sup>14</sup> He notes discrepancies in successive references to the *Kamasutra*. For example, quotations cited from the *Kamasutra* by past authors and scholars are not to be found in the text of the *Kamasutra*, or, as in the case of Kalyanamalla, who is generally held to be the author of the *Ananga Ranga*, there is a discrepancy in the number and description of the qualities of fingernails cited therein and those to be found in the

<sup>14</sup> Curiously, Burton also raises doubts about the state of the text.

present text of the *Kamasutra*. Yet the source of the present state of Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* remains unspecified. Recall that, according to Rice, Burton and his collaborator collated the manuscripts of the *Kamasutra* from various sources. It is unclear if this is the original text to which Upadhyaya refers. Instead, by recourse to the scientific method, Chandra's introduction serves to reinscribe postulates of the original and an "as far as possible" English rendition that formally attempts to preserve the scientific "spirit of the original" (Upadhyaya 1961).

At first glance, the part that consists of Upadhyaya's translation of the *Kamasutra* is also organized according to the scientific method. Unlike Burton's text, this discussion is much more succinct and pithy. This pithiness and apparent lack of embellishment suggests a much more faithful translation of the original. The text is also divided into seven parts, and the prose assigns numbers to the aphorisms that are being translated. The verses are also clearly indicated and numbered. But, despite its more careful and cautious tone in comparison with Burton's text, this *Kamasutra* is no less problematic in terms of hierarchies of gender, social class, and caste. Whether produced within a colonial orientalist or scientific nationalist framework, both *Kamasutras* appear to reproduce the marginalization and regulation of women and their sexualities, the centrality of the wealthy male citizen, the codification of heterosexuality, and the accommodation of alternative sexual practices. Since the various parts and chapters in Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* mirror the problems and limitations that I pointed out earlier with regard to Burton's text, I will not belabor the points here.

But there are also significant differences between the two *Kamasutras* that belie the possibility that these are mere translations of the putative original. That these texts are not translations but *interpretations* that are shaped by their historical, cultural, and political contexts is clear when a closer comparison of the two *Kamasutras* is undertaken. Indeed, there are innumerable examples where the differences in wording show the differences in interpretations. For example, while Upadhyaya entitles chapter 5 in part 1 "The Different Types of Women, Fit and Unfit to Consort with, and about Messengers of Love," Burton calls it "About the Kinds of Women Resorted to by the Citizens, and Friends and Messengers of Love." Clearly, while Upadhyaya foregrounds the suitability and unsuitability of women, Burton highlights the subjectivity of the citizen in the title. Another example drawn from a chapter of each book reveals how these differences are present throughout the texts. In the chapter entitled "Mouth Congress," Burton writes, "The male servants of some men carry on the mouth congress with their masters. It is also practiced by some

citizens who know each other well, among themselves. Some women of the harem, when they are amorous, do the acts of the mouth on the *yonis* (vaginas) of one another, and some men do the same thing with women" (*Kamasutra* 1883, 62). Compare this with the parallel chapter, "Oral Congress," in Upadhyaya's translation, which reads,

Sutra 31 (verse). Young masseurs, usually wearing ear-ornaments, do allow some men to have oral congress with them. (Sometimes young actors or dandies allow undersexed, or old or inexperienced men to have oral congress with them).

Sutra 32 (verse). It is also practised by some citizens who know each other well. (Sometimes citizens who are effeminate indulge in oral congress with each other simultaneously, by lying alongside one another inversely. Some women also do the same, specially in harems, where there is a dearth of virile men.) (1961, 131)

Needless to say, it is difficult to reconcile Burton's male servants and amorous women with *yonis* with Upadhyaya's narratives about masseurs with ear-ornaments; young actors and dandies; undersexed, old, or inexperienced men; effeminate citizens; and a dearth of virile men. These are not two different versions of a translation but two significantly different narratives on same-sex sexual relations, gender, class, and sexuality.

