DIOTIMA TANTRA: A CROSS-CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF THE SOCRATIC SOLUTION TO THE ENIGMA OF BEAUTY

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Abstract: In the present paper I seek to explore the differences between the handling of the enigma of beauty by Socrates and that by Diotima. Drawing on the feminist writers who strongly argue for a historically ‘real’ Diotima, and following the insistence of Irigaray that Socrates probably distorted Diotima’s original speech, I try to place Diotima on a cross-cultural spectrum of feminine spirituality based on the principle of collaboration between matter and spirit. This leads me to investigate whether she can be seen as a Minoan dakini (Miranda Shaw speaks of the Buddhist tantra having been fertilized by the spiritual contribution of the female tantrics figured as dakinis), and attempt to see her view of beauty (an Aphroditean one) as more inclusive and comprehensive than that of Socrates (an Apollonian one). Drawing on Shannon Bell’s view that Diotima might have been a hetaira, I seek to present Diotima as a votaress of Aphrodite the Magna Mater, a comprehensive deity of love, sexuality and wisdom, and try to see her view of beauty as integrally connected to this essentially non-Socratic episteme of goddess spirituality.

Keywords: Diotima, beauty, Minoan dakini, Aphrodite, hetaira

Martha Nussbaum has insisted that, in the Symposium, Socrates is obsessed with the One, at the cost of the multiform world, and hence he proposes that all beauties are uniform. However, she thinks that Diotima is fictitious: an invention of Socrates (Nussbaum 177-181). On the other hand, the feminist writers like Andrea Nye and C. Jan
Swearingen strongly argue for a historically real Diotima (Nye 78-86; Swearingen 25-29). Luce Irigaray, significantly, insists that Socrates probably distorts Diotima’s original teaching (26). I would argue in this essay that Diotima can be seen as a wise woman associated with the mystery cult of Aphrodite, the Magna Mater ruling over Eros, and hence, as a kind of Greek counterpart of the dakinis in Buddhist tantra who, as Miranda Shaw argues, move freely in the ‘skylike freedom’ and teach their male disciples the secrets of such erotic freedom. These dakinis, according to Shaw, know how to make the flesh as light as the sky, and yet they do not abandon the world, but distribute the traces of an ostensibly arcane female wisdom among the labyrinths of tantric texts (Shaw 3-19). Nye, in the context of the Minoan civilization with which she associates Diotima, speaks of the powerful women practitioners of non-patriarchal religions (85). Can we see Diotima as a Minoan dakini? This kind of cross-cultural imagining is sometimes extremely necessary, despite its apparent impossibility. We need to find out Diotima’s sisters and their views of beauty which may teach us how to distinguish between the Socratic vision of beauty and the Diotimean one.

It is possible that Diotima had actually spoken of two paths: the ascent of unenlightened love towards the light of the Kalon, the ultimate sea of beauty-in-itself, and the descent of enlightened love towards the world of the Many, towards the particular instances of Beauty. Socrates distorts this and presents only a journey towards the sea of Kalon, without a return to the shore crowded by the still-unenlightened initiates of the mystery of beauty and love. In the tantric scheme of Kundalini sadhana, there is the practice of making the Kundalini, an epitome of coruscating, lightning-like female beauty, ascend towards the Shivam principle, the ‘Good’, in the highest plexus of our psycho-physical body, and then return to the flesh, to the atoms of apparent darkness, once it has become one with the Good manifesting as unified ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ (a kind of esoteric enlightenment involving the Keatsian realization of the coterminousness of these two principles) [Swami Rama 258-260]. As some feminist writers like Shannon Bell have suggested, probably Diotima belonged to a secret erotic-religious cult in ancient Greece (Bell 21-28). It is possible that it bore some kind of resemblance to the tantric system of the integral enlightenment, combining both the ascent towards what Shaw calls ‘passionate enlightenment’ and the descent of the enlightened passion. Is there hidden, behind the Socratic valorization of the One rather than the Many, a Diotima tantra that refuses to simplify...
the enigma of Eros, and integrates the ascent and descent of love up and down the spiralling stairs of beauty?

