

Virtues and Vices Women of the Indian Epics through Lens of Matsari Tyaga Pragalbha

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Abstract: *The Mahābhārata, one of India's greatest epics, offers a vast moral and psychological landscape where human virtues and vices coexist in dynamic tension. Within this intricate web of dharma and desire, the women of the epic emerge as complex embodiments of emotional intensity, moral resilience, and internal conflict. This paper examines these female figures through the lens of matsarī—a Sanskrit concept often translated as envy or jealousy, yet deeply rooted in emotional comparison and moral ambivalence. By interpreting matsarī not merely as a vice but as a catalyst of human action, the study reconsiders how emotions conventionally labeled as destructive may, in fact, reveal ethical depth and agency in the epic's women. Characters such as Draupadī, Kuntī, and Gāndhārī are re-evaluated for how matsarī shapes their choices, relationships, and sense of justice. The paper argues that their so-called “vices” are intertwined with virtues of loyalty, endurance, and moral perception, thus challenging the binary framework of good and evil. Through this emotional lens, matsarī becomes both a mirror of patriarchal constraint and a mode of self-assertion within an epic deeply concerned with dharma and destiny. Ultimately, this study situates the women of the Mahābhārata as moral agents whose virtues and vices alike illuminate the epic's nuanced vision of human nature and ethical consciousness.*

Keywords: empathetic, exploitation, tendencies

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mahābhārata, one of the grandest narratives of Indian civilization, is not merely a tale of war and kingship but a profound exploration of human emotion, ethics, and existential struggle. Within its vast moral universe, women occupy a central yet often contested space, embodying both the virtues that sustain dharma and the vices that challenge it. The portrayal of female characters such as Draupadī, Kuntī, Gāndhārī, and Satyawatī transcends simplistic moral binaries, presenting them as emotionally intricate and ethically ambivalent figures. Their actions are shaped not only by external social and patriarchal pressures but also by internal psychological currents—chief among them, matsarī—the emotion of envy, rivalry, and emotional comparison. Far from being a mere weakness, matsarī becomes a lens through which the Mahābhārata reveals the subtle interplay between virtue and vice within the human soul.

Examining women through the lens of matsarī allows a deeper understanding of how emotional and moral conflicts operate within epic structures. The Mahābhārata's women, often constrained by dharma and duty, channel matsarī as both resistance and revelation—it exposes their pain, their desire for recognition, and their pursuit of justice in a male-dominated world. When Draupadī's humiliation ignites the great war, or when Gāndhārī's grief transforms into moral fury, these moments reflect the transformative power of matsarī as an ethical and emotional force. This study, therefore, interprets matsarī not as a mere moral failing but as a mode of agency—an instrument through which women articulate their moral consciousness, confront inequality, and redefine the epic's understanding of virtue and vice.

II. FACES OF FEMALE VIRTUE

The Mahābhārata stands as one of the most intricate and philosophical epics of ancient India, offering a profound exploration of human nature and ethical complexity. Beyond its tales of war, kingship, and divine destiny, it unveils a deep psychological study of emotion and morality, particularly through its female characters. Women in the epic, such as Draupadī, Kuntī, Gāndhārī, and Satyawatī, are not passive embodiments of virtue but dynamic individuals shaped by



conflict, emotion, and duty. Their moral depth is reflected in their constant negotiation between societal expectations and personal conviction. Among the many emotions that define their journeys, *matsarī*—the feeling of jealousy, envy, or moral rivalry—emerges as a key force driving their internal and external struggles. This study interprets *matsarī* not merely as a vice but as a lens to understand the emotional and ethical realities of these women.

The concept of *matsarī* in Sanskrit thought goes beyond simple jealousy; it represents an emotional unease arising from comparison, moral awareness, and the desire for justice. Within the patriarchal structure of the *Mahābhārata*, women often experience *matsarī* as a response to oppression, neglect, or emotional restraint. Draupadī's humiliation in the royal court evokes her burning sense of injustice; Kuntī's lifelong concealment of truth reveals her emotional turmoil between motherhood and societal propriety; and Gāndhārī's grief and resentment reflect the pain of moral imbalance in the world she inhabits. Each woman's experience with *matsarī* becomes a form of resistance—a moral and emotional response to a world that restricts her agency. Thus, what appears as a flaw or weakness on the surface becomes a site of strength and ethical reflection.

