

THE LANGUAGE OF DESIRE – A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE EROTIC ARTS IN ASIAN TRADITIONS

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Abstract

A great deal has been written about the philosophy of love. Some of the most profound and sophisticated abstractions on love have existed in the philosophical discourse of all dominant traditions. Philosophers have confronted the questions pertaining to the epitome of love as an attempt to understand its true transcendental essence. Furthermore, the intimate function of love and the rationale behind the emotions it procures have been subjected to research by traditionalists and modernists alike. The resonances in the rhetoric of love across different traditions in Asia, especially the erotic will be subject to research in this paper.

Keywords: Erotic love, Asian tradition

Introduction

A great deal has been written about the philosophy of love. Some of the most profound and sophisticated abstractions on love have existed in the philosophical discourse of all dominant traditions. Philosophers have confronted the questions pertaining to the epitome of love as an attempt to understand its true transcendental essence. Furthermore, the intimate function of love and the rationale behind the emotions it procures have been subjected to research by traditionalists and modernists alike.

The congress of love in action is often a discourse much contemplated in various traditions across the Asian continent. Classical literature in the Asian tradition is replete with philosophies on love and the practice of erotic as an art form. Many of these creative works employ numerous aphorisms to replenish the literary arts with the theories on erotics of love. The wisdom of these early writings boasts of a remarkable progress in the *ars erotica*. The theoretical perspective on the performance of erotic love is as much a part of the aesthetic imagination as other human affairs can be. Many of the early and medieval Asian works relate to erotic love as a

physical exercise which commands intense discipline of the body in order to extract maximum pleasure. Also, *ars erotica* would often be included in discussions surrounding medical science since it pertains to the anatomy of human body and its well-being. The attainment of pleasure and desire are some of the common principles in the philosophical framework around erotic love; moreover, many works also include a commentary on the importance of practicing sexual art incumbent to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. In addition, these treatises offer demonstrations on the extended gratification of sexual intercourse by stimulating and sustaining the sensual pleasure heralded through a discipline of knowing the body.

Sexual lore in Indian Classical Literature

Francesca Orsini's *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History* (2007) is a seminal work around the conceptualization of love as a tradition in the Indian subcontinent. The variety of essays included in her research trace the plurality of these idioms of love in different South Asian genres and canons. She notes that the Indian vernaculars maintained a sophisticated discourse on the passion of sexual love which is amply illustrated in the Sanskrit compositions. Stories of conjugal love can be found in abundance in epic and mythical narratives, be that of *Nala* and *Damyanti*, *Dushyanta* and *Shakuntala*, or the escapades of *Kunti* with Sun, and other Gods of the heavenly abode; these stories offer a remarkable insight in the passionate sexual love which was sanctified by the holy order through the practices of *swayamvara*¹ and *gandharva*².

The trope of desire finds a strong connotation in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* which is at the crux of the sexual lore in the Indian repertoire aimed for a refined readership, *nagaraka*. The desire or *kama* is one of the essentials of the trivarga that dictates the becoming of a balanced man, the other two being *dharma* (righteousness) and *artha* (wealth) as noted by Orsini. In *Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana* (1989), G D Khosla bespeaks in the "Introduction" – "a full and integrated life was possible only if due regard were paid to all three types of activity and a happy balance between them were established. The neglect of any one of them would lead to a deleterious, indeed a dangerous imbalance" (15)³. Inasmuch the importance of *dharma* and *artha* was understood necessary for the balanced human conduct, the pursuit of desire could not be dismissed. Hence the polity of desire in *Kama Sutra* acquires an elite space in the Sanskrit literary canon. Interestingly, Vatsyayana begins his work by stating that the practice of *trivarga* is important at different stages of the human life. And, as per the teachings of the Holy Writ, mind and the body must be harmonized by a judicial practice of the fundamentals in *trivarga*. But he maintains that the practice of *dharma* and *artha* must be placed before *kama* since unthoughtful and mindless pursuit of desires lead to unrestrained social behaviour.

Sir Richard Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot's English translation of the *Kama Sutra* or the *Aphorisms on Love* originally published in 1893 has been the most popular and widely read work which is consistently reprinted replete with an Introduction for every new edition. Vatsyayana states that the principles in *Kama Sutra* are aligned with the science of *kama* called *Kama Shastra* which is deemed just as worthy as *Dharmashastra* or *Arthashastra* by Manu and

¹ Swayamvara is the practise of choosing groom by the girl of marriageable age. It is a Sanskrit word "swayam" meaning self and "vara" meaning groom.

