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The Paradox of the Feminine: Re-reading the *Hitopadesa*

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Abstract: *Hitopadesa*, a seminal Sanskrit collection of fables in verse and prose, stands as one of the most widely read and translated works of Indian didactic literature, believed to be composed by Narayana Pandit. *Hitopadesa* is used to teach children *niti* or right conduct like many other fables. *Hitopadesa* also tries to transmit the male chauvinistic ideals of the then social world to the children. Even after generations, we are transmitting the same old ideals to the children through these books. In most of the stories, women are portrayed through a lens of misogyny, where they are depicted as a source of distraction for men or as deceptive persons. Many verses in the stories serve as warnings to men and are described as untrustworthy. On the whole the text reflects the patriarchal structures of its time where women are primarily defined by their relationships to men as wives, daughters or objects of desire. While the text is traditionally considered as a manual for *niti* (political ethics and worldly wisdom), the text's treatment of women is often dualistic. This paper tries to reread the text, aiming to bridge the gap between the text's didactic "rules" and its narrative reality.

Keywords: *Children's literature, Hitopadesa, gender bias, fables and folktales, male chauvinism*

Introduction

Typically featuring animals or inanimate objects endowed with human qualities, the fable as a literary form is inherently didactic, prioritizing instruction over aesthetic complexity. M.H. Abrams in the book *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defined a fable as follows: “A fable (or apologue) is a short narrative, in prose or verse, that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behaviour; most commonly, at its conclusion, either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an epigram” (121). Northrop Frye views fable as a kind of ‘literal’ allegory where the characters are functions of the moral. In his work *Anatomy of Criticism*, he explains the concept of fable as “a kind of narrative in which the characters are usually animals or inanimate objects, but are essentially human beings in disguise and the story is told to illustrate a moral or social truth” (90-91). Folktales are broader narrative forms within oral tradition that may include fables, myths and legends, but as against fables, they are not always didactic presenting more complex and open-ended narrative structures.

Although a great deal of research work has been done on Indian folktales, several areas remain unexplored. The present paper is an attempt to conduct a gender reading of *Hitopadesa*; a folktale which in many ways is similar to *Panchatantra*. It examines the underlying power structures within these folk tales, focusing on how themes of gender bias, objectification, and male chauvinism work together to normalize patriarchal dominance. Women are rarely portrayed as independent entities; instead, they are viewed through the lens of how they affect a man’s path to success, stability or ruin. The portrayal oscillates between two extremes: the idealized anchor of the household and the deceptive obstacle to moral discipline. To ground this research, I have engaged with a few of the English translations of *Hitopadesa* including those of Charles Wilkins and Sir Edwin Arnold. Following Lisa Tuttle’s definition of feminist theory as ‘asking new questions to old text’, this paper tries to uncover layers of meaning that traditional readings might have missed.

Hitopadesa and its origin

Hitopadesa is a collection of fables in verse and prose believed to be composed by Narayana Pandit. The authorship of the *Hitopadesa* has been contested. 19th-century Indologists attributed the text to Vishnu Sharma, a narrator and character that often appears in its fables. Upon the discovery of the oldest known manuscript of the text in Nepal, dated to 1373, and the preparation of a critical edition, scholars generally accept the authority of its two concluding verses. These verses mention Narayana as the author and a king called Dhavala Chandra as the patron of the text. This literary work is a sophisticated re-envisioning of political diplomacy (*niti*) and worldly wisdom in a nested narrative structure.

The *Hitopadesa* is organized into four books, with a preface section called Prastavika. The different sections are: Book 1- Mitralabha: How to gain a friend, Book 2- Suhrdbheda: How to lose a friend, Book 3- Vighraha: War and Book 4 Sandhi: Peace. Most of the characters in these books are animals. Human characteristics, behaviour patterns and even ethical values are ascribed to these animals. However, one can observe that the conversations between these animals make unnecessary comments on women. Also, no conversation ever takes place among female characters to demonstrate their knowledge. The few female characters in the work are depicted as either foolish, cause for evil or men's ruin.

Otherings of women portrayed in *Hitopadesa*

Various feminist theoreticians and critics all over the world have voiced their concerns regarding the mis-representation of women and gender bias in folktales and myths. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues, "History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers, from patriarchy's earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other" (193).

Hitopadesa like many other folktales is also told in a direct manner and animal characters as well as inanimate objects are used to satirize the characteristics of human behaviour. In the fable of "Tiger and the Golden Bangle" the moral at the end says: "confidence should not be put in rivers; in animals which have claws or horns; in men with weapons in their hands; nor in women; nor in those of royal birth" (48). Though the fable has nothing to do with women, it asks not to put confidence in women.