Reading these women through the lens of *matsarī* allows for a reinterpretation of virtue and vice within the epic. Draupadī's anger and pride, often seen as transgressions, actually symbolize courage and moral integrity. Gāndhārī's curse upon Kṛṣṇa, born from grief and envy, becomes a profound act of justice rather than vengeance. Similarly, Kuntī's silence is not submission but a complex moral choice shaped by compassion and guilt. These moments reveal that female virtue in the *Mahābhārata* is not defined by obedience but by emotional intelligence and moral endurance. The interplay between *matsarī* and virtue underscores the idea that even emotions deemed negative have ethical significance, contributing to the moral depth of the epic.

Ultimately, *matsarī* serves as both a mirror and a medium for understanding the emotional world of the *Mahābhārata*'s women. It captures their inner conflicts, their yearning for equality, and their struggle to uphold dharma amid personal suffering. Through their experiences, the epic dismantles simplistic moral binaries and invites readers to see emotion as an ethical force. The “faces of female virtue” thus emerge not in purity or detachment but in the complex interweaving of pain, passion, and resilience. By reinterpreting *matsarī* as a form of moral consciousness, this study recognizes the women of the *Mahābhārata* as agents of ethical transformation—individuals whose emotions, though humanly flawed, illuminate the deepest truths of virtue, justice, and humanity.

III. THE MORAL PULSE OF MATSARĪ

The concept of *matsarī* in the *Mahābhārata* extends far beyond the common understanding of jealousy or envy. It carries within it a subtle moral and psychological vibration—a pulse that measures the ethical temperature of the human heart. In the epic's vast moral landscape, *matsarī* acts as a mirror that reflects the tension between desire and duty, emotion and ethics. It is not merely a destructive force but a dynamic energy that awakens moral consciousness. Through characters such as Draupadī, Kuntī, and Gāndhārī, *matsarī* reveals how emotions shape ethical choices. Draupadī's fierce response to humiliation, for instance, arises from her deep sense of justice and self-worth; her anger, though perceived as pride, embodies the moral pulse of *matsarī*—the demand for righteousness within an unjust order. Thus, *matsarī* becomes a moral heartbeat within the epic, signaling moments when emotion transcends weakness and transforms into ethical awakening.

The *matsarī*-driven emotions of the *Mahābhārata*'s women must be read as a form of moral agency rather than moral failure. In a world governed by patriarchal codes of dharma, where obedience is often mistaken for virtue, *matsarī* acts as a subtle rebellion against moral stagnation. Kuntī's concealed pain and inner conflict, rooted in emotional restraint and hidden envy, reflect her awareness of the moral imbalance between truth and social honor. Gāndhārī's sorrow, which transforms into resentment against fate and even the divine, marks the moment when *matsarī* transcends personal emotion to become a universal ethical protest. These women, through their emotional struggles, embody the pulse of moral realism—showing that righteousness is not achieved through suppression of feeling, but through the recognition and transformation of it. In this sense, *matsarī* becomes a moral rhythm that bridges the inner and outer worlds of human conduct, teaching that virtue cannot exist without emotional truth.

The moral pulse of *matsarī* ultimately redefines how virtue is understood within the *Mahābhārata*. By allowing emotions to challenge rigid norms of dharma, the epic demonstrates that moral growth often arises from inner turmoil rather than



calm detachment. The envy, pain, and rivalry experienced by its women expose the fragility and humanity of virtue itself. Their emotional honesty, even in moments of weakness, keeps the moral pulse of the epic alive, making the Mahābhārata not just a scripture of duty but a chronicle of human feeling. Matsarī, therefore, is not the absence of morality but its awakening—a vibration that reveals the complexity of ethical life. It compels readers to see that morality in the epic is not static or absolute, but living, evolving, and deeply emotional. Through this understanding, matsarī emerges as a profound symbol of moral vitality—the pulse that animates the epic’s vision of dharma, justice, and human truth .

IV. SUMMATION

In summation, the moral pulse of *matsarī* in the Mahābhārata reflects the deep emotional and ethical vitality that defines its women. Rather than being a mere expression of jealousy or rivalry, *matsarī* becomes a force of moral awakening that exposes injustice, stirs self-awareness, and redefines virtue. Through the emotional struggles of Draupadī, Kuntī, and Gāndhārī, the epic reveals that righteousness is not found in suppressing emotion but in transforming it into ethical strength. *Matsarī* thus bridges the gap between feeling and morality, showing that human virtue is born out of conflict, pain, and empathy. It beats like a moral heartbeat within the epic, reminding readers that true dharma arises not from perfection or obedience, but from the courage to feel, to question, and to act with emotional truth.

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