

## The Ancients Did It Too! Sex, Desire, and Seduction in Ancient India and Greece



**Dates: June 18 - August 6**

**Time: Thursdays, 1 pm EST (10:30 pm IST)**

**Led by: Tuhin Bhattacharjee**

**Outline:**

How did the ancient Hindus and Greeks understand love and desire? Ancient literatures are replete with stories of passion, intrigue, sex, deceit, and seduction. Some stories tell of the erotic longing for an estranged lover (Sappho, Śakuntalā), some about the terrifying consequences of taboo desires (Oedipus and Jocasta, Ahalyā and Indra), while some show us passionate women rebelling against an unjust social order (Medea, Lysistrata, Draupadī, Ambā). In this reading group, we will discuss some of these stories in order to understand how the ancients thought, represented, and performed their desires in literature and the visual arts. We will read from myth, poetry, drama, the famous erotico-philosophical treatise *Kāmasūtra*, as well as look at vase paintings from Greece and erotic temple art from India. Our aim will be to investigate what the ancients – even in their alterity, distance, and discontinuity from us – can teach us about love and the art of seduction, thereby reanimating our modern conversations around desire and its transgressions.

No previous knowledge or participation is required. For each of the sessions, our aim will be to have done the readings in the previous week and then discuss any aspect of the texts that interest us, though our primary focus will be on how the ancient Hindus and Greeks understood and articulated (or failed to articulate) desire. The discussions will be very open, fun, and laidback! **All readings will be posted through this live syllabus.** I will also (sometimes) add a couple of discussion questions to this doc just to give us some direction, but it's not at all something we need to stick to. Please use the "comment" feature on this doc to post any questions, thoughts, concerns you might have about the readings and we'll take them up during discussion!

(See the following pages for readings.)

## Sessions I & II (June 18 & 25): Origins

Readings:

- [The Rig Veda \(Nasadiya Sukta\), trans. Doniger.pdf](#)
- Hesiod, *Theogony* (short excerpt **added below**)
- Plato, [Intro and Symposium excerpt \(Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World\)-pages-35-52.pdf](#)
- [Kamagita, Mahabharata.pdf](#)
- [Doniger - The Hindus An Alternative History, Chapter 8.pdf](#)
- *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (short excerpt **added below**)

Also, feel free to check out the following fun videos on Greek origins and Eros:

[Miscellaneous Myths: The Theogony \(Greek Creation Myth\)](#)

[Miscellaneous Myths: Eros and Psyche](#)

### From Hesiod, *Theogony* (104-138):

Hail, daughters of Zeus, and may you grant delightful song to me,  
That I may hymn the sacred race of those who never die,  
They who were born of Gaia (Earth), Ouranos (starry Sky),  
And Nux (the dusky Night) as well as Pontos (the salt Sea).  
Say firstly how the first ones, gods and Earth, first came to be,  
And rivers and unbounded ocean with its furious swell,  
And the shining stars and broad firmament over all,  
And how they shared the riches and the honors that then followed,  
And how they took possession of Olympos many-hollowed.  
Speak all these things, Muses, from your high Olympian home:  
From the beginning, tell me which of these was first to come.  
Chasm it was, in truth, who was the very first; she soon  
Was followed by broad-breasted Earth, the eternal ground of all  
The deathless ones, who on Olympos's snowy summits dwell,  
And murky Tartaros hidden deep from Earth's wide-open roads,  
And Eros, the most beautiful among the deathless gods -

Limb-loosener he is of all the gods and of all men:  
Thought in the breast he overwhelms and prudent planning; then  
Out of Chasm Erebus and black Night both were born,  
And then from Night came Ether and came Day as well in turn;  
For Night conceived them, having joined with Erebus in love .  
Now Earth first brought forth Ouranos, the starry Sky above ,  
An equal to herself, so he could cover her around,  
And she might serve the deathless gods as firm, eternal ground.  
She bore the hills, the gracious haunts of mountain goddesses then -  
The Nymphs, who range the wooded hills and up and down each glen;  
And without sweet desiring love, she bore the barren Sea,  
Pontos, the raging salt-sea swell; and when she had lain with Sky,  
She bore deep-eddying Ocean and Koios and Kreios too ,  
Hyperion, father of the Sun, Iapetus also,  
And Thea and Rhea and Themis and, in turn, Mnemosyne,  
Phoebe the golden-crowned one, Tethys lovely to see;  
And after these the youngest came, Kronos, crooked and sly,  
The cleverest of all her children and his father's enemy.

### **From the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad***

(1.4.1 - 1.4.6)

In the beginning this world was just a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, 'Here I am!' and from that the name 'I' came into being. Therefore, even today when you call someone, he first says, 'It's I', and then states whatever other name he may have. ...