In order to explore the enigma of beauty as Diotima’s discourse presents it, we need to focus on the problem of the general and the particular, not in a grave epistemological sense, but in the sense we palpably face the puzzle of beauty folded between the general and the particular, Beauty and the beautiful things. As Elaine Scarry points out, for the author of the Greater Hippias, widely believed to be Plato himself, Beauty unattached to particular objects is always a puzzle, it baffles all epistemological programmes of knowing what Beauty-in-itself is (Scarry 7). However, as Scarry herself points out, “Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down.” (13) Then, the problem is that we can perceive beauty only through its particular instances, while it is also true that the concept of unattached Beauty cannot but lure us as an epistemological puzzle, a question to which the particular examples of Beauty offer no adequate answer. It is not sufficient to say that the beautiful things embody Beauty-in-itself, as we are here working within a closed aporetic circle of epistemology. Without knowing what Beauty is, can we really say whether an object is beautiful or not? And, that is why, we also need to dwell on the question of the errors of judgment involved in perceiving something as beautiful or ugly. As Scarry argues, there are always chances that something previously held to be beautiful would cease to be perceived as such at a particular time (9-14). It is also the problem of love, one may add. Something or someone loved with madness may cease, suddenly, to be considered lovable. On the other hand, Adriana Cavarero associates the beauty of the beloved who dazzles us at the first sight with the ‘unrepeatable uniqueness’ of who he/she is. The beauty that we perceive in the beloved at the first moment of love is, Cavarero insists, not a ‘judgable quality.’ It does not tell us what the beloved person is; it only tells us who he/she is (Cavarero 112). If that is the case, then the errors Scarry speaks of become meaningless at least in the context of personal love. But are they really meaningless? Do we not make errors in loving and in considering something beautiful? If there had been no risks involved in loving beautiful people, love would not have been so dangerous, beauty would not have been the beginning of terror, to borrow the expression of Rilke (Rilke 25). Cavarero’s argument that the beauty of the beloved is not operational at the level of the judgable qualities, however, provides us with a possibility of solace in the case we have made an error like those Scarry points out.
The appreciation of beauty involves a process of unselfing, to borrow the term employed by Iris Murdoch. And unselfing has its dangers as well as its facilities. As Murdoch would say, unselfing is the process whereby we become less self-centred, and become sensitized to the value of the universe outside ourselves (Lovibond Chap. 2: sec. 2). However, unselfing is, at least in the context of erotic love, a leap, a radical risk of losing self-consciousness and self-esteem. Beauty can effect unselfing, but beauty can also perpetrate a phallic violence on the unselfed subject. Beauty enthralls us, makes us its prisoner, and it is this prison that Socrates is constantly afraid of in the Platonic dialogues. If I become a hollow valley in order to welcome the molten sun called beauty, there are chances that the sun would soon turn into a forest fire, turning my unselfed self into a waste land, an ontological trash can. The sun of beauty is as terrible as a handsome womanizer, and it is here, at the theoretical moment of gendering the encounter with beauty, that we become able to fully appreciate the range of the dangers involved in the experience of beauty, the full spectrum of “terrors” Rilke spoke of. However, if terrors are the wings of beauty, truth is its beak, and hope is its breast. As Scarry rightly suggests, beauty always reminds us of the immortal realms of truth and certitude, and yet never wholly presents the dazzling realm of truth before us, as it also entails endless possibilities of error (20-23, 38). Its beak, carrying the silhouettes of truth, never sings loudly: it only murmurs, perpetually. Its shadow leaves a trajectory for our journey towards truth, and it is lifesaving and life-altering (Scarry 17-20). Drawing on Odysseus’ encounter with Nausicaa, Scarry argues that beauty is often perceived as the beginning of a new life: the encounter with beauty presents the whole world before the perceiver of beauty as a world reborn (15-16). And one may say that it is the most apt description of the experience of beauty: with beauty, we, along with our world, are reborn. But like every birth, it too is enigmatic, and fraught with dangers as well as full of hope for new horizons.