In the story of "Rich Old Husband and his Young Wife", there are several derogatory comments on women such as:

The following are the reasons for a woman's ruin:

Independence, dwelling at father's house,

Company on festive occasions,

Chatter with men, not staying within rules of conduct,

Living abroad, contact with women with loose character,

Repeatedly losing one's character,

Husband's old age, his jealousy, or his living in a foreign country. (61)

In the “Story of the Blue Jackal” in the section “The Separation of Friends” women are compared to fire or venom and are considered as obstacles to wisdom. “Women, true to their class character, are capable of leading astray men in this world- not only the fool but even the learned and wise man. Both becomes slaves of desire” (112). The section on “Losing Friends” warns against trusting women: “The friendship of a rogue, the affection of a woman and the flame of a fire- these three are fickle and cannot be relied upon by the wise” (84).

In another story, “Lord Shiva’s Boon,” in the section “Peace” men are losing their boon and lives as they enter into a fight for a woman. Here, the woman is portrayed as the cause for men’s ruin. In this story, the two brothers, Sunda and Upasunda got a boon from Lord Shiva that they cannot be killed by anyone except each other. With this boon they began to conquer the world and afraid of this the Gods created a celestial nymph called Tilottama, whose beauty was overwhelming. The two brothers who were blinded by the beauty, lust and possessiveness fought each other for her and eventually killed one another. In the story, the narrator observes the core reason for their downfall as: “These two, who were inseparable and shared everything, including their sovereignty, were destroyed by the Creator’s trickery in the form of a woman. Like two rams fighting over a single ewe, they struck each other down for the sake of Tilottama” (154).

The story, “The Weaver’s Wish” deals with the life of a weaver, Mantharaka, who gets a boon from a tree fairy and decides to ask for an opinion from his wife. Though his friend tries to stop him in between, he follows the opinion of his wife which results in the losing of his life itself. The text uses this narrative to deliver a harsh critique of men who listen to the counsel of women. The wife of the weaver advised him to ask for a second head and two extra arms so he can work two looms at once, rather than asking for a kingdom or wealth. The weaver followed her advice and appeared in public with four arms and two heads. But the villagers seeing the strange appearance mistook the appearance for a demon and beat him to death. At the end of the story the narrator gives a didactic conclusion: “He who, leaving his own judgment, follows the counsel of a woman, comes to grief, just like the weaver Mantharaka who was slain by the villagers” (125).

In the same story there is another verse which reinforces this sentiment: “The intellect of a woman is naturally fickle and lacks foresight. He who rests his life’s decisions upon it is like a man trying to cross the ocean in a boat made of unbaked clay” (125). Though women never appear as characters in the story “Wise Minister,” it gives the moral that if you want to mislead someone the best way is to frame a story with a woman. In the present century where we talk about gender equality and gender neutrality, people keep the same mentality in their words and actions.

“The Mountain’s Evil Spirit” is the only story with a seemingly good female character. Even in that story, the old woman is deceiving the king by saying that she has killed the evil spirit to get the rewards from the king where as it is just a monkey which is the real -problem. Though the woman solves the issue with her wit she achieves greatness by telling a lie. She is portrayed as a woman who uses her “high intelligence” for “low” or immoral purposes. She is portrayed as one who can exploit the fear and superstition of men to protect her own illicit desires. The narrative reinforces the idea that a woman’s “cunning” is a primary weapon. “A woman’s mind is a tangled forest of deception. Even as she speaks words of devotion to her husband, her heart is wandering toward another, and her actions are weaving a net of lies” (98). The text frames the story as a warning to men: do not take things at face value, especially when the information comes from a woman who seems overly concerned with your safety or moral standing. Woman in the story is exemplified as an architect of a false reality, leading her husband into ignorance so she can enjoy her freedom.

The Paradox of the “Ideal Wife”

Hitopadesa often portrays a paradoxical view of wife through the tension between her role as a powerful guardian of the household and her status as a subordinate dependent. It begins by establishing the domestic deal. In the Prologue, a woman’s value is strictly tied to her utility and temperament. A “good” wife is categorized alongside wealth and health as a prerequisite for a fulfilling life. “A large income, perpetual health, a wife who is dear and speaks pleasantly, an obedient son and money-making know-how- these are the six sources of happiness in this world, O king” (Wiese, 57).

This quote suggests that a woman’s primary virtue is her “sweet speech” and her ability to remain “dear” to her husband. Here, the woman is a passive recipient of the male gaze and a component of his success. However, the text acknowledges that such a woman is a rarity. The *Hitopadesa* frequently warns that while a good wife is a blessing, the “nature” of womankind is inherently volatile.