Furthermore, in contrast to Burton's text, if Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* can be considered part of the counterhegemonic, nationalist legacy that sought to destabilize the hierarchies of colonial rule by foregrounding the discourse of science, then it is only partially subversive. Upadhyaya's rendering of the *Kamasutra* as simultaneously scientific and integral to a superior Vedic and post-Vedic tradition reinscribes an anticolonialist nationalist discourse of history that nonetheless has a European subject at its center. Secured on the ascendancy of science since the nineteenth century, Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* cannot be reflexive about the ways in which this discourse privileges a history of enlightenment and masculinized rationality.<sup>15</sup> In fact, this framework of science only lends credibility

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the Enlightenment as androcentric, see Hawkesworth 1989; Harding 1990. Also, I do not suggest that the ascendancy of science within the dominant nationalist tradition was either uncomplicated or unchallenged. M. K. Gandhi provided the most popular and compelling critique of science and technology. But I do argue that this discourse deeply pervades the premise of the nation and later the nation-state. As Ashis Nandy (1991) argues, science and technology become not only the responsibility of the independent state marching the nation toward development but the reason of the state, which is perhaps best verbalized by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India.



to the assertion that Upadhyaya's text is merely a (objective) translation of the original. Upadhyaya's emphasis on the scientific nature of the Vedic and post-Vedic erotic tradition also makes it less likely that he will write his text from a critical, questioning viewpoint; for example, Upadhyaya matter-of-factly discusses how class- and status-based hierarchies govern the sexual desires of women in his *Kamasutra*, a point to which I shall return in the next section. His text may be able to unsettle the grip between colonial power and hierarchies of knowledge, but it implicitly reinscribes the binaries of archaic past and present, glory and decline, East and West, sexually liberated and sexually repressed, the elevated status of Hindu women and the subjugation of Hindu women, feminine and masculine, spiritual and materialistic, and loss and recovery that underlie the orientalist narrative of history. This *Kamasutra* is also unable to avoid erasing multiplicity, difference, or subalternity insofar as it is predicated on a homogenous, Hindu, and elitist national history.

What is clear, then, is that both of these *Kamasutras* are products of their times. Yet, insofar as these *Kamasutras* claim to recover the glorious past of ancient India that can produce emancipatory narratives of sexuality for the purpose of their present contexts, these texts need to be challenged. In both cases, representations of history and sexuality are based in the nineteenth-century collusions between orientalists and elite, anticolonial nationalists. In turn, these representations of history and sexuality are riven by the binaries of racial and national differences, of gender and class oppositions, that are produced and contested throughout this period. If the exigencies of the sexual liberation of Victorian women that involve the active production of a racialized, feminized, but glorious Indian past shape Burton's *Kamasutra*, then his perceptions of women at the margins of colonial Indian society also more concretely shape his text. Inasmuch as Upadhyaya draws on the intertwined, racialized, and exoticized discourses of history and sexuality under the guise of serious and scientific scholarship, his *Kamasutra* is neither just a translation nor free from the differentials of gender, race, imperialism, and nationalism. And, in both cases, a closer reading shows that, despite how the two texts mirror hierarchies of gender, sexuality, social class, and caste, they are not simply translations but narratives of history and sexuality that rely on the premise of the original.

If writing the "original" *Kamasutra* that legitimizes the translations is less about ancient India and more about the relationality between colonial India and colonial Britain, then Burton's "translation" is a hybrid text at best. In a parallel vein, Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* can be seen as a textual expression of a hybrid modernity—shaped by the imbrications of history,

science, and anticolonial nationalisms in colonial India that are part of India's legacy as it transitions into an independent nation-state. However, if these two texts can be read as sites that rely on and, in turn, proliferate flawed discourses of history and sexuality, then they raise questions of alternative readings of history and sexuality as related to the notion of *Kamasutra(s)*. These questions are particularly important because the notion of the original *Kamasutra* is not so easily displaced; showing that the two *Kamasutras* are politicized sites of cultural production that are predicated on misleading distinctions between translations and the original nonetheless leaves open the question of how to interpret Vatsyayana's compilation as reflected through Burton's and Upadhyaya's texts. Neither does the transnational feminist cultural studies approach address alternatives to discourses of ancient Indian history that have Europe as their subject. As Chakrabarty succinctly argues, narratives of history produced at institutional sites—whether “Indian,” “Chinese,” or “Kenyan” (1992, 128)—are only instances of the master narrative of Europe. Alternatively, Chakrabarty suggests that the way out is to “write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and the ironies that attend it” (1992, 148).

