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Ars Erotica vs. Scientia Sexualis:

Studying Foucauldian and Classical Indian Discourse on Sex and Body

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Abstract:

This article focuses on Michel Foucault's ideas of sex and sexuality with reference to the Classical Indian discourse on sex and body. It studies the formation of sex as a discourse and its consequences. It analyses the sex as an art and as science. In total agreement with Foucault, the article establishes how the classical Greek and Indian society considered sex as art and how it is transformed everywhere, especially in the West with the advent of Modernism on the scene. The study is based on comparative approach.

Key Words: Foucault – Sex, Sexuality, Body, Social Oppression, Discourse.

Western civilization is scarcely a thousand years old and must first of all free itself from its barbarous one-sidedness. – C. G. Jung

I

The advent of Postmodern and Poststructural studies on the scene has given tremendous impetus to the studies on sex and body. Sex, which has been considered a taboo even in modernist discourse, occupies centre stage in the wake of new theories which emerged after 1960s. In a way since 1960s the discourse on sex and body has radically been altered. Postmodernists, Psychoanalysts and Feminists came out with new theories of sex. Notable thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan have shaken the very foundation of the modernist studies on sex. They questioned the modernist constructions of sex and sexuality. Specifically, Foucault rejected the notion that there occurred a revolution in sex in the modern period. In *The History of Sexuality (1990)* Foucault shows in a convincing language how sexuality is transformed to the tactical convenience of social systems. He demonstrates how institutions attempt to create the

concept of illness, crime, insanity and sex. According to Foucault, human body, sex and madness are really no more than approximations of our experience. They are ideas which only appear natural in a given historical situation and are fabrications of an artificial system.

In the view of Foucault, modern control of sexuality parallels modern control of criminality, as it was made an object of scientific disciplines. He thinks that since the period of Renaissance, Western culture began to develop new techniques for internalizing social norms and forms, which are related to morals, specifically in the sexual behavior. Human sciences like psychology, medicine and demography seized on the body as an object of social concern and governmental manipulation. Foucault talks about *anatomopolitics* (politics of the body) and *biopolitics* (the planning of population through health). He says in an interview, “We have had sexuality since the eighteenth century and sex since nineteenth century. What we had before that was no doubt flesh” (1978: 211).

For Foucault the Western culture was struck by the development of discourse about sexuality/ theory of sexuality/ science of sexuality and knowledge of sexuality. The West had always been overproducing the knowledge of sexuality. (For Foucault, knowledge and language are closely linked to power and both language and knowledge have a political edge.) This process started in the early Christian centuries. In the beginning of the Christianity the Western discourse on sex took a scientific form. In this regard Foucault finds a fundamental difference between the Eastern and the Western societies. The Western societies always tried to hold a scientific discourse on sex and sexuality, whereas in the East the discourses on sex were multiple. In fact, the East never attempted to develop a science of sex. There are numerous discourses on sex in the East until it came in contact with the West. The discourses in the East never claimed any scientific status. Though in India the discourses on sex were called as *shastra*, the word *shastra* was not an equivalent to science. Though it connotes science, it was used in the sense of ‘text’ in the ancient times. The recent translation of *Kamasutra* by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar used the word *shastra* to indicate

text⁴⁵. The discourses on sex in India and other Eastern countries were treated as arts. These arts aimed at maximizing or intensifying pleasure. Foucault says:

it is in the opposition between societies that try to hold a scientific discourse on sexuality, as we do in the West, and those societies in which the discourse on sexuality is very large, very proliferating, and very multiplied, but does not try to found a science, but on the contrary to define an art –an art which would be an art of producing, through sexual organs or with sexual organs, a type of pleasure that one seeks to make the most intense, the strongest, or as long-lasting as possible. (1999:118-119)

Foucault stated that the West never had an Erotic art. One does not learn to develop one to pleasure and how to produce pleasure in others. Maximizing and intensifying of one's own pleasure through the pleasure of others was not known to the West. The truth of sex, but not the pleasure of the sex was the key factor for the West. Even if there were traces of erotic art in the West it was covert. Specifically in Europe, it was an underground activity. In fact, there are few traces of its existence in Europe. The ancient Indian kingdoms were somewhat tolerant towards certain 'idealistic' or 'abnormal' cultures. Hence, we can find substantial evidence relating these cultures.

