

RESEARCH ARTICLE



DIOTIMA IS NOT BEATRICE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON GENDER, PEDAGOGY AND "EQUIPHONY"

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ABSTRACT

The present paper argues that Diotima, the "teacher" of Socrates whose speech is reported by him in Plato's *Symposium*, is different from the figure of Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy* in that while Beatrice remains a spiritualized erotic object, Diotima is a teacher who occupies a subject position, a position of authority. In the context of contemporary pedagogy, feminist philosophers are often marginalized and subjected to an academic museumization. The paper argues against such crypto-sexist attitudes that prevent the "female teacher" from occupying a subject position and enlightening male students, and instead push her to a Beatricean position, that of an erotically inspiring (but not instructing) woman.

Keywords : Beatrice, Diotima, female teacher, woman philosopher, equiphony, the erotic and the pornographic

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In literary texts, Diotima, the "teacher" of Socrates in the *Symposium*, is often presented as a Beatrice-like figure which "inspires" creative men and guides them as a symbolic muse. However, in the immediate context of the speech of Socrates in the *Symposium*, Diotima was not a muse or an erotic-spiritual guide; she was a wise woman and priestess who taught Socrates the mysteries of love (Plato 31-34). The present paper calls for an adequate appreciation of Diotima's status as a teacher, and - drawing on this - seeks to adumbrate the features of the female teacher of tomorrow who would not be "gazed" at as an erotic object by her male students, but who would, rather, teach her *male* students the secrets of an unaggressive Eros, thereby ridding the young males of postmodernity of a reified manic Eros that subjects love to masculinist and phallogocentric aggressivism.

Diotima may be argued to have taught Socrates how men can love other women (and men, or, "boys", in a homoerotic context) creatively, without being aggressive. Diotima, in the *Symposium*, teaches an erotics that is not manically destructive but rather creative: her erotics centres round an idea of love that is not compatible with the phallogocentric violence of male love. Again, her teaching is not a mere erasure of the carnal aspect of love; she does not bracket off the body. As Miglena Nikolchina observes while discussing Julia Kristeva's reading of the *Symposium* in *Tales of Love*, "Diotima's emphasis on mediation, togetherness, and fecundity is not the result of the evolution, or transcendence, or replacement of carnal (female) fecundity by sublime spiritual (male) love. What happens, conceptually speaking, when Diotima takes the floor in the *Symposium* is

rather the introduction, within the manic and extreme dynamic of the male libido, of a different amorous universe, a simultaneous lateral space of an alien libidinal economy. Diotima provides a maternal emphasis on unity rather than possession, on mediation and synthesis rather than the master-slave strife, and on procreation rather than pleasure. . . Her discourse is hence concerned with the transmutation of the violent and manic male libido" (Nikolchina 105). It is necessary to notice that we, the Indians, should have an immediate concern with this Diotimean erotics today, as male libido, in our country, seems to have gone astray. Indian's growing ill-repute as a land of rapists is something that the "sane" males, the non-rapist Indian men, should be seriously concerned about. While much importance is being attached to the laws that can usher in stricter punishments for the men engaged in "violence against women", no genuine concern is seen, as far as the "erotic" education of young males is concerned. Diotima's teaching is important for men to this day, and erotics is something one should not confuse with pornography, as Audre Lorde, the black lesbian poet, has emphasized again and again. I will now move to the points of difference between the erotic and the pornographic, as Lorde dichotomizes them.

For Lorde, the patriarchal Western civilization has suppressed the empowering potentials of the "erotic" which is deliberately reduced by the male-centric episteme to the "pornographic" to disempower and objectify women. Hence, Lorde urges women to recognize the erotic potentials within them which can empower them, and strongly underlines the fact that the pornographization of the erotic is a masculinist mechanism of subordinating women and nullifying the positive aspects of Eros (Lorde 53-59). Unfortunately, in India today, the same patriarchal device of suppressing the erotic by pornographizing it as Lorde focuses on is being perpetuated in the peculiar cultural juncture of postcoloniality and postmodernity. As the conventional pedagogy in the educational sectors of India still remains orthodox and conservative, the young males' (whether adolescents or those in their early youth) erotic education is not conducted in a positive, creative way. To put it in simpler