It seems that Socrates is conscious of this enigma of beauty in an intense way. He knows the dangers of beauty, and hence seeks to foreground the importance of disciplining the experience of beauty. For him, the encounter with beauty needs a well-trained mode of perception in order to actualize its positive potentials. He sets out to train the perception of beauty, thus mitigating the terrors of beauty. Beauty is the beginning of terror, but can we not burn away the seeds of terror right at the moment of perceiving beauty? This is the central question
which sets in motion the Socratic pedagogical experiments with beauty. Nullifying its potentially terrible aspects, he seeks to make beauty useful for his young male students. Desire can be disciplined in a pleasant way, by using beauty as we would use a prostitute (see Vlastos 26-31; Rosen 60). In this way, the disciplining of beauty becomes coteries, in Socrates’ pedagogical oeuvre, with the disciplining of the feminine. It may be argued that Socrates divides beauty into masculine and feminine, Apollo and Aphrodite. He is mainly concerned with male homosexual love and male beauty. And, as a corollary to it, he retains the Apollo of beauty, the logocentric sun that points to the Truth, at the cost of the Aphrodite of beauty, the puzzling and devouring sea which threatens to drown that sun. One can perceive this agon between Aphrodite and Apollo staged by Socrates in the matrix of beauty. The Socratic dualism appropriates a possibly non-binaristic view of beauty that Diotima may have offered him. As Andrea Nye observes:

The beauty-in-itself that the initiate in Diotima’s philosophy may experience as the culmination of her training is not a transcendent Platonic Form. The initiate glimpses no universal, abstracted from imperfect particulars, but an indwelling immortal divine beauty, an attracting center that foments fruitful creation in all areas of existence. Diotima identifies this center with the pre-Hellenic Cretan goddess, Eileithia, goddess of childbirth, and with her attendant spinner of fate, Moira (78-79).

If this is the case, then we can legitimately see Diotima as a Minoan (I here use the term ‘Minoan’ in the sense of a ‘residual’ [a la Raymond Williams] cultural element in Hellenic Greece) wise woman whose notions of sacred and profane, divine and human, were very different from the Hellenic ones. Bell suggests that, for Diotima, identifiable as a hetaira or sacred prostitute and a priestess of Aphrodite, the sacred and the sexual were not antithetical, and it is her experience as a hetaira that gave her the knowledge which she had allegedly imparted to Socrates (27-28). Scarry has already sensitized us to the central enigma of beauty: the beautiful thing always produces in us a desire for something more than that thing itself (21). We may put it in this way too: the beautiful thing is never a closed circle; it opens our minds towards Beauty itself. In this sense, the beautiful thing is also an entry point to the inexhaustible plenitude of Beauty. If we accept Nye’s observations, we may conclude that Diotima’s Beauty is neither general nor particular; it encompasses and yet transcends both generality and particularity. It is immanent, or
rather, immanently transcendent. It is, in other words, what Irigaray calls the ‘sensible transcendent’ (30). It is not that Diotima’s Beauty dwells in the Socratic domain of disembodied Forms. Rather, it dwells in the embodied things themselves, and yet never presents those things only as limited objects whose contours denote the closures of beauty. It is as if, for Diotima, all the beautiful objects are sheltered in and remind us of the womb of Eilethia. There is a matrix of beauty which is embodied as well as abstract: it is like a mother goddess. And if we remember the observations of both Shannon Bell and John Woodroffe regarding the figure of Aphrodite (Bell 27-28; Woodroffe 87-88), we may argue that Diotima is a votaress of that Aphrodite who is not in agon with but is a mother to the Socratic deity of light, Apollo: A phrodite the Magna Mater who cannot be divided into the Uranian Aphrodite and the Aphrodite Pandemos (see Plato 10-11), the goddess of the terrors of beauty as well as the truth embodied in the beautiful things. This Aphrodite can enlighten us too, but that enlightenment will be very different from the one envisaged by Socrates. Beauty, in Diotima’s occult vision exemplifying an essentially femininespirituality, will entail an unselfing, but it will be very different from the kind of dangerous unselfing we have focussed on. It will be a maternal unselfing towards the worlds contained in the womb of beauty: towards, in short, the endless universe of creativity. Beauty is, now, not only the male lover but also the seed of a son or daughter. And it is not procreation as patriarchy conceptualizes it; rather, it is the freedom to create that is coupled with the will-to-create which makes maternal creativity complete – not only through biological motherhood, but through the creation of art and science, culture and knowledge, loving wisdom and wise love. This is what Scarry dwells on too. For her, an inalienable aspect of beauty is its tendency to produce in its beholder an urge to replicate the beautiful (4-7). Is this, then, the exact meaning of the birth-in-beauty Diotima harps on (Plato 37)?