Even the erotic sculpture and art is available on a monumental scale in India when compared to Europe. Though there were religious and mystical overtones in the Indian sculpture and art, the Indian eroticism explains the popular preference for the biological and immediate, against the metaphysical and other-worldly. In fact the physical always permeated the Indian religious life. In the ancient Indian religious life erotics occupied a central position and was regarded a valid means to attain religious salvation or liberation. The Medieval temple art in India asserts what Nietzsche called the 'transvaluation of all values'. It goes beyond all values and dichotomies or binaries. According to Lannoy:

⁴⁵The word they have translated as 'text' is *shastra*, which some times also means a whole body of knowledge.

The great proportion of medieval temple sculpture is of an explicitly erotic character and this is not limited only to the celebrated maithuna couples but pervades most figurative imagery. (1971: 65)

For many centuries the West had consecrated the speech about sex. Either the 'bourgeoisie' moral or the Christian moral never allowed the West to interrogate itself about sexuality. There were socio-political and cultural movements against this silencing. However, since time of Freud the silence had been broken and there were overt discussions in the West about the sex and sexuality.

The Europeans, for so many centuries, have tried to set up a science of sex rather than to achieve an intensity of pleasure. They strove to find the truth of sex. According to Foucault, before the advent of Christianity, sexuality specifically in Greece and Roman antiquity was free. It was expressed overtly without any inhibitions. But the intervention of Christianity in those societies brought prohibitions for the first time in history. Christianity said 'no' to pleasure and imposed silence on sexuality. It was imposed essentially on the moral grounds. The bourgeoisie in the 16th century continued the old Christian attitude with more severity. This silence continued up to the end of 19th century and during that period Freud lifted the veil of silence.

Christianity imposed the rule of monogamy on the ancient societies. It denied reproduction as privileged and considered it a 'function', a sole unique function of sexuality. Christianity implied a sense that, 'do not make love except to have children. It avoided or disqualified sexual pleasure and treated it as an evil. Foucault identified some 'historical schema' in the history of sexuality of the West. That schema said 'no' to sexuality. Christianity brought new techniques for imposing morals and new mechanisms for inculcating new moral imperatives. Foucault says, "...these moral imperatives which had already ceased to be new at the moment when Christianity entered the Roman Empire and very rapidly became the state religion. It is thus to the

side of these mechanisms of power, much more than to the side of the moral ideas and ethical prohibitions...” (1999: 121)

Foucault calls these mechanisms of power as the power of Pastorate. The phenomenon called Pastorate power is an important phenomenon in the Western to understand the exercise of power. This power, in the beginning was introduced by Christianity in the Roman world. The Christian society plays the role of Pastor and Shepherd in relation to the others and considers them sheep or flock.

II

The phenomenon of Pastoral power was new to the Greek and Roman societies. It was introduced to those societies by Christianity. Even Plato never spoke of that phenomenon. But it was there in the Hebrew society. The concept of shepherd and flock is a fundamental concept in the Hebrew society. It is a social, religious, political and moral concept. God is considered to be the shepherd of the people.

The Pastoral power is different from the customary and traditional political power. The shepherd does not rule a territory. Rather he rules over sheep, cows and multiplicity of individuals. The Pastoral power in the Christian civilization has an important place and a principle function. At the bottom it is the power of responsibility. The Pastor has a moral responsibility to look after his flock. Basically it is the individualistic power. The good shepherd takes care of his flock; likewise the Pastor takes care of the individuals and watches over them. The shepherd has to ensure the salvation of the flock. In the same way the Pastor has to ensure the salvation of the each individual. This thematic, according to Foucault, found in the Hebrew texts has extended over a multiplicity of moving individuals.

Simultaneously, Christianity became a force of political and social organization within the Roman Empire and introduced the Pastoral power to the society. Soon it developed church and the priest took a position and a status. Later they became the shepherds of the Christian community. In this context Foucault says, “...from the

fourth century A.D, and even from the third century, a mechanism of power developed which was very important for the entire history of the Christian West, and in a particular way, for the history of sexuality.(1999: 123)

Foucault thinks that the very existence of the pastor implies that, for each individual it is an obligation to seek his/her salvation. Everyone must seek his/her salvation. The individual will be saved, for which the individual has to do what is necessary to be saved. The power of a pastor emerges precisely from this. The pastor has the authority to require him/her to do everything needed for his/her salvation. Foucault calls this 'obligatory salvation'.

