REL 19.13/AMES 42.08/COLT 55.01

DIVINE LOVE:
DESIRE, SEX, AND ROMANCE IN TRADITIONS OF INDIA*

Spring 2015
William Elison
Reed 105
Thornton 305
MWF 10 hr (10:00–11:05)
office hrs.: by appointment
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Course Description

“You’ve got the money, but we’ve got the love.” Indians comparing their country with this one often make judgments in these terms. But isn’t love a human universal? In what sense can one culture lay claim to it? And how are we to evaluate a statement like this in view of another commonly held impression of India: that it has historically been—and perhaps continues to be—an exceptionally difficult place to be a woman?

This course will explore questions like these through readings of religious texts that have both reflected and constructed Indian attitudes towards love and sex. We will tour various historical genres: moral teachings, erotic how-to, epic narrative, drama, devotional and mystical poetry, modern fiction. The sort of relationships most of these texts center on—and that have thus become normative—fit a familiar template: one woman, one man, both relatively young. Even within this standard arrangement, however, it will develop that there is room for a great deal of variation, with distinctions in prestige or social hierarchy being one variable to be given attention—the ideal bond in many of these texts is one that unites a human subject with a divine lover. We will also consider a variety of angles from which people in historical and contemporary South Asia have “queered” or otherwise reimagined the normative scenario.

Some of the most famous voices in South Asian literary history are represented on the reading list. The Kamasutra of Vatsyayana, the definitive work on the ancient Indian cultivation of sensual pleasure as an art, is a text that has also been influential in the West as the statement of an alternative erotics. Kalidasa’s Sakuntala is considered to be the greatest work of drama ever written in Sanskrit. Nizami’s The Story of Laila and Majnun, a Persian-language text from medieval Iran, is exemplary of the romantic sensibility of Indo-Islamic court culture and is pervaded with Sufi symbolism. There is also a selection of Hindu devotional poetry that expresses the longing of the human subject for the divine in erotic terms. Other landmarks of literary history we will encounter include selections

* Syllabus revised summer 2015.
from the classical corpus of Buddhism and Hinduism, including the Ramayana epic, and stories by the modern Indian writers Rabindranath Tagore and Ismat Chughtai.

Along with these primary texts, the course materials include secondary sources and several films. Together they introduce a sequence of culturally resonant images and ideas of love and related formulations—desire, sexuality, family, gender. They follow a broadly historical trajectory, from the ancient or classical period in which Buddhists and Hindus staked out their doctrinal positions in Sanskrit, through to our own era, whose own contemporary debates are represented through ethnographic accounts as well as films.

**Course Goals and Learning Objectives**

This course will encourage you to develop and express your ideas in more than one way. A typical class will proceed according to the following format: student presentation, informal lecture, class discussion.

A brief student presentation designed to illustrate the day’s topic will inaugurate most class sessions. This assignment will take the form of a) one or more visuals and b) some basic contextual information. The presenter will then engage a round of questions from the instructor and fellow student about the material’s connection to the assigned reading.

The class discussion segment will encourage students to communicate ideas dynamically and verbally. Many of our discussions will center on questions of cultural difference—on getting inside perspectives on collective and individual identity that should provoke you to examine the author’s notions of society and self—and move onto your own.

The main assignments are a midterm exam and a final paper. They emphasize research and writing skills in different ways. The exam will be designed to encourage close reading (and attentive review) of the representative works of ancient Indian literature we will have discussed in class by that point. The final assignment will involve you in library research on a topic of interest to you and relevance to themes discussed in the course; you will organize and present your work in the form of a thesis-driven long essay.

**Prerequisites:** There are no formal course prerequisites for REL 19.13/AMES 42.08/COLT 55.01, which is an introductory level class. If you enter with some prior knowledge of the religion, history, or politics of South Asia—through personal experience, academic study, or both—the information and insights you offer will be a valuable resource. But when you contribute, take care to do so in such a way that opens up discussion for the whole classroom community. And if you enroll with little preparation, look to careful reading of the assigned material to get you up to snuff in the opening weeks, and participate with confidence.