The terrors of beauty are greater for a female lover than a male one. Probably Rilke understood it and hence introduced the figure of Gaspara Stampa in his famous elegy (Rilke 27). Diotima’s ancient wisdom, like that of the dakinis in Buddhist tantra explored by Shaw, is capable of offering women lovers a way out of the particularly patriarchal circles of danger associated with love, the terrible risks and errors that can crush a woman lover in a world dominated by men.
As Scarry says, beauty has something sacred about it (17). For Diotima - to draw on Nye’s powerful arguments - this sacredness is associated with a mother goddess, a goddess not only of procreation but also of female creativity. Diotima herself was, Socrates tells us, wise in erotics and many other things (Plato 31). Her wisdom snaked through the labyrinths of the terrors of beauty and love, like the Kundalini in the tantric tradition, snaking through the maze of darkness and confusion. The sacred that we should think of in this context is something like Lata Mani’s ‘SacredSecular’, something that does not divide the experience of erotically engaging with beauty into the sacred truths and the terrors of profanation but rather seeks to foreground a possibility of seeing everything as beautiful and undermining the unholy nexus between the beautiful and the useful set up by Socratic logocentrism.

Socrates does not tell us what Diotima told him about the condition of the initiate once s/he had reached the wide sea of beauty-in-itself. Diotima, according to Socrates, presented to him the outline of a spiritual journey from particular instances of beauty towards beauty-in-itself (Plato 40-42). But after this ascent, would there not be a descent, a descent towards the particulars from the sun or sea of Kalon? This is something about which Socrates maintains an uncanny reticence. But was Diotima also reticent about this? Or did she actually realize that the ascent to the centre of beauty-in-itself, the animating centre of Eileithia’s coruscating womb, must entail a sacred descent to the particular instances of beauty wherewith the ascent had begun? And that such a descent would be only a downward ascent, to borrow the expression of Helene Cixous (Cixous 5)? We can engage with this issue only by staging a seemingly impossible ‘teleopoietic’ (in the sense Derrida employs the term, that is, in the sense of an imaginative grafting or imaginative making at a distance [Syrotinski 44-45]) dialogue between Diotima and Lata Mani, the brilliant ‘tantric’ feminist of our time. Mani sees tantra as a spiritual doctrine that ‘fundamentally honours embodiment and the potential of humans to live harmoniously with each other and with nature’ (210). Mani dwells on the revolutionary potentials of tantra as far as the orthodox Hindu concepts of sacredness and profanity are concerned (to which she counterposes the tantric system). We may add that like the Minoan civilization as Nye analyses it, the civilization from which tantra emerges is also marked by a prominence of women in religious matters. And as Shaw and Loriliai Biernacki insist, women are figured in tantra not only as goddesses, but also as gurus and female spiritual guides (much like Diotima teaching Socrates)[Shaw 3-19;

