

Un-Tainting *Ars Erotica*: The Orient's Perspective

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Article information	Abstract
DOI : 10.25077/jds.1.1.24-31.2024	<p>This study examines the evolution of the Kama Sutra within the context of Hinduism and its subsequent misrepresentation through colonial interpretations, particularly focusing on the impact of Western scholar Sir Richard Francis Burton. Within Hinduism, the concept of Purusarthas encapsulates the foundational pursuits of human existence: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. While Dharma, Artha, and Moksha have historically held elevated positions, Kama's significance has been marginalized over time. Originally an autonomous pillar akin to the other three, Kama underwent censorship and degradation, notably evidenced in the Manu Shastra, attributing its decline to a deviation from righteous living. The translation of the Kama Sutra into English by Burton in the 19th century propelled its misinterpretation globally, transforming it from a comprehensive guide celebrating love and fulfilment to a sensationalized sex manual. This shift obscured the text's spiritual essence and cultural context, perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes and reinforcing Western sexual fantasies. Burton's translation, influenced by colonial agendas, not only erased the agency of women but also distorted the original intentions of the text, presenting a skewed narrative that catered to Victorian ideals and patriarchal norms. This paper examines the translation, portrayal through the lens of Orientalism, and the intricate gender dynamics the Kama Sutra embodies. Employing critical frameworks of translation theory, feminist analysis, and postcolonial perspectives, this study reveals how the Kama Sutra, as a historical and sexual text, underwent transformation under the influence of Western cultural impositions. Through the prism of translation theory, the paper unravels the colonial lens shaping the Western interpretation, thereby altering the original text to fit Eurocentric ideals. The feminist analysis exposes the erasure of female agency within the text, reinforcing patriarchal norms rather than liberating women. This analysis engages post-colonial theories, notably Edward Said's Orientalism, to illuminate the intricate power dynamics entrenched in the colonial interaction. It exposes how the Western perspective imposed its cultural prism upon Eastern texts, perpetuating a dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient. This division rendered the East a subject of both fascination and apprehension, leading to a reductive depiction that obscured the multifaceted and nuanced tapestry of Eastern cultures. Additionally, the paper integrates feminist and post-colonial theories to comprehensively investigate the profound impact of this representation.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

कुसुम-सधर्माणि हि योषितः सुकुमार-उपक्रमाः। ताः तु अनधिगत-विश्वासैः प्रसभम् उपक्रम्यमाणाः
संप्रयाग-द्वेषिण्यः भवन्ति। तस्मात् साम्ना एव उपचरेत्॥

“Women are like flowers; they should be treated very tenderly. No action should be forced unless full faith is instilled in the wife's heart towards the husband.” –*Kama Sutra* by Vatsyayana

Hinduism, the oldest and most prominent religion in India dictates Purusarthas (ultimate worldly goals) to be the foundation of human existence (Devis Jr, 2004; . The attainment of Dharma (law, duty

and morality), Artha (power and wealth), Kama (pleasure, erotic love, desire) and Moksha (Spiritual liberation) leads to the ultimate fulfilment of a meaningful life (Khal, 2021; Ghosh, 2021). While Moksha is the highest goal requiring complete renunciation of the world, Dharma, Artha and Kama (Trivarga) are worshipped like three deities in Hinduism and form the core axiology of the religion. The superiority and significance of Dharma, Artha and Moksha can be gauged from the fact that it has been the tagline of Classical Hinduism for decades now. But what of Kama? Why is Kama seen in a derogatory light devoid of any spiritual significance? Well, this was always not the case. Originally, the history of Hinduism has been rooted in erotica and its pieces of evidence can be found throughout the country in theory as well as in form (Skora, 2007; Nag, 1995). One ought to think that owing to the heavy censorship of *Kama Sutra* in India, its composition would have been a product of shame and loss of morals.

Kama Sutra translated in English as “Aphorisms on love making”, was composed around 3rd B.C by a sage named Vatsyayana. According to ancient Hinduism, Kama was an autonomous pillar holding similar importance as the other three. It was in the Manu Shastra wherein the first case of erotic censorship was ever recorded. Dharma gained primacy and Kama became the bi-product of a corrupt life led by those straying away from the righteous path. The only exception to its autonomy was seen in the figure of the courtesan who became the embodiment of Kama in herself. The rise of Manu Shastra, the colonial imposition of Victorian morals, ‘post-colonial Stockholm effect’¹, led to the degradation of Kama Shastra in India. Historian of erotics and sexology in pre-modern India, Ivo Fisser, conducted a thorough survey of the “Existing Scholarly Literature of Kama Sutra” and reached the conclusion that Ancient Indian Sexology is an egregiously overlooked discipline within the white spectrum of Indological studies, despite the significant attention paid to it in the past. Fisser’s observations unequivocally demonstrate that the Victorian mindset, despite being a thing of the past, still lingers significantly.

