

**VICES AND VIRTUES: SHADES OF FEMININE WISDOM IN
KATHASARITSAGARA BY SOMADEVA**

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Abstract

Kathasaritsagara (The Ocean of the Streams of Stories), an 11th century Sanskrit composition written by Somadeva Bhatta, stands as one of the most profound repositories of pre-modern Indian narrative literature. This great work contains within it more than 350 tales told across eighteen books in some twenty thousand stanzas. It is, for its size, the oldest extant collection of stories in the world. Beyond its exotic tales and adventurous heroes lies a rich spectrum of feminine characters—queens, wives, yoginis, courtesans, and sorceresses—each embodying shades of vices and virtues often resulting in some forms of wisdom or outcome driven approach demonstrated by the characters. In the stories, these women have been shown to often operate with cognitive acumen, emotional virtue, and motivational drive. The virtues and vices shown by female characters are often context-bound and culturally nuanced, reflecting both social constraints and inner autonomy.

As part of this paper, I examine how feminine wisdom manifests both as a virtuous agency—embodied by loyal wives, queens and lovers—and as a strategic vice, skillfully employed by vengeful queens, deceitful wives and clever courtesans to pursue their goals.

Keywords: feminine wisdom, cognitive wisdom, emotional wisdom, motivational or spiritual wisdom

Introduction

1. Feminine Wisdom as a virtuous agency:

a. Upakosa: Mastery of Mind and Morals (Kathapitha, Taranga 6 – Tale of Vararuci's Pupils)

Upakosa, the daughter of a famed courtesan and wife of the wise Brahmin Vararuci, is left to manage the household when her husband departs for a pilgrimage. In the absence of her husband, four influential men—a king, a courtier, a merchant, and a scholar—visit her, each attempting to seduce her with promises of wealth, protection, and pleasure. Rather than confronting them with hostility, Upakośā uses a refined blend of wit and symbolic rituals. She promises each man a different night, asking them to wait for her while bound to ritual posts, disguised as spiritual acts. Through this, she delays each without yielding, ultimately exposing their intentions to the public without ever being dishonored herself. When Vararuci returns, she recounts the events, and he

commends her intellect and chastity: “You have governed not only your senses but theirs too—this is the highest dharma.”

Her wisdom lies in leveraging societal rituals and expectations as a defense mechanism. She embodies virtue through loyalty, chastity, and emotional intelligence, using manipulation not as vice but as strategic protection. Cognitive Wisdom: High strategic planning, situation analysis, managing multiple stakeholders.

❖ Emotional Wisdom: Self-awareness, empathy, avoidance of confrontation.

❖ Motivational Wisdom: Devotion to guru (Vararuci), protection of self-respect, dharmic restraint.

“She made each man imprison himself in hope and delusion, while she remained untouched.”

b. Padmavati: Queenly Grace and Strategic Patience (Lambaka I, Taranga 4 – Udayana and Vasavadatta)

Padmavati is the politically married second queen of King Udayana, who still mourns the supposed death of his beloved first wife, Vasavadatta. Despite her marginalized position in the royal court, Padmāvatī carries herself with dignity and pragmatism. When Vasavadattā returns alive and her marriage is reinstated with King Udayana, Padmavati is offered the choice of stepping aside. Instead, she advocates for peaceful coexistence, stating, “Let this court be ruled by shared joy, not divided sorrow.” She plays an instrumental role in reconciling factions within the kingdom and serves as a calming presence between the two women. Her character is not reactive but thoughtful—her silence, patience, and willingness to prioritize the kingdom’s stability over personal emotion shows her internal strength.

Padmāvatī displays virtues of patience, political foresight, and emotional generosity, turning her vulnerability into power by refusing to engage in rivalry.

c. Madanamanchuka: The Loyal and Clever Lover (Lambaka IX, Tarangas 9–12 – Mrgankadattacarita)

Princess Madanamanchuka, daughter of a powerful king, is passionately in love with Prince Mṛgāṅkadatta. When a political conspiracy forces him into exile, she is confined to her chamber, her movements watched. Despite this, she secretly communicates with her beloved using coded verses, trusted servants, and cleverly disguised tokens. Her actions help Mrgankadatta avoid traps, reunite with allies, and reclaim his path to the throne. Her emotional resilience and political sharpness turn her into an unsung strategist behind his success. Upon their reunion, she says, “Kings are made by swords; but yours was made by a woman waiting.”

Her story highlights virtue through unwavering love and clever action, with no trace of vice. Her wisdom is practical, emotionally grounded, and loyal beyond the call of tradition.

Motivational Wisdom: Loyalty and personal sacrifice.

2. Feminine Wisdom as a Strategic Vice:

a. Madanamanchuka: The Lustful Stepmother (Lambaka IX, Tarangas 2–3 – Mrgankadattacarita)

The Queen, second wife of King Amaradatta and stepmother to Prince Mrgankadatta, becomes enamored by her stepson’s charm and valor. In a private encounter, she confesses her love and proposes a secret union. Mṛgāṅkadatta is shocked and refuses her, reminding her of her dharma as a mother. Humiliated, the Queen weaves a lie and accuses him of making advances. Her influence leads the court to consider executing him, until a loyal maid reveals the truth. The

Queen's cryptic warning to him "A crown waits for him who knows where to bend" reflects her blend of seduction and ambition. She is clever, persuasive, and politically shrewd, but lacks moral restraint.

Her story demonstrates vice wielded with intelligence —her cognitive wisdom corrupted by lust, vanity, and revenge.

b. The Deceitful Brahmin's Wife (Lambaka VII, Taranga 4 – Tale of Mandaraka)

In a sacred village, a respected Brahmin performs daily rituals while his wife leads a double life. Beautiful and composed, she seduces a younger man and together they plot to poison her husband. Every morning, she assists in sacred fire offerings, and every night she schemes murder. When her plan nears execution, a household servant accidentally overhears and exposes the wife and her lover. When confronted, the wife utters, "You seek purity in flames, but the heart burns with other desires."

Her story shows how cognitive brilliance in disguise and deception can mask deep vices —lust, treachery, and spiritual hypocrisy. Her emotional detachment and cold logic make her a terrifying example of wisdom without virtue.

c. The Resourceful Courtesan (Lambaka V, Taranga 3 – Śaktideva and the Princess of the Golden City)

Saktideva, on a quest to find the magical Golden City, is captured and wounded in a foreign land. A courtesan, known for her wit and charm, finds him barely alive. Moved by his dignity and silence, she tends to him in secret, bribing guards and risking her own safety. She helps him escape and provides shelter. Over time, she transforms, stating, "In saving him, I discovered something worth more than silver: purpose." Eventually, she renounces her former life and seeks a new beginning.

Her arc is one of transformation through virtue—from seduction to service, from aesthetic beauty to ethical strength. Her emotional wisdom and gratitude become tools for redemption.

Conclusion: The feminine characters in Kathāsaritsāgara are far from one-dimensional. They are thinkers, actors, and agents of change. Their wisdom is not always aligned with conventional virtue — and therein lies the richness of Somadeva's portrayal. Women like Upakośā and Madanamanchukā uphold dharma through loyalty and strategy, while figures such as the stepmother and the Brahmin's wife reveal the disruptive potential of feminine intelligence misaligned with ethics. This narrative diversity provides an enduring insight into the gendered complexity of power, choice, and moral vision in classical Indian storytelling.

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