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Biernacki 3-27]. If we remember these things, then it becomes all the more exciting to attempt a teleopoietic cross-cultural reading of Mani’s views on ‘trash’ and Diotima’s lost utterances regarding the ‘downward ascent’ of the enlightened initiate from the wide sea of beauty-in-itself towards the imperfect particulars throbbing with the waves of that sea. Mani says, “It is time to accept our intimate relationship to trash. It is time to recognise the sacredness of all bodily fluids and substances. It is time to heal our distaste for that which makes our life whole, holy. Either that or we must remain predators of nature with an extractive and deeply profane relationship to Creation” (28). For Socrates, the particular beautiful body with which the erotico-spiritual journey begins becomes trash after the height is reached. But for Diotima, probably, the ascent has another meaning. Ascent and descent are the twin process that completes the journey, and the ascent is towards the centre of things, and not to the realms ‘above’. In this sense the Diotimean ascent of love towards beauty-in-itself can also be called an upward descent towards the centre, the depth, of things. Eilethia is not ‘above’ the creation that has come out of her womb, she is embodied in it. And Diotima pays a ‘tantric’ (a la Mani) respect to this embodiment. When the sea of Beauty has been experienced, the particulars are no more trash: they have become sacred. This is the beginning of a maternal tolerance of things apparently ugly, and this is also the move out of the closed circle of narcissistic love and acquisitive obsession with catching and holding beauty. Diotima’s Eros is all about pluralizing beauty and discovering its plenitude, and not about imprisoning the beautiful. Socrates denounces the male homoerotic obsession in his society with possessing and dominating the beautiful boy (Halperin 266-270), but he himself valorizes a different form of possession. For him, the obsession with the possession of beautiful bodies should be replaced with the obsession with possessing beautiful wisdom. But Diotima shifts the focus from possession to creation. Under the altar of Eilethia, beauty is no more the beginning of terror, but the beginning of creation. It is this creative dynamics to which beauty gives rise that mitigates the terrors. If we follow Diotima, even the experience of a failed love will not make us psychopathic; we will not see the former beloved as ugly trash, but as a stellar trace of beauty we have left in a different galaxy. The errors that Scarry speaks of are now no more errors, but only different, though always loving, orientations to the offspring of Eilethia. Unselfing becomes a dephallicization of the phallogocentric self, and my Self, which has become a deep hollow valley and has let the waves of beauty...
in, is no more in the danger of being raped by the beautiful man (I consciously use the masculine form) whose ‘judgable qualities’ I overlooked at the moment of falling in love with him. The valley is now full of stars, and these bloom in accordance with the rhythms of beauty that are woven into and out of the particular embodiments of beauty. Each particular instance of beauty, no more considered trashy or ugly, is surrounded by the aura of the maternal Aphrodite, the daughter of the enigmatic sea. Seas are always dangerous and beautiful simultaneously, but Aphrodite knows how to lift the sun from their wombs.

If beauty is an ‘unselfing’, an opening up towards the Other, as Murdoch suggests, then the sea of Kalon may be the ultimate alterity that Diotima envisages as the meeting point of the ascending passion and the descending passionate wisdom: the place where beauty, through a radical erotic self-transcendence of the sort Maria Zambrano delineates in ‘On a History of Love’ (294-96), cancels out the ‘terrors’ of beauty. Rilke too finally envisaged a happiness falling from above (99): he, too, beginning with Gaspara Stampa’s angst, finally journeyed towards the sphere of the Diotima tantra, the cyclical continuum of the beautiful beings and the sea of Beauty, offering a nest for love.

To find out the ‘hermitage’ of love (a la John Donne)[Donne 6-7] at the heart of the storm unleashed by the ‘unselfing’ play of beauty, I have attempted a ‘tantric’ reading of Diotima’s teaching that can be juxtaposed against the Socratic attempt of homogenizing (as Nussbaum would argue) all different forms of beauty in order to eschew the terrors of unselfing. However, what appears to be the most original contribution of Diotima to the problems of beauty and love is that her doctrine offers an erotic way to wisdom and creativity for both men and women. What she says is important for sanely living and loving in a world where the experience of love is often vitiated by an obsession with possession, and hence fraught with dangers. Gathering us, the fallen petals of a pornographic civilization, under Eilethia’s or Aphrodite’s maternal umbrella, Diotima underlines the third factor in love - the creative matrix that can be figured forth as a mother goddess, which keeps love from falling into the void of complete non-being - by upholding the principle of the simultaneity of love and creation-through-beauty (Cavarero says that through the very act of love the lovers are reborn [112]) and by invoking, somewhat tantrically, what Ted Hughes called the ‘Goddess of Complete Being’(Davies 129).
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