Through an exploration of the historical evolution of the *Kama Sutra* within Hinduism and its subsequent misrepresentation in colonial translations, this study analyzes the multifaceted impact of Western interpretations, particularly Richard Francis Burton’s translation. It scrutinizes how colonial agendas, influenced by Orientalist perspectives, distorted the spiritual essence and cultural context of the *Kama Sutra*, perpetuating stereotypes and erasing the agency of women while reinforcing Victorian ideals and patriarchal norms.

METHODS

This research is primarily anchored in a multifaceted analysis centred on the English translation of the *Kama Sutra* by Richard Francis Burton. The examination delves into diverse theoretical frameworks to comprehensively dissect the Western interpretation of the *Kama Sutra*. Utilising Edward Said’s work on Orientalism, this study navigates the intricate power dynamics and cultural hegemony perpetuated through colonial translations. Said’s discourse on the construction of the ‘Orient’ and its representation within Western narratives forms a foundational aspect of this analysis. Additionally, the exploration extends to Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space, providing an alternative lens through which to examine the textual transformation of the *Kama Sutra*. Bachelard’s insights into the phenomenology of space offer a unique perspective on how cultural contexts shape interpretations and translations.

In augmenting these theoretical frameworks, this research draws from the scholarly contributions of South Asian writers and theorists, including Abhay K, Jyoti Puri, and Sanjay K Gautam. Their perspectives offer nuanced insights into the indigenous cultural significance of the *Kama Sutra* and provide a crucial counterbalance to Western interpretations. Further, the incorporation of works by prominent Indologists such as Wendy Doniger adds depth and breadth to the analysis, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the text’s historical, cultural, and gendered dimensions.

¹ I have coined this term to represent the inexplicable return of the colonised back to its coloniser in order to derive some identification for itself even after independence. Although the former coloniser no longer haunts the former colony literally but figuratively the impact of superimposition of its identity persists and hence a peculiar identity crisis stays within the colony’s subjects. The colonial past becomes a sort of abductor to whom the colony has lost hefty amounts of its cultural values and yet longs to go back to in order to keep it alive to fulfill its mental advancement be it political, cultural or societal.

This methodological approach amalgamates diverse theoretical paradigms and cross-cultural perspectives to offer a holistic understanding of the *Kama Sutra*'s misrepresentation through colonial translations, illuminating the intricate interplay between power, culture, and interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Politics Behind Translation

Kama Sutra is considered a one-of-a-kind treatise on sexuality that celebrates the art of love-making. However, unfortunately, that is not what it is known for. With the first-ever Western translation done by Sir Richard Francis Burton, what was meant to be a guide became glorified as a sex handbook worldwide. Here the debate arises, as earlier seen in "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe, whether writing in the English language is an act of empowerment or an effect of slavery. Uma Chakravarty (1989) argues that "the need to justify colonial domination over India tempted this Orientalist history; the degeneration of an ancient civilization, the abject position of women in the 19th century India and the inability of effeminate Indian men to rule themselves provided the necessary justification and impetus to the discourse of history." The issues prevalent in Indian society were highlighted in the translations of local texts and 'needed'² British inclusion to be solved.

The colonial portrayal of India as a brute place with barbaric customs provided them with the incentive to take advantage of the cultural superstitions in the country and paint themselves as saviours who had come to save the brown women from torture and civilise the nation by ridding it off these evil practices. Sati was taken as a political opportunity to paint the narrative of 'Saviour and the Saved'³. Similar, if not worse conditions were seen in the colonisation of Africa, a less developed country than India. The local traditions of Africa were used as a pawn in colonial politics to dismantle the native culture by dividing natives, brainwashing them into feeling inferior and justifying the Christian religion as supreme. This is evident by Okwonko's suicide whose death and manner of dying is a metaphor for the gradual decline of a culture in the novel. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Mask* talks about a concept of "self-division" which states that in the psyche of a black man, he behaves differently with other black men than with a white man and he attributes it to the effect of colonialism which includes physical, mental and psychological subjugation. He also says, that to speak a language is more than just speaking syntax and vocab but to "assume a culture". And one ought to live the culture, to fairly translate it. Just like the sacrality of marriage in Hinduism cannot be understood by anyone from the outside, similarly, the contexts of our ancient teachings cannot be completely understood by just frolicking through them.