That first being became afraid; therefore, one becomes afraid when one is alone. Then he thought to himself: 'Of what should I be afraid, when there is no one but me?' So his fear left him, for what was he going to be afraid of? One is, after all, afraid of another.

He found no pleasure at all; so one finds no pleasure when one is alone. He wanted to have a companion. Now he was as large as a man and a woman in close embrace. So he split (*pat*) his body into two, giving rise to husband (*pati*) and wife (*patni*). Surely this is why Yajñavalkya used to say: 'The two of us are like two halves of a block.' The space here, therefore, is completely filled by the woman.

He copulated with her, and from their union human beings were born. She then thought to herself: 'After begetting me from his own body (*ātman*), how could he copulate with me? I know – I'll hide myself.' So she became a cow. But he became a bull and again copulated with her. From their union cattle were born. Then she became a mare, and he a stallion; she became a female donkey, and he, a male donkey. And again he copulated with her, and from their union one-hoofed animals were born. Then she became a female goat, and he, a male goat; she became a ewe, and he, a ram. And again he copulated with her, and from their union goats and

sheep were born. In this way he created every male and female pair that exists, down to the very ants.

It then occurred to him: 'I alone am the creation, for I created all this.' From this 'creation' came into being. Anyone who knows this stands within this super-creation of his.

Then he churned like this and, using his hands, produced fire from his mouth as from a vagina. As a result the inner sides of both these – the hands and the mouth – are without hair, for the inside of the vagina is without hair. 'Sacrifice to this god. Sacrifice to that god' – people do say these things, but in reality each of these gods is his own creation, for he himself is all these gods. From his semen, then, he created all that is moist here, which is really Soma. Food and eater – that is the extent of this whole world. Food is simply Soma, and the eater is fire.

### **Session III (July 2): Sappho**

Readings:

- [Sappho, fragment 1 \(Ode to Aphrodite\)](#)
- [Sappho, fragment 31](#)
- [Sappho, fragment 94](#)
- [Carson - Eros the Bittersweet.pdf](#) (read pages 3-31)

### **Session IV (July 9): *Kamasutra***

Please try to read (at least) Book Two. You may or may not read the Introduction, unless you already have.

- [Kamasutra](#)

### **Session V (July 16): *Oedipus the King***

Write your questions and comments either here on the pdf.

- [Sophocles - Oedipus the King \(trans. David Grene\).pdf](#)

**Possible discussion questions:**

1. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the downfall of the tragic hero as a result of *hamartia*, often translated as “error in judgement” or “tragic flaw” but literally meaning “missing the mark.” Aristotle considers *Oedipus Rex* the finest example of tragic drama. What do you think is Oedipus’ *hamartia* that leads to his fall?
2. Why does incest – an inevitability in origin myths – become such a primal taboo here?
3. What is the role of the Sphinx – the part-woman, part-animal, part-bird riddler – in the Oedipus myth? Why does Oedipus need to solve its riddle and kill it in order to enter the city? What are its consequences?



*Oedipus and the Sphinx*, Gustave Moreau, 1864

## **Session VI (July 23): *The Recognition of Sakuntala***

Write your questions and comments either here on the pdf:

[Kalidasa - The Recognition of Sakuntala \(trans. Chandra Rajan\).pdf](#)

Possible questions for discussion:

- Ancient India, at least in the period we are focusing on, did not produce tragedies (there are exceptions). What do you think might be the reason(s) behind this remarkable lack of tragic drama?
- How is nature represented in Kalidasa's play? What does the king's violent entry into the harmonious space of the forest signify? How is the representation of nature related to female sexuality?
- How would you read the 3 different unions of the lovers in the play: the first union in the forest, the second (failed) union in the court, and the third and final near Mount Meru? What do each signify?
- How does the play (implicitly) condone or condemn the patriarchal idealization of Sakuntala and the strictures imposed on her?

## **Session VII (July 30): Aristophanes, *Lysistrata***

As always, write your questions and comments either here on the pdf:

[Aristophanes - Lysistrata.pdf](#)

Possible questions for discussion:

- How do the women in the play use their situation within a patriarchal culture to mobilize others and forge resistance? Do you think the play reproduces masculine fantasies about overtly sexual women? Or, in the dynamic of desires, transferences, and affects that the characters produce, are the women able to turn their narrative into something more empowering than victimhood?
- These plays were performed by male actors. What happens when men, dressed as women, do sexual talk and touch each other sexually? What kind of queerness does it produce on stage?
- Why does Aristophanes choose female characters to lead an anti-war movement? What happens when women cease to perform their socially assigned roles?

**(Final) Session VIII (July 30): Queering Indian mythology**

Reading: [Shikhandi And Other Tales They Don't Tell You, by Devdutt Pattanaik.pdf](#) (selections: 1, 4, 11, 12, 14, 16, 26)