In the “Story of the Merchant’s Wife”, the wife manages to maintain the appearance of an “ideal wife” while actively pursuing illicit affairs, using the husband’s own devotion as a shield for her deception. While the verses demand female submission, the fables portray women as clever agents who easily outwit their husbands.

Researchers argue that the *Hitopadesa* views women as a dangerous but necessary part of the social and political fabric (Wiese, 2026). The “ideal” is a disciplinary tool meant to domesticate a force that the text otherwise views as chaotic. Some feminist critiques suggest the negative portrayal of women in these fables is a “shadow-instruction” in *niti*. It teaches the ruler to be suspicious and

vigilant, using the “disloyal wife” as a metaphor for a “disloyal ally” (Roy, 2026). “The *Hitopadesa* constructs a paradox of acquired virtue. The wife must be a ‘Durga’ for her husband’s honor, yet the text argues that women are naturally ‘un-fortifiable’. The ideal is therefore a state of perpetual restraint rather than natural character” (Sternbach, 1965).

Economic paradox is also evident in the text. While women are depicted as subordinate or inferior ones, the text assigns them the absolute management of the “trivarga” (virtue, wealth and pleasure). The person trusted to manage home is simultaneously viewed with inherent suspicion. While analyzing the story of the merchant’s wife and the jewel thief, it is evident that the woman uses her cleverness to protect her husband’s property or to secure her own survival when the husband’s worldly wisdom fails. The text warns that the wit of a woman is destructive, yet in the actual tales, it is often the only thing that saves the family from bankruptcy or death. This suggests that the female intellect is a potent resource that the patriarchal structure of the *Hitopadesa* struggles to categorize – it is both a threat and a savior.

Women portrayed as stereotypes

One of the most common stereotypes used in *Hitopadesa* is the wickedness or untrustworthiness of women. The narrative supports this ideology through the various verses in the stories where they frequently warn men that a woman’s external beauty or sweet speech is merely a mask for a treacherous nature. “A debt-contracting father is an enemy, and so is an unchaste mother; a beautiful wife is an enemy, an unlearned son is an enemy” (5). This expression clearly reflects the then patriarchal anxiety regarding female agency and sexual power.

One of the major warnings given to the young princes in *Hitopadesa* is regarding the “mismatch” in marriage that is, old men marrying young women. Here often the young wife is stereotyped as naturally prone to infidelity as she cannot be satisfied by an elderly husband. In the story, The Oldman and the Young Wife, the wife’s affection is portrayed as purely transactional or deceptive. This story which appears as a part of the introduction states its didactic lesson as follows. “In the absence of practice, knowledge is poison; in a state of indigestion, food is poison...a young wife is the poison of an old man” (5).

The text implies that women are fundamentally unknowable and inconsistent, even to the Gods. “Even the Gods do not know the character of a woman, nor her luck; how then should a man know it?” (95). Throughout the text, the ‘ideal woman’ is always defined by her relationship with her husband. Her virtues include silence, obedience and household management. The text notes that among the “six

felicities of life”, a man should hope for “a sweet speaking wife” (4). This reinforces the stereotype that a woman’s value is tied to her ability to provide comfort and ego reinforcement to the patriarch.

Another prevalent stereotype in the text is the proneness of women to duplicity. The text even gives a sense that a “good” woman is only good because she hasn’t had the opportunity to be bad. The text claims that a women’s heart is a labyrinth of deception that even the gods cannot navigate. “The heart of a woman is not to be known: it is like a path in the woods or the track of a fish in the water” (Narayana, 42). In the “Story of Jewel-Plath”, a wife successfully hides her lover under the bed and convinces her husband that she was praying for his long life when he discovers her (Narayana 56). This reinforces the stereotype that women use “religious piety” as a mask for “sensual infidelity”.

Thus, in *Hitopadesa* women are portrayed not as just individuals but as types. The stereotypical ‘ideal woman’ is often exemplified. Throughout the text one can identify women portrayed as ‘pativatra’ or devoted wife. Her virtue is often considered as a tool for the social and spiritual success of her husband. Most often the female characters in the folktale such as the unfaithful wife of the barber or the merchant are depicted as inherently fickle, lustful and intellectually cunning. This in turn creates a fear in the mind of the young readers and teaches them that the women are a chaotic force that must be managed through constant vigilance. Thus, the *Hitopadesa* functions through a binary logic between the paradox of the ‘dutiful woman’ and the ‘deceitful woman’.