Orientalism and the Construction of Cultural Dominance: Edward Said's Discourse in Context of Burton's *Kama Sutra*

In his biography, Burton emerges as an embodiment of a European traveler who was driven by an insatiable thirst for the exotic, an unquenchable desire for adventure, and an unwavering pursuit of success, all enabled by the vast reach and power of the colonial empire. His life's journey was marked by daring feats, dangerous expeditions, and a relentless pursuit of knowledge and experience that took him to the farthest corners of the world (Dearden 1937; Farewell, 1963; Brodie 1967; Rice 1990). Burton, on his quest to sexually emancipate Victorian England (Doniger, 2003), failed to grasp the bird's eye view of the core ideology behind the text. Translated with political intention in mind, it was never meant to be an excavation and expansion of Hindu culture but a fetishising tool, manipulated to liberate sexual repression in the West. This theory heavily inspires the modern-day narrative on and around the *Kama Sutra*.

The discrepancies in Burton's *Kama Sutra* can be better understood with Edward Said's Orientalism, a discourse that produces a certain idea of the Orient, that fixes the Orient in a certain definition and doesn't

²Implies God complex of the colonisers, depicting Indian societal woes needed the patronization of British colonisers in order to get rid of. This also shows that the British were justifying their existence to the world.

³Saviour signifies the assumed omnipresent intellectual god like figure of the British coloniser and the Saved here signifies the ever ignorant beastly amoral women, forced to burn themselves on the pyre of their dead husbands.

leave it “a free subject of thought and actions”. The term ‘Oriental’ or ‘Eastern’ was used to describe lesbian practices that were considered disreputable by Vatsyayana in a region of the Gupta Empire that was soon to be colonized, specifically the Eastern part. This suggests that the concept of “Orientalism” did not originate with the British, but rather with the people of the Orient themselves. These women used various objects, such as dildos made from bulbs, roots or fruits shaped like a male organ, and statues of men with distinct sexual characteristics. (KS 5.6.2) However, Edward Said’s Orientalism differs from Vatsyayana’s as it is more than just a geographical distinction based on sexual practices, but a careful schematization enforced to establish European cultural dominance.

In a nutshell, Orientalism employs the analogy of ‘Orient is you because you are not us’⁴. On this grand stage, the vastness of the East is confined, and it is here where figures emerge to symbolize the larger whole from which they originate. The Orient, which may have once seemed like an endless and unknown expanse beyond the familiar European world, is now given a sense of structure and definition through the depiction of these figures on this stage. These “figures” were the orientalists. “When an orientalist travelled in the country of his specialization it was always with abstract and unshakeable maximus about that civilization which they had studied. Orientalists seldom expressed curiosity in anything other than verifying old truths. Their approach involved imposing these truths onto the native population, who often failed to grasp them due to their supposed inferiority. Therefore, in addition to an adequate amount of precise and factual knowledge about the East, a certain type of “second-order knowledge” has been established through Oriental tales, the mythology of the enigmatic East, and the concept of Asian inscrutability, which has taken on a life of its own (Said, 1977). These figures are to the Orient that costume is to a character in a play. Said’s phrase “the other” is a testament to the Western obsession with everything ‘Oriental’. This is also a reference to Jacques Lacan’s terminology, which stands for language and social conventions, referring to the Mirror Stage.

The identity of the Orient is constructed against the backdrop of Occident much like the child who tries to acquire her sense of self by distinguishing herself from her reflection. Mirror in this case is the Occident whose perceptions shape the Orient’s identity. In this context, the sole means for someone to discover who they are is via contrast with an “Other” which in Orientalism alludes to the “Orient’s special place in the Western experience” (Said, 1977). Behind the facade of amusement, there is an underlying fear lurking somewhere within the Occident that perceives the Orient as an insinuating danger. This can be seen in Dante’s *Inferno* which speaks of the cosmic inevitability of Islam’s fate, a religion both a threat and imposter to Christianity. The Islamic prophet Muhammad is shown in the lowest depths of hell and chastised for standing in for the Christian schism. Hence, the threat is muted, familiar values impose themselves, and in the end, the mind reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either “original” or “repetitions”. The debate stems down to a masculine Occident against its oversexed, feminine counterpart. The term “eunuch” was commonly used in British writings about the Orient with a vague connotation of sexual cruelty and impotence. This usage also influenced Burton’s translation of the *Kama Sutra*. The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West familiarity of contempt and its shivers of novel delight (Said, 1977). It is interesting to see that the whole Orientalist theory revolves around Europe and Europe seems to be a subject of both Orientalist and Nationalist narratives.