Note that among the assigned texts are three Hindi-language mass-market (“Bollywood”) films. These are examples of popular cinema, produced as crowd-pleasers. Attend the
screenings expecting to enjoy yourselves, but also prepared to take notes over a period of up to three hours. You will be required to write a short essay on the film of your choice.

**Required Texts**

*Note: It is very important that you use the editions/translations specified here. A different translation is a different book.*

**In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali.**
Translated by Edward C. Dimock and Denise Levertov. Chicago.

**Kalidasa, The Recognition of Sakuntala: A Play in Seven Acts.**

**Nizami, The Story of Layla and Majnun.**
Translated by Rudolph Gelpke with Zia Inayat Khan and Omid Safi. Omega.

**Vatsyayana Mallanaga, Kamasutra.**

Textbooks can be purchased at the Wheelock and Dartmouth Bookstores. Note that the syllabus incorporates numerous reading assignments taken from sources outside of these books. You will be able to access these readings through Canvas.

**Films**

- Black Narcissus (dirs. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947)
- Fire (dir. Deepa Mehta, 1997)
- Lajja (dir. Rajkumar Santoshi, 2001)
- Veer Zara (dir. Yash Chopra, 2004)

**Course Requirements**

1. Class Participation: 10%
2. Group Presentation: 15%
3. Midterm Exam: 25%
4. Film Essay, 5 pp.: 20%
5. Final take-home exam, 7+ pp.: 30%

**Classroom Policies**

1. **Attendance:** Attendance in class is mandatory. If you find you are unable to attend on a particular day, tell me before you miss class, preferably through e-mail. Note that attendance is an important part of your class participation grade and my grading will take evaluations of your reasons for any absences into account.

2. **Cell phones:** Off. Checking your phone for messages, etc. while class is in session is a mark of disrespect to me, your classmates, and the College and—outside of an emergency context—will incur mockery from me or worse.
3. **Laptops:** Closed. Take classroom notes on paper.

4. **Food and drink:** No eating in the classroom. Liquids are fine. If it were up to me you could smoke in class too, but if you took me up on that I suspect we could both get in hot water with the College.

   *If you require a personal exemption from any of these rules, talk to me or e-mail me about it.*

5. **A general principle concerning the syllabus:** Read the whole syllabus. No, really. Like today.

6. **Another general principle concerning the syllabus:** The syllabus is subject to change through the course of the term. As your instructor, I may revise or augment what’s on the menu for any given day through the end of the term.

7. **A general principle concerning class discussion:** The classroom is a community, and class discussion is a collective project. When you contribute, be aware that your audience is a roomful of comparably well-informed interlocutors. Don’t be shy (I will try to encourage you), and keep in mind this basic point: It’s not about me; it’s about the ideas—and contributing to a dynamic and collective discussion about them.

8. **Late assignment policy:** I am open to giving extensions on papers, but work turned in late without my approval will incur a three-point penalty for every day it is late. The final paper is due at 5:00 on 9 June, which is the Dartmouth College deadline. As far as the other assignments (and emergencies) are concerned, there’s one cardinal rule: Don’t be a stranger. I promise to be accessible, by e-mail and in person before and after class and at the office.

9. **My attitude towards grading:** Do the reading for each class and make informed contributions to class discussion when you see an opening. If you follow these two baseline principles, you’ll be well on the way to succeeding in this course. A straight-A project for me is one that exhibits excellence, and generally speaking there are two ways to do that. The first is to produce work that is letter perfect. In the case of a paper, that means the argument is tight and it discusses the material at a level of sophistication that demonstrates mastery. The second way is to take an ‘intellectual risk—and for that risk to pay off. As a teacher, I’m never more pleased than when I recognize work from a student that surprises me and teaches me something new.

   A grade in the C range or lower generally indicates that something is wrong. I don’t give out many Cs, and when I do I am sure to identify the problem. I do recognize that some students may make the call to turn in C-grade work in my class because they have placed their priorities elsewhere, and that is a decision I can respect on a personal level. In other words, no foul—so long as you’re 1) in control of the situation; and 2) not under the illusion that you’re entitled to a good grade for something you didn’t work hard on.
Academic Honesty Policy


Student Needs

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course and who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the first week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

Student Accessibility Services: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/facstaff/.