² Manusmriti defines 8 types of vivah (marriages) out of which gandharva in one wherein the bride and groom marry out of love and without the consent of the family. The others are Brahma, Prajapatiya, Daiva, Arsha, Asura, Rakshashaa, and Pischacha.

³ Vatsyayana and Richard F. Burton. *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana: The Classic Hindu Treatise on Love and Social Conduct*. Penguin Books, 1993.

Chanakya respectively. Moreover, in the “Introductory Preface” to the original treatise, Vatsyayana mentions that the work had existed before his time in a thousand chapters composed by Nandi (the follower of *Mahadeva*), and another five hundred chapters in an abridged version by Shvetaketu. Vatsyayana had taken the liberty to put together one hundred and fifty chapters under seven parts, each dealing with various aspects of love and social conduct in order to expound a versatility on the subject matter for the Hindus. Hence, it would be inaccurate to say that the work is only about the sexual positions which enhance pleasure during the intercourse. The treatise includes discussions on the importance of studying other arts complementary to the vernacular of desire. Furthermore, it is also about courtship and maintaining a relationship with the partner vis-à-vis establishing a power quotient in the sexual congress. Also, in the text an entire section is devoted to committing adultery by indulging in sexual intercourse with the wives of other people called *Paradarika*. This section also includes a chapter on the examination of a woman’s mind. The sixth book consists of discussions on living with or as *Vaisika*; and the last part of the treatise deals with commentaries on grooming oneself so as to attract other sexual beings, and on the use of medicinal potions, concoctions or any other aphrodisiacs.

Even though the *Kama Sutra* is a product of its time, it refrains from adapting a monotone of patronizing women as weaker or inferior sex. Surprisingly, the text connotes that women (*nayika*) are also equal and active participants in the sexual congress, therefore they must be educated about the art of desire, lest they be bereft of fulfilling their passions. Certain *shlokas* in Book Two are devoted to the importance of obtaining an orgasm for both the participants since it ensures the fruition of coitus. In addition to it, out of the sixty-four arts of love-play, few positions are ascribed to women being on top as a way to take control of the congress. The sixth book is built upon the world of courtesans who are trained in the *Kama Shastra*. At numerous instances the role of a *nayak* is amiss in these discussions as the focus shifts to the *ganika* (learned courtesan) who wins the heart of the man about town (*nagarakavritta prakarana*)⁴.

A glimpse into the Sanskrit vernacular reveals that *Kama Sutra* is not the only scripture about the erotic arts of desire. Kokkoka’s *Ratirahasya* or *The Secrets of Conjugal Bliss* is one of the chief works to be composed after Vatsyayana’s *Sutras*. The text *Ratirahasya*, as the name suggests, is more about the God of love Kama’s consort Rati. It is one of the early texts that talk about feminine beauty and different classification of women based on their physiological, psychological, and sexual characteristics. While a similar classification was also made by Vatsyayana in the preface to the *Sutras*, its details were amiss in the text. Kokkoka’s text is divided into fifteen chapters called *Panchivedas* with each chapter devoted to topics like classification of men and women, erogenous zones, amorous practices during solar and lunar cycles, odors, and recipes for increasing the size of the *yoni* (vagina) and controlling the flow of semen, et cetera. Many of Kokkoka’s predecessors focused exclusively on arousing the female participant by stimulating her erogenous zones but did not comment on the same for men. *Ratirahasya* offers detailed examination of the *kamasthanas* (erogenous zones) and *anangasthiti* (love potential) for men and women respectively. A similar erotic strain is found in Jayadeva’s *Ratimanjari* which was probably composed in the 12th century. The short lyric is aimed exclusively at male readers as it serves as a handbook on how to please different types of women, but by no means does it evade the need for pleasure in women. However, since it is written from a male perspective, the poem refers to the female partners as passive participants in coitus.

⁴ *Nagarakavritta Prakarana* or Man about Town is the name of the first chapter in Kamasutra.

The art of eroticism is not restricted to literature in the Indian aesthetics. The erotic sculptures of India are an appropriate addition to the practice of *ars amoris* in Indian subcontinent. There are many stone carvings on temple walls and gateways which depict lovers in *maithuna* (sexual union) at various degrees. There are many explanations for these carvings - some of the popular answers nod to the sexual positions from the *Kama Sutra*, while a few relate these carvings to have been commissioned by the predominant Kings in order to attract the citizens during religious festivities.