The 'obligatory salvation' cannot be sought by oneself. Rather one should have the acceptance of the authority. The acceptance of authority implies that each of the actions that one involves in must be known to the pastor, who has the authority over the individual. In such a way the individual is another weapon that is added to the old judicial system. Foucault was very analytical in this aspect. He says:

There has come to be added another form of analysis of comportment, another form of culpability, another type of condemnation, much more subtle, much tighter, much finer. This new form is ensured by the pastor, who can require the people to do everything that they must for their salvation, and who is in a position to watch over them and to exercise with respect to them, in any case, a surveillance and continuous control. (1999: 124)

The Christian social structure, according to Foucault, demands from others an absolute obedience. Obedience is the fundamental condition for all other virtues. In practice, this obedience is to none other than to the pastor himself. Simultaneously the pastorate brought with it an entire series of techniques and procedures concerned with the truth and the production of truth. The pastor teaches everything. He teaches writing, truth, morality, commandments of god and the church. In this regard the pastor is the master of truth. In the process of carrying out his responsibility as a pastor, he must know everything related to his 'flock'. He must know what goes on inside the

soul, the heart and the most profound secrets of the individual. The knowledge of the interior of the individual is very much essential for the practice of the Christian pastorate. The Christian has to tell his pastor everything that occurs in his mind. He/She has to confess everything that occurs in her/his self to the pastor and the pastor will be charged to direct his/her conscience. The confession will produce the truth which is not known to the pastor as well as the subject him/her self. Thus the production of subjective truth is fundamental in the practice of the pastor. The ultimate aim of Christianity in this type of practice is to establish and protect the morality of monogamy, of sexuality and of reproduction. In the process it is able to control individuals by their sexuality. In fact according to Foucault, Christianity:

did not prohibit and refuse (sexuality), but put in place of mechanism of power and control that was, at the same time, a mechanism of knowledge (savoir), of knowledge of individuals, of knowledge over individuals, but also of knowledge by individuals over themselves and with respect to themselves. All of this constitutes the specific mark of Christianity, and it is in this measure, it seems to me, that one can do a history of sexuality in Western societies starting with mechanisms of power. (1999:126)

The above statement proves that confessing sexual misconduct had long been an integral part of religious confession. People were not simply made to confess only sexual deeds; they were also expected to confess their desires, thoughts and dreams. They were made continuously aware of their sexuality and to talk about it in all aspects. It was an effort of changing sexual desire into a discourse. Simultaneously, the discourse on sex was extended beyond the realm of religious confession. Sex became something to be studied rationally, to be analyzed and classified. Sex by eighteenth century had been treated as a statistical phenomenon, as the people began to study demographics as a means of regulating the population. The sex lives of citizens became important objects of public scrutiny, as statistics regarding birth rates, fertility rates; illegitimate birth became important for public use. Soon the discourse on sex established its place in the scientific arena.

Since eighteenth century sexuality has been linked with the concept of education, psychiatry, family structure and demography. Sex became a thing to be administered. Simultaneously the western civilization colonized the human biology. It devised an *anatomopolitics* in conjunction with *biopolitics*. Human sciences such as psychology, medicine and demography seized on the ‘confessed body’ as an object of social concern and governmental manipulation. The ever widening discourse on sex, simultaneously transformed it into a problem of truth. Sex was seen, in the West as something dangerous. Foucault shows here an essential difference, relating to the ideas of sex between the East and the West.

III

In Foucault’s view the modern West is not the first to develop a discourse about sex. The culture of Rome, China, Japan, India, and Arabic world, have all treated sex as an object of knowledge. But Foucault distinguishes the Eastern societies from the West by saying that the East deal in an *ars erotica* or erotic art, where as the West deal in a *scientia sexualis* or science of sex. Foucault says:

Historically there have been two procedures for producing the truth of sex. On the one hand, the societies – and they are numerous: China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arab-Moslem societies- which endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from the pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience...Consequently the relationship to a master who holds the secrets of paramount importance; only he, working alone, can transmit this art in an esoteric manner and as the culmination of an initiation in which he guides the disciple’s progress with unfailing skill and severity. The effects of masterful arts, which are considerably more generous than the sparseness of its prescriptions would lead one to imagine, are said to transfigure the one fortunate enough to receive its privileges: an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and its threats.