Additional Support for your Learning

Academic Skills Center: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/~acskills/.
Research Center for Writing and Information Technology (RWiT):
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/~rwit.
Course Schedule

week 1—Introductions

Mar.  30 (M)
  introductions of: members of the class; the general scheme of the class; its goals and standards. Let’s trade first impressions: Is India a romantic place? Why or why not? What does “romantic” mean to you?

Apr.  1 (W)
  matrimonial ads exercise, Shaadi.com, Indian news sites

  3 (F)
  reading: Rachel Dwyer, “Tales of Love,” from All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love

week 2—Desire is a Problem

  6 (M)

  8 (W)
  readings: John S. Strong, ed., from The Experience of Buddhism, “Realizing the Four Noble Truths,” “The Community at Kitagiri,” “The Evolution of the World,” “The Story of the Yogini Mahabhadra”

  10 (F)
  review session

week 3—But Pleasure Has Its Place

  12 (Sun)
  screening (7:00, Rockefeller 003): Lajja (dir. Rajkumar Santoshi, 2001)

  13 (M)
  readings: Valmiki (trans. Arshia Sattar), Ramayana, selections; Linda Hess, “Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man’s Rejection of His Ideal Wife”
  film discussion: Lajja
15 (W)
reading: Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra, first half*

17 (F)
reading: Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra, second half*

**week 4—Epic Romance**

20 (M)
*reading:* Kalidasa, *The Recognition of Sakuntala, first half*

22 (W)
*reading:* Kalidasa, *The Recognition of Sakuntala, second half*

23 (Thu, x-period)
*presentations: Groups 1 and 2*

24 (F)
*readings:* Norman Cutler, “A Tamil Allegory of Love,” “Nammalvar,” “Poems of Nammalvar,” *from Songs of Experience*

**week 5—Divine Lovers**

27 (M)
*Midterm Exam*

29 (W)
*presentations: Groups 3, 4, and 5*

May 1 (F)
*reading:* Dimock and Levertov, trans., *In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali*

**week 6—The Elusive Beloved**

3 (Sun)
screening (7:00, Rockefeller 003): *Veer Zara* (dir. Yash Chopra, 2004)

4 (M)
*reading:* A. K. Ramanujan, V. Narayana Rao, and David Shulman, *When God Is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Ksetrayya and Others, selections*

*film discussion: Veer Zara*
6 (W)
reading: Nizami (trans. Rudolf Gelpke), The Story of Laila and Majnun, first half

8 (F)
reading: Nizami (trans. Rudolf Gelpke), The Story of Laila and Majnun, second half

week 7—Traditions, Inversions

11 (M)
discuss film essay

13 (W)

14 (Thu, x-period)
presentations: Groups 6 and 7

15 (F)
reading: Gayatri Reddy, With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India, selections

week 8—Queering India

17 (Sun)
screening (7:00, room TBA): Fire (dir. Deepa Mehta, 1996)

18 (M)
readings: Indian reviews from Economic and Political Weekly; Ismat Chughtai, “The Quilt”
film discussion: Fire
discuss final paper

19 (Tue)
film essay due, 5:00 pm

20 (W)
reading: Ruth Vanita, Love’s Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West, selections
22 (F)
presentations: Groups 8, 9, and 10

week 9—The Intimate Enemy

26 (Tu)
screening (7:00, Rockefeller 003): Black Narcissus (dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947)

27 (W)
readings: Rabindranath Tagore, “Giribala,” “Fury Appeased”
film discussion: Black Narcissus

29 (F)
reading: Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism, selections

week 10—Love Marriage, Arranged Marriage

June 1 (M)
readings: Cari Costanzo Kapur, “Rethinking Courtship, Marriage, and Divorce in an Indian Call Center”; Purnima Mankekar, “Dangerous Desires: Erotics, Public Culture, and Identity in Late-Twentieth-Century India”

9 (Tue)
Final Paper Due: 5:00 PM