By way of disruption, I wish to write a broad narrative of the social context of classical India, which is roughly the time period to which scholars attribute the *Kamasutra*. I seek to highlight the materiality of gender, class, and caste systems of stratification that generally organize what is to be reified as India by the nineteenth century. This is not to slip in a more authentic historical account that is unfettered by the complicated legacies of the nineteenth and twentieth century or to suggest there is an originary, recoverable text. On the contrary, I wish to suggest that there are profound inconsistencies between feminist understandings of the past and the celebratory view of sexuality that is at the heart of representations of the *Kamasutras*. To this purpose, I will contextualize the so-called classical period of India, with particular attention to its distribution of power and its socially entrenched systems of stratification. I rely heavily on broad feminist critical histories of this period in the next section not only to dispute representations of *Kamasutras* as emancipatory texts of sexuality but also as a result of the lack of specific information on the gender, class, caste, regional, and linguistic variations that informed the compilation and circulation of sections of what is later seen as “the” *Kamasutra*. I will also read Burton's and Upadhyaya's *Kamasutras* against the grain of that history. In the next section, I will suggest that these *Kamasutras* indicate not the celebration of sex but the regulation of sexuality through the mechanisms of pleasure in the unequal social setting

of classical India. Here I both invoke and indicate the limits of Foucault's theory of sexuality to argue that the regulation of sexuality through the discourse of pleasure is more appropriately situated amid patterns of stratification than amid the positive economy of somato-power (power that takes hold of the body in a way that acts as a matrix of sexuality in which people at once recognize and lose themselves) in eighteenth-century Europe; seen in this way, "the" *Kamasutra* represented by Burton and Upadhyaya is possibly the most egregious example of these productive disciplinary strategies.

### **Postcolonial disruptions: Considering alternative readings**

Social historian Romila Thappar places the *Kamasutra* in the middle of the "classical" pattern that evolved from 700 C.E. to 300 C.E., the period that was described as the "golden age" or "ancient India" by nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalists. This pattern evolved in what is later defined as northern India, which is also the site where Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* is said to have been compiled.<sup>16</sup> What appears incontrovertible is that this "classical" period was not only stratified but also undergoing social disruptions. These processes of stratification had started to develop earlier with the emergence of the state in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. (Thappar 1980). More specifically, class-, caste-, and gender-based hierarchies emerged with the shift to an agricultural economy and urbanization between 800–600 B.C.E. (Chakravarti 1993). Characterizing this post-Vedic period of what gets constructed as early or ancient India by the nineteenth century, feminist historian Chakravarti (1993) suggests that it was stratified with the collapse of the tribal economy and polity; the establishment of private control over land; patrilineal systems; the preservation of caste purity, which entailed a strict monitoring of the sexual behavior of certain categories of women; and the dominance of husbands over wives. By the classical period, she argues, caste, class, and state structures were deeply entrenched and functioned together as the institutions within which gender relations were organized.

What is striking is how difficult it is to reconcile the descriptions of the subordinate position of women in the classical period with the notion of the sexually egalitarian, sexually liberated woman that is central to the discourses of history and sexuality underpinning Burton's and Upadhyaya's *Kamasutras*. Thappar (1966) argues that by this period women

<sup>16</sup> Roy (1998) also confirms northern India as the site attributed to the compilation of the *Kamasutra*.

may have been idealized in literature but had a distinctly subordinate position in society. A limited type of education was nominally available to upper-class women. Early and sometimes even prepubertal marriages were practiced for these women. Those women defined as socially marginal by the law books, such as Buddhist nuns, theater actresses, courtesans, and prostitutes, appear to have had more social freedom. Widows were encouraged to become sati by this period. The discursively created sexually liberated, egalitarian woman of ancient India, who served to project the pleasure of middle-class Victorian women in Burton's *Kamasutra*, may not have normatively existed. On the other hand, Thappar's analysis is somewhat easier to reconcile with Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra*, which emphasizes the role of the *nagarak*, the polished male citizen, whose daily life consists of adorning himself, bathing, eating, resting, teaching parrots to speak, gaming, music, dialogues on art and literature, and socializing, a point to which I shall shortly return.