Foucault further says:

On the face of it at least, our civilization possesses no *ars erotica*. In return, it is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession. (1990: 57-58)

According to Foucault, the knowledge passed on by the *ars erotica* is the knowledge of sensual pleasure. The truth in it is truth about pleasure itself, how pleasure can be transformed and maximized. A mystique evolves around this knowledge. This knowledge can only be passed from an experienced teacher to novice. In this passing of knowledge there are no questions of prohibitions and censors. Quite opposite to this, the *scientia sexualis* deals with confessions extracted from the unlearned in the form of confession. The difference between *ars* and *scientia* can be compared to the difference in the academic world between the arts and the sciences. The sciences deal with the world we live in and the arts deal with our responses to the world. The sciences encompass a set of facts that are supposed to be true. The arts, on the contrary deal with the human response to experience.

In fact, the Greek word *Eros* denotes sexual love, desire and pleasure and the *sexualis* refers to sex as an abstract concept. *Ars erotica* focuses on sex as a human phenomenon, *scientia sexualis*, on the other hand highlights the non-human aspect of sex, sex as a form of reproduction that indulge in much the same way as animals. That is why; *Ars erotica* speaks from personal experience, while *scientia sexualis* speaks from the angle of an outside observer. Because of its secrecy and passing down from a master to the student the *ars erotica* has been attributed some sacredness. The case of *scientia sexualis* in this regard is quite opposite. Talking about sex is act of confession in the *scientia sexualis*.

IV

The ancient Indian thinkers recognized the pursuit of *Kama* as one of the important life drives. Among the four ends of life-*dharmā, artha, kama, moksha*- *kama* has been given third place. The expression of sexual desire was acceptable within the *dharmā*. *Kama* was treated as an ideal of life; hence, the expression and the language relating to the sexual matters were very free in classical India. As Ananda Coomaraswamy stated:

The conditions of human love, from the first meeting of eyes to ultimate self-oblivion, have seemed spiritually significant and there has always been a free and direct use of sexual imagery in religious symbolism. (Kuppuswamy, 2001:236)

In India, just as we have *dharmasastras*, that dealt with righteousness and *arthasastras* that dealt with wealth and power we have *kamasastras* also. The *kamasastras* dealt with love or *kama*. All these *sastras*, according to Maeleine:

deal essentially with the rules of conduct which give success in business and in love. The ancient amorous desire includes all the aspects of desire and there were no taboos. Though the theory of *kama* is present only in one or two classical texts. (1997: 44)

The notion of *kama* is everywhere in Indian thought. It even gave impetus to philosophical and religious doctrines and practices.

Though *dharmā* received much emphasis, there was no downgrading of the other two aims-*artha* and *kama*- of life. They were given significant place in the life of an individual as well as in the social sphere. According to Tannahill, the pursuit of *artha*, the material well being, and *kama*, pleasure and love-often strike the Western observer as shockingly unspiritual. Sex for ancient Indians as for Taoist Chinese was a religious duty. As in the most of the western world, sex was not a matter confined to the bedroom in the ancient Indian civilization. A great deal of life was lived in public.

Privacy was related to body, but not to emotions. *Kamasutra* of Mallanaga Vatsyayana of the third century A.D has been a part of the Indian tradition in the matters relating to sex and love. It is a classic textbook on erotics and other forms of human pleasure. It is the ancient Indian treatise governing the relationship of humans and the sexes.

Kamasutra is one of the three basic human sciences in classical times in India. The other two are: The Laws of Manu and the *Arthasastra* of Kautilya. *Shastra* in the context of *Kamasutra* refers to the style of writing of its author. It consists of the use of aphorisms and precepts. *Sutra* does not reflect in any form shastra or science. The spirit of *Kamasutra* is not prescriptive. In fact, Vatsyayana had some ethical bias. He wanted to reconcile the three ends of life, *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*. In the third century A.D unlike his predecessors, Vatsyayana stated that man and women will have the same delight and both experience an orgasm due to ejaculation at the end of coitus. As Peter Das says, "...it was not until the 1980s the medical community finally accepted the fact that women really ejaculate...clearly, medical professionals in ancient Indian were better observers." (2003:399)

However, Indian scholars like Sudhik Kakar tried to counter the Eurocentric statements that India has no science of sex, [for example the statement of Foucault] and prove that India too had its own science of sex with the citations from *Kamasutra* and other treatises on sex of the classical India. Wendy Doniger and Kakar say:

the *Kamasutra* is primarily a scientific-didactic work, reflecting in both expression and content specific features of Ancient Hindu scientific descriptions.... This is the procedure of *scientia sexualis*, and places Vatsyayana, if not in the company of Newton and Einstein, at least closer to Freud and Kinsey than to Lawrence and Henry Miller. (2002: 181)