Subversion of wit

“Narayana’s fables do not see women as subjects of their own stories but as objects of male anxiety. The female character is a mirror reflecting the male fear of losing self-control” (Doniger, 204). In the introduction itself the narrative sets the stage for subversion. “The appetite of women is twofold; their intellect fourfold; their daring sixfold; and their desire eightfold”. (Narayana 117). By claiming women have “fourfold” the intellect of men, the text acknowledges a cognitive superiority that it then spends several chapters trying to ‘guard’ against. “By quantifying female ‘cunning’ as six times that of men, the text creates a psychological barrier. It transforms female survival instincts into a supernatural or inherent threat that justifies domestic containment” (Rajan 112).

In certain stories women are portrayed as intelligent characters who solve problems, outwit guards and manage crises. But how *Hitopadesa* frames this intelligence is what makes it more interesting. It almost always portrays their intelligence as “kutila” or crookedness. When a male character like the Jackal uses wit, it is seen as ‘niti’ or strategy. When a female character uses the same level of wit, it is portrayed as ‘kutila’ or crookedness or ‘maya’ or delusion or deceit. In the story of the

Barber's Wife wit is used to escape the physical consequences of adultery. When her husband ties her to a post, she uses a surrogate to take her place and then claims a "divine miracle" restored her nose.

In many of the fables the "quickness of mind" of women often outclasses the male characters. However, the text often frames this intelligence of women as a symbol of a "fickle nature". "Untruth, rashness, guile, folly, greed, impurity and cruelty are the innate flaws of women" (112). Ludwik Sternbach, who made a detailed study on Indian Sanskrit literature also makes this analysis in his study. "The woman in *Hitopadesa* is viewed through the lens of suspicion; she is the 'gate to hell' or the 'snare to the world' that distracts the men of high purpose from his duty" (Sternbach 45). Female wit is used as a tool of domestic rebellion and survival. In most of the women characters portrayed their power is not derived from their wit or mind or status but from their ability to manipulate male desire to achieve an end which the text then uses to prove why they cannot be trusted. The text establishes a clear dichotomy in how wit is valued based on gender. By portraying women as inherently deceptive, the text justifies the strict patriarchal controls of the era.

A. K. Ramanujan describes this ambivalence as "context-sensitive morality" in Indian narrative traditions. According to Ramanujan, characters in such tales do not adhere to fixed ethical codes but adapt their behavior to circumstances, often using intelligence in pragmatic ways. Female characters in the *Hitopadesa* exemplify this flexibility: their wit is not inherently virtuous or immoral but situational. In a patriarchal world that limits their direct power, cunning becomes an alternative mode of agency.

At the same time, the text also reflects a deep-seated suspicion of female wit, aligning it with disorder and social instability. As Ludo Rocher notes in his study of Indian fable literature, works like the *Hitopadesa* often blur the line between ethical instruction and political pragmatism. In this context, women's intelligence is portrayed as unpredictable and potentially disruptive, reinforcing the need for vigilance and control. Such representations can be read as part of a broader ideological project that seeks to regulate not only behavior but also interpretation: by framing female wit as dangerous, the text attempts to guide readers toward cautionary conclusions.

The subversion of wit in the text is not merely a reflection of ancient social norms but literary device that manages anxiety. By labelling female intelligence as cunning, the text attempts to domesticate a power it cannot fully ignore. The paradox remains: the *Hitopadesa* teaches that the wit is the highest virtue for a king, yet the most dangerous vice for a woman. Yet, by documenting these instances of female cunning, Narayana preserved a record of female agency that frequently outmaneuvered the very worldly wisdom the book sought to instill in princes.

Conclusion

The portrayal of women in *Hitopadesa* is instrumental rather than humanistic. In these stories women serve as catalysts for the plot or act as living metaphors for the unpredictability of the world. The “wisdom” of *Hitopadesa* is undeniably male-centric, providing a fascinating- if often uncomfortable – look into the power dynamics prevalent in the ancient society.

Considering the impact that gender representation in children’s literature has on the self-esteem of children, it will be better if these stories can be rewritten with gender neutral themes. This rewriting is not just about fixing the past; it’s about decoupling the text’s brilliant political strategy and practical ethics from the outdated social prejudices that often bury them. The focus should be shifted from the one who is performing the action to the nature of the action itself. For instance, the text often labels women as a deceiver and her fickle nature is warned. Instead of warning the fickle nature of women, the text could warn against the inconsistency and the universal tendency for people to prioritize self-interest. The honeyed words and “poisoned hearts” metaphor used in the stories to represent women could be reapplied to sycophants, corrupt advisors or dishonest competitors. This makes it more suitable for the modern world where people lose their kingdoms not because of “seduced princes” but because of corporate manipulations and dishonest networking.

Thus, by removing the gender bias embedded in the ancient text, the core philosophy—the importance of friendship, the necessity of caution, and the power of intellect—will shine through for everyone.

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