It is also remarkable that the classical period witnessed significant social disruptions as well as hegemonic attempts to contain these disruptions by encoding social regulation. Thappar (1966) suggests that the encoding of social law was necessary to counter the threat posed to the authority of the brahman and its source, the Vedas. The upholders of the law had to define social relationships more precisely against two destabilizing patterns, namely, the ascendancy of the mercantile classes and the creation of new subcastes. For example, throughout this period, the legal coding of social norms was emphasized with the *Manava Dharamshastra*, or the Law Code, written by the patriarch Manu sometime in the first two centuries and, since then, cited as the authority on social laws. Thappar (1966) argues that the rise and consolidation of the mercantile classes and their support of Buddhism and Jainism threatened to undermine brahmanic authority and the dominant, exclusionary form of Hinduism. As a result, not surprisingly, the most important of the law books strongly reiterate that the brahman is inherently superior in every way to other members of society, including the wealthy *vaishyas*, and is to be treated with the utmost respect. Thappar suggests that this period witnessed the preeminence of the brahman, who not only held sway over the officially sanctioned forms of knowledge but also consolidated wealth through land grants. In effect, collective memory was revised and inscribed through brahmanic reinterpretation, and the Vedas were established as the unimpeachable source of authority.

Read against the grain of these descriptions of what is later labeled classical India, it is not clear how narratives of the *Kamasutra* as an unabashed exploration of sex in so-called ancient India can be easily sustained

in U.S. popular culture, in scholarly considerations within contemporary India, or in Burton's or Upadhyaya's texts. On the contrary, the *Kamasutra* appears more as a form of knowledge production in a society undergoing tremendous social change and, possibly, disruption. In discussions about the process of state formation in "early India," Thappar (1966, 1980) and Chakravarti (1993) concur that the two epics, *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan*, articulate the uneasy transition from kin-based societies to more stratified ones. If these epics may be considered ways of negotiating gradual but significant social disruptions, then the *Kamasutra*, which coincides with the *Manava Dharmashastras*, may be also read as part of the brahmanic attempt at encoding and regulating social-sexual interaction. Arguably, then, the discourses embedded in the *Kamasutra* are about sexuality and its production and control and *not* about sex; ultimately, the *Kamasutra* is not concerned with sex as depoliticized activity but with the exercise of power in a stratified, dynamic context.

The widely prevalent interpretation that the "original" *Kamasutra* is a brahmanic text that reflects ancient social perceptions of women's sexual pleasure being at par with social perceptions of male sexuality is particularly untenable. On the contrary, Chakravarti (1993), while not directly addressing the *Kamasutra*, argues that the upper-caste woman is the object of moral panic in brahmanic texts. For Chakravarti, the nonconformist woman appears threatening enough to the structure of Hindu orthodoxy that women's subordination is institutionalized in the brahmanic law codes and enforced by the power of the state. A variety of means ensuring women's conformity, including economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed on conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and the use of force, were central to the process. According to Chakravarti (1993), since women were regarded as the points of entrance to the caste system, the sexual control and subordination of women were key to maintaining caste purity, and these rules were encoded in brahmanic texts. Given the position of women at the time and the role of brahmanic texts, without direct evidence to the contrary, assumptions of the elevated status of women's sexuality in "the" *Kamasutra* are insupportable.

Turning to Upadhyaya's text, for example, there are constant references to the rules of social and sexual interaction. Women are more conspicuous as courtesans and as wives learning the norms of social and sexual interaction. In this *Kamasutra*, a marital relationship with a woman of a higher caste who has already been married once is strictly forbidden, the position of the remarried widow is distinct from and subordinate to the legally married wives, and wives who may be unloved and sexually neglected by their hus-

bands should nonetheless take the lead in religious ceremonies. Evidently, the detailed categorization of sexual behavior is inseparable from the specified parameters of permissible sexual interaction. In effect, against the grain of this gender-stratified context of classical India, Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* emerges less as exemplification of a post-Vedic belief system, where sex is almost sacramental and essential to life, and more as the exemplification of a normative construction of sexuality within an unequal society. Contrary to Chandra's suggestion in the foreword, Vatsyayana's accomplishment may lie less in documenting the breadth of the sexual domain from a scientific point of view and more in establishing appropriate rules of social and sexual interaction.

