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Book Review

KAMA : THE RIDDLE OF DESIRE

by Gurcharan Das, New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2018,
pp. 548, ₹799. ISBN 9789353051921.

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Gurcharan Das's latest book, *Kama: The Riddle of Desire*, resonates with references to the ancient Hindu text, the *Kamasutra*, which contains the best known discussions of erotic desire in Sanskrit literature. Attributed to the philosopher Vatsyayan in the 3rd century CE, scholars have remained uncertain about the date or manner of its composition, but its vast influence over the literature of sexuality has long been recognised. According to Wendy Doniger, the *Kamasutra* became 'one of the most pirated books in English language soon after it was published in 1883 by Richard Burton'. The sexual aspect of the original text has continued to be dominant among the western readership. Gurcharan Das has used this background to create a philosophical novel where the protagonist, Amar (his name means 'eternal'), is in his 70s, and looks back on a life of pleasure, with introspection, passing through the various phases of adolescent love, romantic attachments, marriage, intimacy, adultery and reconciliation. As a robust septuagenarian he says,

In the autumnal *vanaprastha* of my life...I have become more and more accepting of human weaknesses. When I ought to be thinking of retiring to the tranquillity of a forest to contemplate, I remain incurably ensnared in the city's temptations. Women are still an enigma to me. I am attracted, not to a single woman, but to every woman who is young, affectionate, charming and voluptuous (p. 183).

A book that defies being categorised, *Kama* is a unique blend of fiction and nonfiction, pulling in eastern and western literary and philosophical sources, interweaving references to the greatest authors on desire: Proust, Shakespeare, Kalidas, Tolstoy, Jayadev, to name a few. Gurcharan Das explains throughout that 'Kama' is both desire and pleasure, and pleasure can be various, not just of the sexual kind. This is where the usual misreading of the *Kamasutra* as a manual of sexual positions is corrected by Das's *Kama*, which seeks subtlety in understanding the vast scope of the erotic. The timing of the text in the new millennium and among discussions of cosmopolitics is also important. Re-interpreting India's legends and myths has become both fashionable and useful. The legacy of 'faith' when it encounters cosmopolitan modernity has led to problematic assertions of power and hierarchy. The west's overdetermined reading of the *Kamasutra* as a sex manual has to be corrected, as Gurcharan Das has rightly emphasised. It is, according to him, a book of manners, a citizen's handbook, a gentleman's guide to joyful living.

Amar is to some extent the flâneur in post independent India. Born in the 1940s and passing through the period of India's modernisation under Jawaharlal Nehru, he responds to the forces of social and material change as India is catapulted into the global capitalism of the 1980s. Amar is both observer and participant in this history of the middle class in India. As a child he remembers the conflicting influences of a *ganja* smoking pundit at home, and the Bible education in school. As an adult he moves into the cosmopolitan spaces in Bombay where caste and creed hold less meaning than wealth.

Amar's journey of experience begins in Delhi as a callow young school boy on a bicycle, magnetised by the life of the rich and beautiful residing behind the high walls of bungalows in Lutyen's Delhi. Despite being teased, fooled and humiliated by a seductive young woman, he persists in his search for the ideal relationship, which takes him into other areas of the metropolis, but much further to Bombay's cosmopolitan environs. There he gains a mentor in Kamini Mausi/aunt (a *ganika*, a woman of sexual wisdom, in the vocabulary of the *Kamasutra*), and a friend in Avantika, whom he later marries. Although the couple enjoys a fulfilling spousal relationship, Amar's restlessness takes him experimenting with other forms of desire, leading to an illicit and painful affair from which he emerges scathed but wiser. One is reminded that Virginia Woolf had declared that 'the horror of marriage lies in its "dailiness"' (p. 263), and Simone de Beauvoir, had quoted Nietzsche, 'The single word "love" in fact signifies two different things for man and woman' (p. 347).

However, the story is far from being a straight narrative of emotional and actual journey, because Gurcharan Das intersperses the signposts in Amar's path with cross references to philosophical texts on love and desire. The transitions are smooth; one may even call it a process of osmosis. The most frequent allusions are to Marcel Proust's extraordinary novel in seven volumes, *Remembrance of Things Past*, a disquisition on Time and its impact on memory. Das's epigraph from Proust, 'Desire is powerful indeed, it engenders belief' (p. 1), is developed into a direct identification between his narrator and the French writer, 'Both Marcel and I awakened to a renewed sense of life and beauty. Why does it not happen to us more often?' (p. 15). The parallel with Proust's enquiry is, however, not meant to be consistent, and the author moves on, along with Amar, to find other writers and other analogues, that being a deliberate strategy of the novel.

Shakespeare would be a natural ally on such a quest, and Amar's reliance on *Othello* in understanding passion, jealousy and marital violence is delineated in some detail. 'If she be false/O, then Heaven mocks itself' (p. 179) becomes the tipping point in Shakespeare's plot, where Othello's love turns to murderous anger. Gurcharan Das upturns the plot to write of Amar's infidelity and, to an extent, Avantika's sophisticated response to it. He says, 'Unlike Shakespeare who thought of jealousy as losing a possession—either household property or person—Avanti believed that love was the opposite, it was about giving, not owning' (p. 179). This expansiveness leads into other great tales of adultery as a helpless surrender to innate desire such as Anna Karenina's for Vronsky or Anton Chekov's 'Lady with a Lap Dog' for the Russian banker on vacation in Yalta.

The narratives on desire from Indian sources would naturally evoke Radha and Krishna's mythic lore in Jayadeva's poem, *Gita Govinda*. Radha, married and older than Krishna, defies all social norms to seek her divine paramour. He, though not always faithful to her, adores Radha to distraction. But He is a supreme God and she, a mere cowherd girl. The romantic interlude of Radha and Krishna is both intense and unsustainable, says Gurcharan Das in his exquisite commentary on the *Gita Govinda* where he emphasises the triumph of Radha, not her abjection. It is believed that when Krishna, confessing his tryst with another woman, asked for Radha's forgiveness, words failed Jayadeva and he left his manuscript unfinished. Returning from a ritual bath, Jayadeva found the final words inscribed by a divine creator: '*Dehi padapallava-mudaram*' ('Krishna bows his head at the feet of Sri Radha').

If Kama is constituted of so many variables, is 'desire' an eternal riddle? Gurcharan Das uses multiple perspectives and argues,

Kama is not only a force of nature but a product of culture and history. It has changed over time. Kama as the ancients saw it was different from the one in the medieval centuries and certainly in the modern age. The value of looking at it historically is that it forces us to think of the various faces of kama...in a dynamic way (p. 470).

It is one of the few books that attempts a compendium on Indian ways of exploring desire and maps it within the cross currents of colonial education. Since Das uses the word 'riddle' in the subtitle, he is absolved of providing any final analysis on the provenance of the term. The guise of fiction allows for a 'history of ideas' on sexuality and desire picked from eclectic but learned sources. Das's book adds substantially to the theoretical work of psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar and sociologist Ashis Nandy by introducing an imaginative dimension. When placed in the lineage of Das's own writing—*India Unbound*, a critique on wealth or *Artha*, and *The Difficulty of Being Good*, a treatise on *Dharma* or ethics—*Kama* follows as the third of the four *Purusharthas* named in ancient Hinduism (the last being *Moksha* or liberation). The author is contemporising and globalising his discourse in addressing readers who can make adroit shifts between the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad*, and Vatsyayan's *Kamasutra* and Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. A book that is engaging in content and methodology, *Kama: The Riddle of Desire* carries the unique stamp of Gurcharan Das's erudition turned into a racy plot.
