OF YOGINIS AND TANTRIKSTERS: DONIGER ON WHITE’S TANTRIC SEX – REFLECTIONS IN THE SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXT

DAVID GORDON WHITE, Kiss of the Yogini, ‘Tantric Sex’ in its South Asian Contexts
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Even though there are notable writings on Tantra by authors such as Padoux, Goudriaan, Gupta, Sanderson and others, a new serious, critical and academic work on Tantra is always a welcome addition. White’s book is one such work that makes a significant contribution to our understanding and knowledge of Tantra. It has also raised a controversy, and it is this latter aspect that prompts me to write this note.

As I was about to embark on writing a review on this book for the Journal of South Asian Studies, Australia, I came across a glowing review of it, accompanied by a diatribe against Hindutva [the Hindu Right], by Wendy Doniger in the The Times Literary Supplement1 and an extraordinary repartee to it by Rajiv Malhotra of the Infinity Foundation on the Suklekha webpage which was then re-posted on RISA-L network. In a nutshell, Doniger sees White’s work as ‘flying in the face of the revisionist Hindu hermeneutic tradition’, which to her, and to White, began in the 11th century with Abhinavagupta brahminising Tantra. Before that, according to her and White, Tantra was essentially a subaltern protestant practice. Rajiv Malhotra’s scathing attack on both of them is based on the lack of adequate proof in White’s assertions about the origin of Tantra and on the attempts by these two, especially Doniger, to bring in current Hindu chauvinism into the discussion.

I believe it is appropriate, nay, essential, to mention my credentials before I embark on my remarks. I arrived in Australia 40 years ago and have taught Organic Chemistry at Monash University for over 30 years. During this time I have also been a lay Hindu priest and hence a practitioner of the right handed Tantra. I hold a doctorate in Religious Studies as well. Currently I am engaged in understanding and extending an important work on Lajjagauri by a Marathi scholar, Dr. R.C. Dhere. Iconized as a nude and headless female figure in the birth giving position (uttanapada), Lajjagauri has been identified by White as a Yogini in his book (pp. 115 and 116). My interest in this area has made it incumbent upon me to read the literature on goddess worship.
White's main argument is embedded in chapter 8 of his work. In this chapter, he hypothesizes the transformation of the Tantra from a folk based ritual, which involved physically donating bodily substances to the chosen goddesses in order to acquire supernatural powers, to an internalization, aestheticization and semanticization of Kaula practice (a change from doing to knowing) by Brahminic Hinduism. He argues that by doing this, which he terms overcoding, Brahmins were able to marginalize Kaula practices and transform them into a body of ritual and meditative techniques, which permitted the average householders to use them as well. Yogini circles of the folk tradition were internalized, transformed into chakras of Hathayogic practice. Yoginis themselves were semanticized into seed mantras and finally ritual substitutes were introduced for the bodily fluids. The main theoreticians responsible for this change were Abhinavagupta and his disciple Kshemaraja. White has titled this chapter 'The Sublimation of the Yogini' and writes that the language of phonemes and photemes, mantras and yantras made it possible for practitioners of high Hindu tantra to discuss in abstract terms palatable to the higher tradition, what was and remains at the bottom, a sexual body of practice. In other words, to White, the original Tantra was little but sex and the consumption of bodily fluids in order to acquire supernatural powers.

That White has done painstaking research in this esoteric and difficult area, there is no doubt. I believe this is the first time someone has shown the real significance behind the large mithuna sculptures that adorn the Tantric Khajuraho temples. By translating many previously unknown works, White has certainly made an original contribution to our knowledge of Tantra. By a detailed study of these Sanskrit texts, and by use of historical evidence, White has tried to support his main argument about the transformation of Tantra.

However, I take issue with his conclusions. White's assertion that there was 'an original Kaula tradition' prevalent only in the folk tradition within India is speculative. As my colleague, John Dupuche, the author of the important new work, The Kula Ritual, comments, 'it has been only a growing and changing tradition'. The branding of Abhinavagupta as someone who packaged the tantric path for the consumption of a leisurely Kashmiri populace shows a singular lack of understanding of the Brahmanic scholarly tradition. An examination of chapter 29 of Abhinavagupta's Tantaloka would leave no doubt in anyone's mind that he certainly did not shy away from describing and using bodily fluids.

It is true that many Tantric practices were an anathema to some of the writers of Dharmashastras and attempts were no doubt made to whitewash Tantrism. However, like other examples in Hinduism, here also there is a