terms, while the syllabi in the schools are structured so as to cautiously remove all traces of the "erotic" (a la Lorde), the young male students' erotic impulses find a shelter in the pornographic imperium of the cyberspace. So, two forms of education go side by side for the young male students – one is the official, desexualized education proffered by the school curriculum, and the other, the "unofficial" pornographic education that trains the students in what Zygmunt Bauman defines as "adiaphorization", a process of making the human subjects morally insensitive (Marshman 79-82). This kind of adiaphorization is also necessary for a capitalist society that seeks to produce technocrats and human automatons, while silencing the moral discontents that might otherwise have jeopardized the social smugness which fosters adiaphorization. Hence, in such a society, the unenunciated rule is that young males must not be officially taught about love, and that they should not be sensitized to the necessity to undermine the myth that the male body is essentially aggressive and that the male libido's aggressive dimension is something "natural". The sexual epistemology of the late capitalist society demands that the young men must not be educated about the creative dimensions of love, or instructed in the mysteries of the non-possessive erotic impulse that does not take a destructive turn. Rather, they should be hypocritically lectured on the importance of "loving all human beings equally" (a cliched prescription of universal *agape*) and such other abstract lifeless ideas, while the status quoist socio-political mechanism will continue to secretly indulge in the boys' unofficial pornographic education.

As opposed to this scenario, is it at all possible to envisage a different mode of pedagogy that would instruct the adolescent males in the Diotimean erotics, an erotics that can creatively transmute the violent and manic male libido and train young men in a non-violent erotic ethics, making them understand that a non-manic libidinal economy is not a "repression" of the sexual urge but rather its elevation into something better and greater, that a creative *eros* is not the negation of pleasure but rather its enhancement? Again, we need to understand that Diotima does not bracket

off the body; she does not uphold a merely ascetic principle. She just shows us what Iris Murdoch would identify as the true sun of the "Good" (Murdoch 97-98), and urges us to warm our souls under it. Diotima, through her discourse on love delivered to Socrates, builds a bridge between the flesh and the soul, and shows us the means of spiritualizing the flesh.¹ Pornography, on the other hand, is a radical devaluation of the carnal dimension of the human existence; it does not eroticize the carnal but rather produces in us a radical hatred of the body, and seeks to convince us that the body can be objectified – made into a momentarily useful thing.² Thus, pornography is an animalization of *human* sexual acts. In this way, pornography produces what might be called second order animals, the human animals that are neither humans nor natural animals. The viewers of pornography also turn into such automatically operating human animals, the embodiments of adiaphorization. These adiaphorized human animals, who are automatons and slaves in the empire of late capitalism, are the products of a pornographic culture that is not only oriented towards a vulgarization of sex but rather leans towards a *total* vulgarization of the "human condition" itself. A Diotimean pedagogy is needed today to defy the anathema of adiaphorization, to bring back the full human being³, and to rehumanize the dehumanized male who is a happy slave and automaton in the hands of his late capitalist masters. A significant way of bringing back the full human being is to eroticize education, to clear a space for Aphrodite within pedagogy which we take to be a wholly Apollonian terrain.

Aphrodite can be seen as the *third* deity who defies the Nietzschean dichotomization of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. She can show us a different way towards enlightenment. It goes without saying that the Aphroditean enlightenment is totally different from the enlightenment we have been trained to celebrate. Rather, it would be akin to what Miranda Shaw calls the "passionate enlightenment", an enlightenment that opens up the horizons of a "skylike freedom", involving, and not negating, erotic passion (Shaw 3-19). Diotima is the proponent of such a passionate enlightenment. Shannon Bell argues that Diotima was probably a

devotee of Aphrodite (Bell 27). If that is the case, her passionate enlightenment is neither an Apollonian illumination nor a Dionysian catharsis. It is, rather, an appreciation of the erotic, and it provides us with the outline of a pedagogical model that is oriented towards the Aphroditean wisdom. It can de-adiaphorize the pornographized human mind-body complex that is automatically disciplined in the cultural economy of late capitalism. A *pornographic* body is a "docile body" (Foucault 179-181): an *erotic* body is oriented towards "skylike freedom". It is this journey towards skylike freedom that Diotima underscores in her erotic teaching. She presents us with a model of erotic-spiritual ascent which begins with the beauty embodied in particular fleshly frames but gradually journeys towards the larger manifestations of beauty, finally reaching the wide sea of beauty-in-itself (Plato 34-42). This sea can be figured as the "sky" too: it is an *atopia* of liberation.

Of course, all of this sounds very abstract and cold, and the "young generation" is supposed to be obsessively fond of "hot" things. But are they intrinsically fond of these hot things, or are these hot things imposed on them from above, from the ultra-canny designers and discipliners of late capitalist desires? What Diotima offers is neither hot nor cold: it is a warm erotics that can nullify both the aggressive heat of male libido and the cold, hypocritically desexualized worldviews that trade in ideological clichés.