A different kind of Eurocentrism is conspicuous even in the words of Kakar here. There is no need to justify the native knowledge systems or *sastras* by taking the

Western authors or systems as centres. In a way that type of justification is also a form of Eurocentrism. Many scholars had already proved that it is not possible to distinguish between philosophy and religion in India. In this regard it is totally different from the West, in which belief and knowledge have never been on friendly terms. In its search for knowledge the Eastern philosophy has always tried to be holistic. It never tried to be scientific. Like the West the East never considered the rational as the real and the real as the rational. However, *Kamasutra* also contains certain norms and disciplined actions necessary to achieve one's goal. Like so many classical Indian scholars, Vatsyayana considered *kama* or carnal pleasure as one of the basic objects of human existence.

As Kakar says, *Kamasutra* not only assumes an official male voice but presents methods that deny that women's words truly represent their feelings. However, the text speaks about women in sympathetic tone. In Greek and Roman cultures woman was either the mother of children or the instrument of pleasure. But in India women might have been considered an extension of her father and husband in other areas, but in the domain of *kama* she had an existence of her own. *Kamasutra* designates every form of desire, every desire and sensual satisfaction. Hence, the woman must be an expert in the art of sex. But women were never considered mere an object of sex in Indian classical treatises on sex. As Biardeau says:

In India...conquest of women is nothing if it does not have as its consequence of shared pleasure. A woman is neither a dominator nor a passive instrument; she is the necessary and respected partner. Her own desire must match that of the man and find its satisfaction at the same time as his: the anatomical considerations and the classifications of men and women which Vatsyayana includes in have no other aim than this. (1997:51)

The emphasis on physical love in classical India is a form of humanization of sexuality. In the process of humanization of sex and sexuality, unlike the West, the East, specifically Indian has a rich tradition of erotic literature. The *Anunga Ranga* of

Kalyana Malla and *Ratirahasya* of Kokkoka are the other significant texts in this tradition.

An important effect of *scientia sexualis* in the West is that systems of classifying and evaluating sexual practices are developed. This is conspicuous in the way in which limits are placed on what is acceptable sexual practice. Foucault identified a long tradition of prohibitions relating to certain forms of sexual practices. Sexual relations in the West were always conditioned and governed by complex codes, strict rules about what can be done and what cannot be done. In the Indian classical tradition discourse on sex such forms prohibitions were never existed. According to Kakkar and Doniger, “More precisely, it is possible to excavate several alternative sexualities latent in the text’s (*Kamasutra*’s) somewhat fuzzy boundaries between homoeroticism and heteroeroticism.” (2002: xxxvi)

Whatever may be the inherent contradictions in the classical Indian discourse on sex; certain liberal spirit is conspicuous, which is missing in the Western tradition.

V

Much more liberal spirit relating to sex in classical India can be seen in the Tantric tradition. Tantric tradition, unlike other traditions was action-oriented system. It is not system of study. The Tantric system was a very old system. As Arvind and Shanta Kale felt:

It (Tantra) is certainly as old as Hinduism which started 3500 years Before Christ. The Vedic Hindus had a very level-headed view of sex: It was an interesting subject and, therefore, they enquired into it with the same unswerving doggedness that they gave to mathematics, physics, phonetics and physical fitness. Thus, the people who gave the world the concept of zero, atomic theory, the world’s most phonetic alphabet and Hatha Yoga, also gave us the Science of Ecstasy. They called it Tantra. (2003: 5)

Some thinkers considered Tantra a revolutionary faith. They even saw it as a religious expression of a political revolt and a protest against the social status quo. Many of the Tantrics deliberately aimed at breaking caste/class systems. Most of them considered sexual intercourse as a part of religious duty. They tried to use sex as the cosmic union of opposites. They believed sex as the greatest source of energy in the universe and placed high value on ritualized intercourse. According to Tantra the human body is a microcosm of the universe. The Tantrists believe all that exists in the universe must also exist in the individual body. One who realizes the truth of the body can realize the truth of the universe. The spiritual path of Tantra includes sexuality and sensuality. Tantra transports sexuality from simply doing to actual being.

VI

Throughout the Indian discourse on sex one can never find any form of denigration of the body or sex. Despite the masculine emphasis on Indian society, its legal and social oppression, the discourse on sex and body in India has been a sensible pleasure.

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