Erotic Arts in China

Chinese scholarship in the erotic arts has been kept alive discreetly. The history of these surviving manuscripts is just as colorful as the contents of the text itself. Few scrolls on Chinese sexology were written on bamboo and excavated from the Han Tomb as time capsules. A majority of the Chinese sex manuals survived in the monumental Japanese medical science manuscript called *Ishimpo*. The texts on sexual alchemy survived centuries through illegal circulation. Manuscripts on women's sexual practices (*Wondrous Discourse of Su Nu*) were recovered from the library of a patronage in Japan. It would not be wrong to assume that a majority of these surviving works on Chinese sexual arts were recovered from Japan; the reason for which could be that the strict Chinese dynasties under Confucian tutelage had forbidden the composition and circulation of such works. However, Chinese sexual yoga was in practice within the Jade Palace so as to invigorate the *Ch'i* or *Qi* of the dynasts. The principle purpose of these sex manuals which date back to the Han dynasty was to prescribe healthy sex for its readers. These manuscripts preach that a proper sexual intercourse benefits the health and general well-being of the participants. Taoist sects during the Six Dynasties believed that a spiritual transformation could be achieved through a unity of yin and yang. The implications of yin-yang theory were to stimulate a balanced unity with the exterior and interior worlds. Since the man lives in congruence with the nature, it was of supreme importance to achieve harmony within the human body attuned to the comic forces of the world.

The sections on sexology were found in Ma Wang Tui medical journals which are commonly believed to have been composed during the early Han period. This scripture included two titles on the art of sexual intercourse, namely *Ho Yin Yang* (Conjoining Yin and Yang) and *T'ien hsia chih tao t'an* (Discourse on the culminating way in Under Heaven). The former, *Ho Yin Yang* is a treatise on the sexual positions written on bamboo slips which echo the esoteric style of literature written within the tradition of *yangsheng* (nurturing life). The cryptic verse in the Introduction of *Ho Yin Yang* makes explicit remarks to the physiological aspects of a woman's body and to a man's penis through a series of symbolic imageries of a basket, receiving cannister, stove frame, et cetera, which were often used in *Shih Ching* love poems and *I Ching* texts. Few parts of the bamboo slip present more esoteric verses pertaining to the sexual cultivation, the exchange of bodily fluids (saliva and semen) and the radiance of a man's skin during ejaculation. *T'ien hsia chih tao t'an* contains similar esoteric verses but the difference lies in the enactment of these sexual conjunctions which is suggestive of inducing multiple orgasms in a woman. These Ma Wang Tui slips are evocative of *fangzhong shu* (The Art of the Bedchamber) works which enunciate the idea of longevity, exclusively for men, by absorbing a woman's *ch'i* during coitus. As the loss of semen is equated with death (post-coital shrinkage of the penis also connotes death) the man must absorb the *Yin ch'i* which is an inexhaustible source of vitality. As men are in danger of depleting their source of *Yang ch'i*, they must resort to absorbing the vapors of the *Yin ch'i* and not lose their vital essence (*jing/ching*). Withholding the

ejaculation of semen and taking in the orgasmic expulsion from the vagina ensures longevity, according to Tao. It seems that the Taoist sects during this time were obsessed with procuring the Golden Elixir of Longevity and *coitus reservatus* was their grail of ensuring unending vitality.

The excavations from Ma Wang Tui are generally followed by the sections from *Ishimpo*, a medical manuscript on the physiology of human body compiled in over thirty volumes. The classics recovered from Sui-T'ang dynasties are more adventurous than their predecessors. From Ma Wang Tui to *Ishimpo*, the rhetoric of these texts follows a definite change in the style of writing, even though the content bears connections between the two works. The two major works, the *Classic of Su Nu* and the *Secrets of the Jade Chamber* are written in the form of interviews where the Yellow Emperor seeks vitality and the sex goddess Su Nu answers a multitude of questions in relation to his pursuit⁵. The dialogic continues with Su Nu teaching the Yellow Emperor of the nine methods of tapping into the *ch'i* in a woman; seven ills which harm the *ch'i*; and eight benefits of invigorating the *ch'i* in a man. The next section includes a variety of concoctions that Su Nu prescribes which could benefit the weakening *ch'i* of the Yellow Emperor. There is a remarkable undertone of a female supremacy which could be observed in the *Classic of Su Nu* since the entire dialogic explicates the weak *ch'i* of the man and the superiority of the female *ch'i*. *Secrets of the Jade Chamber* is a continuation of the treatise based on questions asked by the Yellow Emperor and introduces new characters to the dialogic forum. The new corpus of advises includes a discussion of changing female partners frequently with a preference for young women. It also includes prohibitions, tabooed practices during intercourse, preferred days to have intercourse for conception, and few tricks which guarantee the birth of a male heir.

