



Honour, Punishment and Virtue as Evolutionary Strategies: An Evolutionary Psychological Rereading of Select Women characters in Indian Mythology

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A central accusation levelled against the Puranic and Ithihasic traditions by contemporary critics concerns their portrayal of women and the prevalence of punitive, moralizing narratives. Episodes such as Sita's trial by fire and subsequent banishment in the *Ramayana*, the humiliation of Shoorpanaka, the polyandrous marriage of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, or Ahalya's petrification and redemption have often been read as emblematic of patriarchal control, sexual regulation, and the disciplining of female behaviour. Consequently, Hindu narrative traditions are frequently grouped with Abrahamic models of moral governance and are dismissed as inherently misogynistic or socially regressive. However, such critiques tend to rely on modern liberal frameworks of freedom, desire, and gender autonomy, and often overlook the ecological, social, and reproductive conditions within which these stories emerged. An evolutionary-psychological approach offers an alternative interpretive lens – one that reads these narratives not as moral indictments of female sexuality but as culturally mediated reflections of mating strategies, reproductive conflict, paternity certainty, and cooperative social behaviour. From this perspective, the “tests,” restrictions, and negotiations represented in these stories function as narrative explorations of universal human dilemmas: how societies balance individual desire with group stability, how kinship structures regulate competition, and how male and female reproductive interests sometimes align and sometimes diverge. An evolutionary-psychological interpretation therefore reframes Puranic and epic narratives as repositories of adaptive strategies rather than patriarchal dogma. Such a reading not only enriches our understanding of *dharmic* ethics but also positions these texts as early cultural articulations of enduring evolutionary patterns – providing a blueprint for human behaviour that integrates social order, reproductive logic, and moral imagination.

INTRODUCTION

A recurrent charge levelled against Hindu mythology and philosophy – the *Purāṇas*, the *Itihasas*, and even the *Vedas* – concerns the allegedly subordinate position accorded to women, inferred from the narratives they contain. Episodes such as Sita's trial by fire and subsequent banishment in the *Ramayana*, the humiliation of Surpanakha, or Ahalya's petrification and eventual redemption are frequently cited as evidence of patriarchal control, sexual regulation, and the disciplining of female behaviour. In such readings, these texts are taken to reflect an ideology that is not only deeply paternalistic but, in fact, more stringently patriarchal than the Abrahamic traditions. Therefore, it is deemed socially regressive and morally indefensible and deserving repudiation. Within such interpretations, the agency exercised by these women is either minimised or dismissed as incidental – momentary assertions of will within an overarching framework of male dominance in which women ultimately function as possessions, symbols, or objects of humiliation.

Such readings, however, overlooks two crucial considerations. First, it neglects the historical and cultural milieu in which these narratives emerged – societies that employed myth and story not merely to reflect social arrangements, but to dramatize complex philosophical and ethical questions. Second, it ignores insights from a basic psychological understanding of male-female relationships and social behaviour. Evolutionary psychology, a branch of behavioural science that examines the relationship between psychology and behaviour through the lens of evolutionary adaptation, offers a productive framework for re-examining these narratives. From this perspective, the positioning of women within these texts and the logic governing their actions can be understood not simply as instruments of oppression, but as expressions of evolved social and mating strategies. Importantly, the principles these narratives articulate are not confined to the specific societies in which they were composed but continue to resonate in the modern world as reflecting enduring patterns in male–female interaction, mate selection, and relational dynamics.

The recurrent narrative motifs of female virtue, honour codes, sexual regulation, and punitive responses in Indian mythic literature can be fruitfully analysed through two methodologies – the Dharmic tradition as well as the Evolutionary Psychology. Through this lens, Sita's fire ordeal, Ahalya's restoration, or Draupadi's polyandry can be understood not as blanket prescriptions of female submission but as dramatizations of both ethical norms and evolved concerns. Many of these narratives, far from erasing women's agency, foreground it: Sita chooses exile with Rama; Draupadi asserts her autonomy repeatedly in political arenas; Ahalya's story encodes issues of desire, deception, and social reintegration. These stories articulate complex negotiations of power rather than simple endorsements of domination. The Indian epics and *Puranas* are ideal for an analysis of the pattern of mate choice, female power, and group psychology because, as dramatizations of human dynamics, culture, and psychological predispositions, they describe the archetypal scripts for gender and social behaviour.