Orient: A Threat or Ploy?

Imaginative geography and dramatic boundaries alienise the Orient and create an aura of paranoia around it to the extent that the Orient begins to face penalties for its very existence. The nouns describing the genitals in the translation were used with the motive to foster- hinder differences between the two schools of sex⁵. The Orientalist goal acted as a double-edged sword, on one hand using the Orient to

⁴This phrase is representative of alienation of the Orient from the collective Europe

⁵The translation represents how the Burton has churned out words like ‘Yoni’ and ‘Lingam’, which mean two creative powers in Sanskrit scriptures which give birth to human life, and equated them with base translations of them which are ‘Vagina’ and ‘Penis’ respectively which eliminate the entirety of essence within the two words. Yoni in the Sanskrit text symbolised and signified the female aura, the essence of the feminine being, and the spiritual energy of creation of life, not just an opening within the human body but the entirety of the female.

improve the native arts at home while also using deliberate terminology to “dodge the smell of obscenity” (Doniger, 2011) by depicting it as a tropical tradition followed in some exotic part of the world. “Most of them were imbued with the dual purpose of investigating the science and the arts of Asia with the hope of facilitating ameliorations there and of advancing knowledge and improving the arts at home”. One of Burton’s objectives in translation was to save events from oblivion by representing the Orient in modern Occidental terms. This analogy of the Orient’s representation by the Occident turned the Orient into a theatre for the Occident’s representation. The clarity of modern European science lifted the Orient from the realm of silent obscurity where it has been neglected, except for the inchoate murmuring of a vast but undefined sense of its past.

Unveiling Colonial Manipulation: Distorted Translations in *Kama Sutra*

The distinction made by the human mind between the known and the unknown comes naturally to it. This is analysed by Gaston Bachelard in the “Poetics of Space” whereby the inside of a house acquires emotional familiarity and rational sense as opposed to the mysterious and anonymous reaches of distance, a subject of curious exploration. Our mind amplifies the undefined and the strangeness of it gives birth to the “fear of the unknown”, a theory given by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, when the strange becomes familiar or the familiar becomes strange, dread of the unknown arises. The threat of what’s out there obscures our judgment of it. Hence, the image of the Orient, pre-formed notions coupled with political agendas gave rise to a series of cultural translations which started the theme of the representation of the Orient by the Occident, a few examples of which include Ananga Ranga, and Lotus Sutra. However, these cultural translations did not have any role for the natives. During the colonial occupation, the knowledge collected from the natives was given the title “Contribution to modern learning.” However, the reality was that the natives were neither consulted nor treated as anything other than a pretext for a text. These texts were useful only for Europeans to feel in command. This exemplifies the impossibility of translation as an apolitical and transparent process. It is worth noting that Burton worked on the draft of Ananga Ranga with enthusiasm and translated it into a “more acceptable and polished language.” (Brodie 1967, 294) changing the original.

According to Rice (1990), a significant portion of the Ananga Ranga was created by Burton himself, and not based on Hindu thought or writing style, which Burton believed to be too verbose. This colonial encounter led to the perception that the English translation was superior to the original, which was considered to be poor and overly pedantic. The original text and culture are forced to submit to the translation process to generate and disseminate desired knowledge. The concept of the “trick of translation” arises from the Orientalists’ assertion that they are able to “Orientalize the Orient”. This means that they believe they can interpret and represent the cultures, languages, and traditions of the East in a way that is consistent with their own Western perspectives and values. The consequences of this practice are complex and far-reaching, as they involve issues of power, identity, representation, and cultural exchange. “Most of them were imbued with the dual purpose of investigating the science and the arts of Asia with the hope of facilitating ameliorations there and of advancing knowledge and improving the arts at home”. This was probably one of Burton’s goals of translation as well. Rice suggests that the “authoritative, witty, polished and thoroughly annotated” (1990) tone of the *Kama Sutra* makes it clear that Burton played a major role in editing the work.