Chinese expression in erotic arts also boasts of painted porcelain cups and rice bowls, woodblock prints, plates, jade figures, and paintings depicting lovers engrossed in coitus. Chao Meng-Fu was a noted painter during the Yuan dynasty and he was particularly skilled in the art of painting erotic pictures. A brief mention of his pornographic artistry is mentioned in a controversial novel by Li Yu written in the seventeenth century wherein a character gives his wife a wooden album of thirty-six erotic paintings by the celebrated painter. Another painter worth mentioning belonged to the Ming dynasty called T'ang Yin who painted the "Six Extraordinary Positions", a reference to which is found in an album *Feng-liu-chueh-ch'ang* published in 1606. The twenty-four prints in this book are originally based on the paintings by T'ang Yin. It is not surprising that most of the early prints belonging to Han, Sui-T'ang, and Yuan (Mongol) periods have not survived in originals. They mostly exist as references mainly from the Ming dynasties, or as recreations by later artists. Neo Confucians expurgated these texts and prints as means of inducing filial piety and state-bound duty of the Emperor to its citizens. Nevertheless, many references have survived this ordeal and have been the subject of intensive research on Chinese expertise in *ars erotica*.

Eroticism in *Shunga* and other Japanese art forms

The erotic arts reach a new paradigm in the Japanese literary discourse with *shunga* pictures. *Shunga* or "spring pictures" was a form of popular art meant to illustrate erotic sentiment often times inspired by contemporary anecdotes, or scenes from popular works at the time.

⁵ The Yellow Emperor is believed to have copulated with twelve hundred virgins and attained immortality. Yellow Emperor and Su Nu are fictional characters in the Art of Bedchamber. Su Nu, T'sai Nu, and P'eng Tsu are the three women who teach the Emperor. They are further referred to as Plain girl, Dark girl, and Elected girl respectively.

Furthermore, these *shunga* prints also feature a parodied version of these aforementioned incidents which were circulated privately to the patrons in Edo Japan. Since *shunga* is a wide-ranging genre, it becomes difficult to determine its function, nevertheless, it is certain that the Japanese art did not outlandishly ban the production or consumption of *shunga* as some of the earliest works are available for scholarly research. The sexual activities in *shunga* prints are represented through a playful oeuvre in order to highlight its sensual eroticism which could perhaps be a manner of educating its readers about the coital art. One thing which is absolutely clear is that the Japanese literati did not attach any ostensible meaning to sexual intercourse; they see it for what it is, as an act of pleasure which is the first of its kind phenomena in the Asian tradition. Also, the Japanese erotic art carries its own set of aesthetic sensibilities which were given its folds of formality through *shunga* prints. To understand the expanse of *shunga* means to grasp the expression of pleasure through the symbolic language - be it the nude paintings, or the silken clad fashionable courtesan of Edo Japan, the erotic art finds a new paradigm of aesthetic sensibilities in *shunga* prints, and it would be a gross mistake to obfuscate its sensuousness with pornography of the west.

The benefits of longevity offered by the Chinese manuscripts from the *Art of the Bedchamber* provided a vital background to the Japanese art to flourish its own indigenous representation. *Shunga* art was an expression of authentic Japanese sensibilities, its own customs and morals, which were lacking a definitive illustration at the time. The degree of eroticism available through the Chinese manuscripts were amiss since they seldom indulged in the inexpressible joy of coitus, and were too dogmatic in the sexual matters. The Japanese government and the high-society had been largely complaisant towards the expression of sex in the literary art. Sophisticated expressions of erotic adventures were available through the Chinese doctrines accessible only to the aristocratic families and feudal lords of Edo-Japan, but it was monumentally missing from popular forms of art. *Shunga* pictures provided that fitting outlet for the masses since most of the extant Yamato-e or Kano style semi-erotic prints were scenes from the *Tales of Genji*, a popular work during the Heian period. The earliest known erotic *shunga* scroll, *Koshibagaki-zoshi* (The Brushwood Fence) is the first of its kind to talk about sexual voyeurism, and interestingly its later renditions included some of the Imperial personages, and even the most popular scandal of the time involving a Princess's paramour with an Imperial guard⁶. By the late sixteenth century *shunga* art seems to have evolved into a structured form of twelve scrolls (for each month in a year) inscribing a non-narrative pictorial representation more nuanced on the individual beauty of each painted scroll. With these changes a new style of painting gradually took hold which was categorically different from the classical generic styles of Yamato-e, Kano, and Tosa schools of art. This was called the *ukiyo-e* or the "floating world pictures" which soon became the dominant technique for *shunga* scrolls. *Yoshiwara Makura-e* (Yoshiwara Pillow pictures) is an appropriate example of this nascent genre. This full-fledged erotic print consists of some of the most flavorful illustration of brief encounters with the famous courtesans of Edo Japan of the seventeenth century. Later, Tsukioka Settei refined erotica by exquisitely capturing the feminine beauty in his iconographs. His brushwork was considered exceptional at the time because of his usage of gold and other rare