In his introduction to the *Kamasutra*, Upadhyaya (1961, 1) attests that "it aims at teaching a person the best method to control and properly guide the desires, particularly the sexual urge, so that the person may be an useful member of the family, society and his country and contribute his mite to their welfare by his way of life." Notwithstanding the question of how the unproductive life of the citizen contributes to the welfare of his society, Upadhyaya's analysis is somewhat useful. It implicitly situates the *Kamasutra* as an impulse to control the potentially disruptive nature of sexuality through its regulation and management. In Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra*, the stated goal is mastery of sexual technique, which suggests that sexual desire is being textually channeled and managed through the production of sexual knowledge and the discourse of sexual pleasure. Rather than a celebratory treatise on sexuality that could provide an antidote to repression, Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra*, then, could be read as an attempt to articulate and manage socially mandated sexual desires and sexual techniques.

This reading also helps explain Burton's fascination with the text. It becomes possible to appropriate the *Kamasutra* for the sexual liberation of Victorian women and men without a sustained critique of related structural gender inequalities either in Victorian societies or within colonial India, or of the role of the text in shaping structural inequalities across national contexts. Thus, for national cultures past and present faced with the discursive politics of sexual repression, the *Kamasutra* not so surprisingly appears to be an alternative. Colonial and independent India, Victorian and contemporary England, and the United States, each grappling with ideologies of sexual repression, become fascinated with the apparently liberal past of ancient India.

This fascination with the sexual past of ancient India or the East is deeply pervasive and does not escape Foucault's analysis of the history of sexuality. In a challenge to the ideology of sexual repression in the so-

called West, Foucault (1980, 1990) suggests that the coding of all pleasure as sex necessitated its restriction and regulation and enabled its control first by the Stoics and later by the Christians; only since the seventeenth century has sexuality, as a social and historical phenomenon, been produced in the West through a positive economy of somatic power and through the scientific discourse about sex. In contrast, Foucault (1990) argues, there is a second way of producing the truth of sex, namely, *ars erotica*, which is evident in societies such as China, Japan, and India. For Foucault, the fundamental difference between the discourse of science in the contemporary West and *ars erotica* is that in the latter case truth is drawn directly from pleasure and accumulated as experience. Furthermore, pleasure is not considered in relation to absolute laws of social regulation or to utility (such as procreation) but primarily in relation to itself. In these cases, truth is experienced as pleasure and used to enhance the sexual practice itself. Indeed, according to Foucault, the knowledge must often be protected to retain its effectiveness.

On the contrary, read against a feminist critical history of India's golden age, these *Kamasutras* indicate the regulation and control of sexuality not through a consideration of pleasure primarily in relation to itself but as a way of channeling sexual behavior in a hierarchical social setting. Reading these *Kamasutras* through the lens of a feminist critical history also highlights the orientalist legacies embedded in Foucault's history of sexuality in western Europe. As I have shown, in Burton's and Upadhyaya's *Kamasutras*, truth is produced through its economy of sexual techniques and sexual pleasure related to, but independent of, utilitarian functions such as procreation as early as 700–300 C.E. In contrast to Foucault, it may be reasonably argued that pleasure is being valued only in relation to existing mechanisms of social control. In their specification of the social relationships of gender, caste, and class within which pleasure may be enhanced, Burton's and Upadhyaya's *Kamasutras* make it impossible to make a case for the valuation of pleasure in itself and not to see it as a mechanism for the social regulation of sexuality. Foucault has insightfully argued for the importance of revealing networks of positive, rather than repressive, somato-power, but these networks may be more typically characteristic of stratified settings, which are distinguished by the presence of complex, hierarchical social structures such as the state.