The idea that the original text was created solely for the purpose of translation is supported by Burton’s *Kama Sutra*. This work challenges the notion that there is a clear distinction between the original and its translation, which is often due to a lack of careful consideration. Burton’s writing reveals his belief that it is a man’s responsibility to sexually satisfy a woman. The source of female pleasure, the G-spot has been completely missed and the techniques of women deriving pleasure from themselves and the act of sex also reversed. Thus straying from the original and ultimately altering it. Based on Rice’s (1990) analysis, Burton displayed a preference for women with brown and black skin over women from his

own country. He also believed in the Bubu system, a common practice among English officers in British India at a time when there were very few white women. These revelations offer insight into the hidden realities and ulterior motives of these so-called “intellectuals”. Burton referred to the Bubu - also known as the black wife - as a temporary wife for English officers and administrators. Burton highlighted the benefits of having a Bubu, stating that she acted as a “walking dictionary” and was essential for students. Not only did she teach students Hindustani grammar, but she also provided insight into the local way of life. Additionally, the Bubu would manage the household and prevent the student from saving money or spending it unnecessarily. She ensures the household runs smoothly, takes great care of him when he’s ill, and creates a welcoming environment (Rice, 1990: 50). According to Rice, Burton’s “walking dictionary” not only taught him sexual techniques, but also introduced him to native life. This was because the household where he lived consisted of a range of her women relatives and a lifestyle that included native food, music, and religious customs. Additionally, Burton was exposed to numerous educated women of the courtesan classes who provided various forms of entertainment. This raises the question of who has the authority to translate, instead of recovering positive didactic writings through translation.

The Orientalized ‘East’: Sexual Fantasies and Patriarchal Agendas

Said (1978) claims that around 1800, sex in the Orient progressively turned into a commodity that could be acquired through popular culture. Writers from Europe who visited the Orient frequently discussed sex. Orientalists established the link between promiscuous sex and the Orient. Burton was able to use this to voice his opinions against the constrictive boundaries of the official Victorian sexual discourse. Additionally, it presented the East as a liberating substitute. The East was feminized by Mrs. Speier and Clarisse Bader as a wellspring of spirituality, culture, and civilization. They provided a remedy for the evils of a Western civilization that was changing quickly and appeared to be materialistic. It’s interesting to observe how the East has served as a counterbalance to the negative aspects of shallow Western civilization as well as an inferior equivalent.

East as a liberatory alternative became ground for the exploration of the depraved sexual fantasies of the British. As Rice indicates, he was intent on promoting the sexual emancipation of Victorian women. However, this emancipation seemed more about un-tabooing sex for the benefit of patriarchy than about female sexual liberation. Hence, the patriarchal agenda of Western sexual depravity was sought to be fulfilled in the East. I consider this ‘convenient emancipation⁶’ as it seems Burton purposefully erased the agency of women in the translated *Kama Sutra* to not give Victorian women that choice. In fact, Glen Burne (1985) contends that Burton was penning this sensual literature during the height of the English understanding of sexuality, which was characterized by female sexual desirelessness, distortion, repression, and suppression. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is a classic illustration of the period’s treatment of women. There are three kinds of women represented in the story, first, the ideal Victorian woman, living within the confines of the societal sphere, other, the eccentric woman, known to be independent and dominant and does not fit within the ideal and third the alone woman. The source “Images of Women in Literature” by Mary Ann Ferguson (1981) deals with the traditional stereotypes used towards women in the 19th century namely the submissive wife, the dominating wife also referred to as the (bitch) and the woman alone and explained how the submissive kind is deemed perfect in the patriarchal society.

CONCLUSION

The *Kama Sutra*, as unravelled through translation theory, feminist analysis, and postcolonial lenses, emerges as a reproduction of glorified and naturalized historical and sexual narratives. *Kamasutra* is the reproduction of glorified and naturalized narratives of history and sexuality (Gayatri Spivak) insight resonates profoundly, revealing how this text became a vessel for Western fascination, undergoing a transformation that echoes the power dynamics of its time. Within translation theory, it reflects the

⁶Suiting Burton’s very deliberate agenda

imposition of colonial perspectives, altering the original to fit Western ideals. Feminist analysis peels back the layers, exposing the erasure of female agency, and reinforcing patriarchal norms rather than liberating women. A postcolonial lens further exposes how this text served as a tool for cultural domination, echoing Said's notion of 'Orientalism' by framing the East through Western desires, fantasies, and projections.

In the interplay of these critical lenses, the *Kama Sutra* stands as a testament to the complexities of cultural representation and translation, revealing not only the impact of Western ideologies on Eastern texts but also the perpetuation of societal power dynamics and gender imbalances. It underscores the importance of critical engagement with historical texts, urging a reconsideration of their reception, interpretation, and the nuanced roles they play in perpetuating dominant narratives, particularly regarding sexuality and cultural identity.

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