⁶ This scroll is about the notorious incident of 986 AD involving Princess Nariko and an Imperial guard. The Princess was placed in Nonomiya Shrine for the two-year long purification ritual. Some nine months later, a rumour arose that the Princess has been seduced by an Imperial guard. The lovers were dismissed from the shrine. The scroll depicts the Princess and the Imperial in the final moments of their coition.

pigments which greatly influenced the later ukiyo-e artists of the eighteenth century. Kitagawa Utamaro became the leading ukiyo-e artist by 1700s with his *Utamakura* (Song of the Pillow), a *shunga* album that is undoubtedly a masterpiece. Apart from his intense erotic scenes, Utamaro was also one of the firsts to indulge in *abuna-e* (nudity) which was relatively absent in *shunga*. Japanese art was never forthcoming in representation of nude bodies or genitals since it was considered too commonplace and lacking any aesthetic quality. Utamaro's erotic prints featured lovers engrossed in coitus (sometimes even violently) unaware of their surroundings. His works are an essence of complex fantasies at play bearing resemblances to the realistic forces for the viewers. Meiji Japan witnessed a decline of ukiyo-e *shunga* prints with a brief resurrection through *bijin-ga* (girl pictures), but foreign influences, Western pornography, and the censorship of *abuna-e* had finally put an end to the circulation and production of *shunga* which thrived on popular demand.

Arabic Erotica

The paucity of erotic arts in Islamic world is a consequence of their strict social codes which have forever precluded the possibility of sex in artistic expression. The wealth of eroticism in Indian, Chinese, and Japanese traditions is absent in Islamic arts. Nevertheless, some fragments have withstood these severe tribulations and they supplant a new dimension to the Islamic arts flourishing within the Quranic folds. David James in the essay "Islam – The Arab Inheritance" from *Erotic Art of the East* makes some of the curious investigations on the existence of erotic expression which is found in public bath houses. He insists that some of the fragmentary evidence proves that the walls of these medieval public baths were decorated with pictures of naked girls sculpted by a special class of artisans. Apart from these conjectures, one serious body of work composed around the sixteenth century *Al-Rawd al-Atir fi nuzhati'l khatir* or *The Perfumed Garden for the Souls Recreation* by Sheikh Nefzaoui is an Arabic treatise on the eroticism in Islamic arts. It is not surprising that the book contains verbatim on an array of subjects - from sensual pleasures, to sexual advice, instructions on pregnancy, and so on. The book consists of twenty chapters each varying in length and style written specifically for a certain Grand Vizier who commissioned for the book to be published with added chapters on spells, concoctions for body odor, pregnancy in women, and remedies for increasing the size of the penis. The prefatory "Introduction: General remarks about Coition" bears a candid undertone about the matters of sex, but it is written exclusively for male readers. The book limits female participation in coitus, and acknowledges them as mere creations of beauty. Moreover, it refrains from any substantial insight into a woman's psyche, the female participant is reduced to her role of a seductresses who entices men with her pleasurable bosom and voluptuous body. While the work may not have done justice to female readers, it is noteworthy that the book easily takes on a humorous tone in its countless anecdotes and fictitious stories. *The Perfumed Garden* is written from the prospect of educating the male readers through anecdotes, a style which bears resemblance to the folk narrative in *Arabian Nights*. Also, the work is remarkably different from its Indian or Chinese counterparts, even though it may have been indirectly inspired from these treatises. *The Perfumed Garden* is styled as a work to entertain and delight its readers about the sexual ventures of its multitudinous characters who may or may not have been products of popular narrative at the time.

Conclusion

Of the many examples taken from various Asian platforms, it is clear that each tradition employed its own strategy to furnish a doctrine on erotology. The Japanese tradition and its Arabic counterpart are the ones who were forthright about the quintessential pleasure in sexual intercourse, the sensual delight of sex was their *laissez faire*. The Indian and the Chinese treatises have ostensibly averted the pleasure quotient to talk about human anatomy, health benefits, or worldly affairs pertaining to coitus. Nevertheless, each of these texts has an aesthetic power which cannot be obfuscated with pornography of the West. The degree of versatility in Asian erotica provides the pursuer a thorough insight on the diverse traditions of the Asian aesthetics. Despite the restrictions imposed on most of these works, the aesthetic ecstasy of these erotic arts incites a resplendent acumen of the litterateur in the East.

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