Foucault (1980) argues that the notion of the state as the source of all articulations of power is not very useful historically. He is probably right. Yet I argue that with the process of state formation, as it is represented by feminist anthropologists, social stratification is intensified and sex is irrevocably riddled with power—a power channeled through the coding of all

pleasure as sex and the discourse of sexual pleasure.<sup>17</sup> Foucault suggests that this coding of all pleasure as sex compels writers such as St. Augustine to restrict sexual activity to procreation. More broadly, this coding of pleasure as sex is critical to emerging gender, class, and caste hierarchies—in effect, to the organization of power and to the construction of sexuality. In other words, contrary to Foucault's thesis, the positive economy of somato-power is perhaps not unique to post-Enlightenment Europe but, more appropriately, inherent to processes of social stratification.

It is a reflection on the related, transnational histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the *Kamasutra* is discovered during periods in which social contexts are riddled with the exigencies of power and stratification. The comparative contexts of the classical period of India, colonial India, Victorian England, and postindependence India are vastly different. But their differences should not be allowed to efface important parallels. Insofar as colonial and postcolonial constructions of sexuality in ancient India are able to elide a consideration of the social context and the prevailing forms of gender hierarchy, the *Kamasutras* appear utopian. In these cases, the construct of the *Kamasutra* is celebrated as a treatise on sexual activity rather than a manifestation of sexuality. In the middle of colonial and nationalist discourses, in the tension between representations of the exotic, erotic East for the liberation of the West and the golden age of sex in Indian life, the social history of the *Kamasutras* remains neglected, and, thus, the social history of gender and sexuality is also neglected. The neglect is evident whether it is gender relations in the time period when the "original" *Kamasutra* is said to have been compiled or the politics of gender and sexuality under the colonial state when Burton "discovered" the *Kamasutra*. Postindependent constructions of the *Kamasutra* in India, such as Upadhyaya's version, remain entrapped within a discourse, the product of colonialism, that seeks to generate and preserve an untainted vision of the past. Ultimately both representations are riven with historical inequities of power.

### Conclusion

Notions of the original and the translated *Kamasutras* are rooted in discourses of history and sexuality that were generated in the encounter between colonialism and official, anticolonial nationalisms. These representations are unevenly secured on a past borrowed by a colonial empire

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., the work of feminist anthropologists such as Leacock 1983; Gailey 1987; Ortner 1993; and Rapp 1993.



coming to grips with its politics of sexuality. Burton's *Kamasutra* illustrates how, under the transnational conditions of empire, narratives of history normalize emergent categories of nation, race, and gender. Upadhyaya's *Kamasutra* also exposes the tensions of sexuality in a postcolonial society grappling with the legacies and politics of national identity constructed against the grain of colonialism. Today, it is thereby conceivable to think of the *Kamasutra* as a fifteen-hundred-year-old "Indian" compilation, "discovered" by the orientalist Burton and deployed by intellectuals in India to scientifically defend "ancient traditions" and argue for change in contemporary societal attitudes toward sexuality (or what is an implicit call for "modernization"). Read from a transnational feminist cultural studies perspective, the two *Kamasutras* illustrate that these discourses are hardly circumscribed by categories of past and present, of "India" and the "West," or tradition and modernization-Westernization; nor do these texts allow one to comfortably claim that each is a mere translation of the original.

Indeed, the narratives of history and sexuality that enable and, in turn, are reinforced through each *Kamasutra* are profoundly limited by and riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions. The politics of gender, race, nationality, and class are differently influential but consistently suppressed in these texts. In effect, in contexts such as the United States, based on neocolonial projections of India or the so-called East, sexuality is discursively constructed. Therefore, the irony of the reference in *Cosmopolitan*, about the *Kamasutra* signifying a woman reader who is an erotic expert, is almost lost. Not only is a historicized understanding of the *Kamasutra* that uncovers the elision of gender- and class-based histories threatened, but, conversely, it is also projected for women readers as an implement of sexual liberation. Against the grain of feminist historiographies of ancient India, it is not possible to sustain with ease notions of the sexual emancipation of women through the so-called classical period; on the contrary, these historiographies indicate a greater likelihood of the control and regulation of sexuality in a stratified social context. These feminist historiographies also suggest the possibilities and limits of a transnational feminist cultural studies approach that reveals the tensions of class, race, sexuality, and gender that underlie cultural productions such as the two *Kamasutras*; however, without more thoroughgoing critiques and analytic strategies that go beyond the scope of the text, deeply pervasive assumptions about "the" *Kamasutra* might remain untouched. A multistrategy feminist analysis of the two *Kamasutras* and the cultural context of the precolonial northern part of the South Asian subcontinent is necessary to erode perceptions that either the "translations" or the