Nevertheless, at this point, we must dwell on the difference between Diotima and Beatrice. Dante's Beatrice is primarily an erotic object, and then elevated into the figural aura of a symbolic spiritual mentor (Williams 17-22, 175-186). She is actually not a woman occupying a subject position (Spivak 20-31). On the other hand, Diotima is a priestess and a teacher, she is not erotically eyed by Socrates but operates as the latter's instructor in erotics. She is not a ghostly guide like Dante's Beatrice, she has *authority* in her tone (Nye, "The Hidden Host" 84). The difference between these two celebrated female figures from Western culture must be appreciated. In many literary texts produced by male authors, Diotima is often presented as a Beatrice-like spectral muse, an erotic guide, who is just a slightly altered form of

an erotic object. Thus, in a Bengali poem by Sibnarayan Ray, Diotima becomes a Beatricean guide in the male subject's journey to love and wisdom (Ray 81-82). And, in the celebrated figurations of Holderlin, Diotima becomes Hyperion's beloved, just like Dante's Beatrice (Grange 161; del Caro 86). She is no more the majestic teacher who speaks with pedagogical authority, but an erotic object. The same thing happens in the case of the female teachers today, whether in India or abroad. They are secretly figured as erotic objects by their adolescent male students, and thus, a woman teacher who could have functioned as a Diotima *de nos jours* turns into an erotic object which must be subjected to (young) male gaze (Frueh 192-195).

When in college, I was often asked by my male friends whether I had ever fallen in love with a woman teacher in school. When I answered in the negative, I used to be deemed to be an incorrigibly unromantic person. Today, the adolescent male students in Indian schools often find it adventurous to "fall in love with" (read sexually objectify) their female teachers. Celebrities talk about such experiences (God knows whether real or imaginary) on the TV channels; young college students discuss this among themselves; popular TV shows telecast programmes dwelling on such themes; the literary market produces popular fiction emphasizing this topic. Interestingly, the UTV Bindass show, *Superstud, School of Flirt*, that parodies the Diotimean erotics and purports to groom young men erotically so that they can become males desired by every woman, is a gross denial of all possible models of a substantial erotic instruction targeted at the goal of foregrounding the *full* human being. Such shows end up underpinning all the gender stereotypes of a phallogocentric society that is obsessed with the teratology of the macho man. And such shows are also grounded in a (soft-)pornographization of the erotic. Young men receive their unofficial erotic education from such shows, and these shows, just like the pornographic audio-visual narratives easily available on the internet, shape the Indian young man's concepts of love, women, and masculinity. All these are indirectly related to the sexual malaise that plagues our society today. Rape may be an extreme

phenomenon, but the dynamics of the objectifying male gaze are pampered in the mainstream Indian society without any ethical scruple about "women's honour". Actually, honouring women is not a solution, either. This honour has its own mythology which stinks of patriarchal ideologies. What is rather needed is an ethics of listening to women's voices, an appreciation of the woman teacher as a *subject*.

But how can a woman teacher of today instruct the young male students in a creative erotics? We all know the objections that are going to be raised. The Indian society is not still so intellectually matured; the inauguration of Eros into the epistemology of school pedagogy will destabilize the teacher-student relationship, and so on and so forth. But we need to understand that a teacher instructing her students in erotics need not necessarily be involved in an erotic relationship with the student(s) instructed. A teacher can maintain a distance between what she teaches and what comes out of that teaching in the lives of the students. As Andrea Nye, the noted feminist philosopher, has observed, the situation really becomes problematic when a teacher falls in love with a young student (Nye, "At the Feet of Mrs Ramsay" 109-118). And yet, this too is a human possibility. Such things keep happening. But Diotima's teaching, we should remember again, is not confined to personal erotic experiences alone; it is oriented towards the articulation of an erotic community that can channelize erotic creativity into a collective creative impetus (Nye, "The Hidden Host" 86-88). Diotima's Eros is not just a means of reaching the wide sea of beauty, it is also oriented towards the "teleopoietic" (à la Derrida) collectivity of divinized humans who have bathed in that sea of beauty. And all teachers are meant to envision their students in terms of a future collectivity as well as present individuals. Teaching, in this way, is also a mode of *teleopoiesis*, as Derrida interprets the term.⁴

Diotima's theory of beauty can be analysed thus: beauty is a path towards the Good; the beautiful being should not be sought to be possessed, but be seen as the embodiment of a flame of the sun of the Beauty-in-itself. In this unique erotic epistemology, beauty ultimately

melts into the aura of goodness. Diotima weds aesthetics to ethics, and thus she articulates a theory of the love of beauty that is not centred on possession (Plato 35-42). This is exactly what is bracketed off by today's essentially pornographic indoctrination of young men's aesthetic-sexual epistemology. What can be seen can be possessed – this seems to be the motto of the present generation nourished on a culture oversaturated with images. There are desires for images, and there are also innumerable images of desire (Jameson 297-300). These two bleed into each other. Finally, one forgets whether the desire creates the image or the image creates the desire.