“original” could be considered sexually celebratory or emancipatory, viewpoints that are varyingly inscribed in numerous, currently circulating *Kamasutras*.

Corporate networks that cut across nation-states such as the United States and India circulate multiple such *Kamasutras*. Within this transnational, globalizing cultural arena, categories of the sexualized East, of monolithic ancient civilizations, of loss and recovery, of womanhood in the past and present, and of the contemporary Indian nation as deficiency are produced and reaffirmed. For example, the well-known French Indologist Alain Daniélou (1994) recently translated another *Kamasutra*. Enabled by a transnational publishing and distribution network that is far more extensive compared with that of the second half of the nineteenth century, Daniélou claims to base his *Kamasutra* on various other versions available in Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, and English. Daniélou’s defense of yet another translation of the *Kamasutra* is primarily based on three claims: that it is the first unabridged modern translation of the classic Indian text; that, unlike Burton’s version, which failed to preserve the original division of the text into verses and to translate certain sections, his version seeks to gain a clear and full understanding of the philosophy and techniques of the *Kamasutra*; and that Daniélou wants to demystify India and show how a period of great civilization, of high culture, is also perforce a period of great liberty. To that extent, Daniélou’s (1994) *Kamasutra*, much like its predecessors, remains trapped within an unexamined nexus of power.

Yet another recent edition based on the works of the Kama Shastra Society preserves this vision of the erotic, exotic East for the consumption of the West, albeit differently. The Hamlyn Publishing Group produced a collection of the three works associated with Burton in one volume entitled *The Illustrated Kamasutra, Ananga-Ranga, and Perfumed Garden: The Classic Eastern Love Texts by Sir Richard Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot* (Fowkes 1987). A mere one thousand years separates the *Kamasutra* from the *Ananga Ranga*! *The Perfumed Garden*, in the same volume, is attributed to Sheikh Nefzawi writing in Tunisia in the fifteenth century. Each of these works is stripped of its context, as the introduction by Charles Fowkes admits. He alleges that the material on astrology, charms, folk medicine, and magic was deleted from this edition, and Kalyana Malla’s boring tables and the racist, sexist remarks of Sheikh Nefzawi were eliminated. How are these irrelevant? Yet Fowkes, clearly aware that several centuries separate the *Kamasutra* and the *Ananga Ranga*, nonetheless unequivocally claims that they share the same cultural heritage. This claim once again reproduces an immutable, static “Indian past.”

Furthermore, how is it conceivable to use Indian paintings of the Mughal tradition to illustrate the Tunisian work, the *Perfumed Garden*? With a flourish, centuries of Indian history are collapsed as tradition, and India and Tunisia become part of the same cultural East.

Within India, calls for the modernization of sexual attitudes in India, against the backdrop of the *Kamasutra*, at best present limited visions of social change and at worst exacerbate the problems by effacing deeper inequalities of gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. Invoking liberal and liberatory images of ancient India only serves to deflect attention from contemporary structural problems that beleaguer the realm of sexuality, especially among the young. The problem is less that sexuality is repressed and not openly discussed but that, for example, women of various social classes and groups are expected to embody sexual purity and that sexuality is implicitly and explicitly conflated with heterosexuality. This is not to suggest that there is no pressing need to dispel misconceptions surrounding sexuality, but this kind of education cannot be separated from critiques of the underlying hierarchies of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, and nationalism. In the last instance, issues of sexuality in contemporary, postcolonial India are not challenged through tropes of modernization, Westernization, nationalism, and ancient tradition but through the analysis of persistent regional and transnational social inequalities.

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