Eros creates what Umberto Eco, following James Joyce, would call a "chaosmos"⁵, and to appreciate this structure, to be happy within the *chaosmic* universe of the head and the heart, one needs a training which perhaps only female philosophers can provide us with.

Maria Zambrano, the noted Spanish philosopher, strongly argues for an order of love which can heal some of the deep maladies of modern humans. As she repeatedly points out, an order of the heart is as important as the rationalist order of thought (Zambrano 62-69). Drawing on Zambrano's thesis we may say that a Diotimian pedagogy would steer clear of both the logocentrism of the modern epistemology and the pornographic objectification of the human body that enshrines the "heart". The focus on the heart⁶ at once defies the rationalistic and pornographic modes of adiaphorization, and the heart, though conceived of as something abstract, needs to be brought back to the pedagogical practices today.

Finally, we have to deal with the vexing question: do we really respond sincerely to the voices of women philosophers? Just as the young male students erotically objectify their female teachers, do we not, in the larger sphere of philosophical pedagogy, neglect – or at best museumize - the feminist philosophers, especially the theorists of sexual difference who seek to establish a productive intellectual, spiritual, and also erotic dialogue between the sexes (Alcoff 1-13)? And that is why we need to reformulate the idea of gender equality into a concept of *equiphony*, as presented by Isabel Santa Cruz. For

Santa Cruz, equiphony is "equal access to public discourse" (Amoros 344). This is what is often denied to women thinkers. They are exoticized, museumized and seen as curio items. But do the male philosophers seriously listen to the feminist thinkers? Will the Socrates of today agree to be instructed by a "wise woman"?

Now, let us conclude the reflections on the alternative pedagogical paradigm we have been outlining so far. In most of the contemporary coeducational pedagogical systems, the "woman teacher", just like the "woman philosopher", occupies an object position and is not appreciated in terms of her subjectivity. If we are really to seek a solution to the sexual malaise plaguing our society in India, we have to prescribe "erotic" (a la Diotima) teaching for the adolescent boys, conducted by women who would try to motivate young males to come out of the closets of the phallographic epistemology. The pornographic disciplining of the adolescent males' sexopsychological makeup is not only dangerous for their psychic development but also pernicious for the society at large, because, one cannot maintain social health by perpetuating the objectification of women. And that is why, if the pornographically adiaphorized young males of today's generation are to be rehumanized, a Diotima must descend from the erotic heavens of the "Good", from the realms of skylike freedom, to usher in an erotic enlightenment, to install Aphrodite at the heart of pedagogical praxis, and to resist the pornographization of the *erotic* which can empower women (as Lorde argues) and which can offer true human freedom to the men who are made into "docile bodies" through the pornographic adiaphorization set in motion by the postmodern patriarchy.

Notes :

1. See Adriana Cavarero 112.
2. See Mielke 27-28.
3. Nye argues that, for Diotima, love permeates the whole of human activity. See "The Hidden Host" 87.
4. For the elucidation of this, see Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 31. Spivak writes, "Derrida brings the rich notion of *teleopoiesis*—teleopoietic rather than

legitimizing reversal—into play many times in his book. That is indeed one of the shocks to the idea of belonging, to affect the distant in a *poiesis*—an imaginative making—without guarantees, and thus, by definitive predication, reverse its value. Again, note the difference between this and the mechanical convenience of mapmaking. “The teleopoiesis we are speaking of is a messianic structure. . . . We are not yet among these philosophers of the future, we who are calling them and calling them the philosophers of the future, but we are in advance their friends. . . . This is perhaps the ‘community of those without community’.”

5. I here draw on the title of Umberto Eco’s book, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: the Middle Ages of James Joyce*.
6. See Maria Zambrano, “The Metaphor of the Heart”, trans. Sarah Cyganiak, in Cyganiak, *The Method of Maria Zambrano*, 299-316.

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