RESEARCH QUESTION

This paper questions and determines the evolutionary pressures dramatized in the stories of female chastity, male guardianship, and chastisement of sexual transgressions. It seeks show how these texts encode universal Evolutionary Psychological tendencies that could offer models of conduct aligned with dharmic principles of balance, responsibility, and social cohesion. This paper analyses three episodes from the *Ramayana* through the framework of Evolutionary Psychology to show how these are not evidence of misogyny encoded in the Sanatan texts but articulations of evolved human responses and social mechanisms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The dharmic texts of Sanatana Dharma articulate ideal systems of conduct and moral order, communicating them through both Vedic injunctions and the narrative traditions of the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*. Mythological texts serve illustrate the core precepts of the Sanatana philosophy which is grounded in the belief in a universal natural and moral order. Central to this worldview is the Indic concept of *Rta*, which denotes the cosmic order that governs both the universe and human conduct through adherence to truth (*satya*) and righteousness (*dharma*). As Mahadevan observes, “the action that individuals and society take in their living are not supposed to disturb the *Rta*” (49). *Rta* functions as a moral compass, guiding human behaviour and establishing the ethical standards by which individuals and societies align themselves with the universal order (Prasad 31). Over time, the concepts of *dharma* and *karma* evolved from *Rta*, articulating the principle that actions that are in harmony with cosmic order yield constructive consequences, while those that violate it result in disorder and suffering. Among the laws embedded within this universal order is an understanding of evolved human nature, including male and female psychology, and the importance of social and familial continuity. The texts, therefore, do not merely impose rules; they illustrate modes of living that foster harmony with both cosmic order and human nature.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* may be read as prescriptive and descriptive moral frameworks: the former sets forth ideals of behaviour, while the latter explores the complexities of lived dharma. In both epics, norms for men and women are shaped by the principle of *svadharma*, or context-specific duty. The mutual fidelity of Rama and Sita, the neutralisation of the erotic threat posed by Surpanakha, the negotiated polyandrous marriage of Draupadi, and the possibility of redemption following sexual transgression in the story of Ahalya together articulate a moral universe that grants women agency and identity. While such moral regulations may appear restrictive when read through modern lenses, their relevance lies in the articulation of the biological and psychological foundations underlying human behaviour. In this sense, dharmic texts do not merely prescribe what ought to be done; they reveal the “how” of cultivating social harmony, emotional stability, and enduring relationships in accordance with evolved human psychology.



Evolutionary psychology, a term first used by American biologist, Michael Ghisenlin in 1973, may be defined as an interdisciplinary approach that studies “behaviour, thought and emotions in the light of evolutionary theory” (Reader and Workman, 1). It applies the principles of evolutionary biology – particularly natural selection – to decipher the human mind, cognition, and behaviour. Evolutionary psychologists argue that the behaviour and psychology of modern humans are shaped by psychological dispositions that once aided survival and reproduction in early human societies. Scientific research suggests that, biologically, human beings remain largely “primitive.” For instance, our preference for high-calorie foods can be traced to ancestral environments in which food was scarce, and survival depended on maximizing energy intake whenever possible. What once protected early humans from starvation now manifests as dietary cravings in a world of abundance. Our minds, too, reflect these ancient adaptations. Humans are instinctively more attentive to threatening or fear-inducing information than to pleasant news because, in early human history, heightened alertness to danger significantly increased chances of survival. Evolutionary psychology focuses on such psychological adaptations – mental traits and behavioural tendencies that offered selective advantages in ancestral environments.

While fields such as biological psychology, social psychology, and developmental psychology have described many human propensities, preferences, and cognitive patterns, they often stop short of explaining why these traits exist in the first place. Evolutionary psychology addresses this gap by situating human behaviour within the conditions under which the species evolved. Writing on the evolution and adaptation of species, Darwin mentions further research in human beings beyond the animal studies on which he primarily focused: “[I]n the distant future I see open fields for more important researches. Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation. Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history” (Darwin, 458). Thus, he indicates that the mind is as much a product of evolution as the anatomical features and the qualities and preferences of the mind and emotion is a process “arising out of the selection pressures of the ancient past” (Reader and Workman, 6). By examining the pressures of early human life, evolutionary psychologists seek to explain how particular internal states, behaviours, and psychological mechanisms emerged to support survival and reproductive success in humanity’s earliest eras.

Theoreticians of Evolutionary Psychology offer a meta-framework to emphasise how our minds are a product of psychological adaptations that increase fitness and survival. The earliest pioneer of the field was the evolutionist E.O. Wilson who published *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* in 1975 suggesting that human behaviour could best be understood as a product of evolutionary forces. The main point in modern evolutionary theory is that natural selection favours those individuals who pass on the largest proportion of their genes to future generations, which in the case of homo sapiens is through sexual selection (Reader and Workman, 33). The genetic variation in offspring that resulted from such a sexual union was most advantageous for survival, and this explained why males and females of a species differed so much from each

other in physical form. However, it did not explain why there was so much difference in mating behaviour between the sexes – the males being more aggressive and competitive than females.

In 1972, Robert Trivers' put forth his 'Parental Investment Theory' arguing that the fundamental driver of sex differences in mating behaviour lies in unequal biological investment in offspring. He defined 'Parental Investment' as "any investment by a parent in an offspring that increases the chances that offspring will survive at the expense of the parent's ability to invest in any other offspring" (Trivers, 139). Since females invest heavily at the outset – through larger gametes, gestation, childbirth, and lactation – they become selective in mate choice. Males, whose biological investment is comparatively low, compete for females who maximize their reproduction opportunities. In species such as humans where biparental care is observed, male parental investment ensures that males become choosy about partners for long-term relationships, and females become competitive for such male investment. This was termed the 'mating mind hypothesis' by American evolutionist Geoffrey Miller. These sexual asymmetries generate predictable patterns: sexual selection, mate competition, mate guarding, and conflict between the sexes.

David Buss's and David Schmitt's 'Sexual Strategies Theory' (1993, 1996) builds on Trivers' insights by arguing that humans have evolved a repertoire of mating strategies rather than a single, fixed pattern, based on the duration of mating (long- or short-term) and different reproductive costs for males and females. Though males are more oriented towards short-term mating opportunities because of lower parental investment and females prioritize long-term strategies in terms of good genes and physical protection, both sexes pursue both strategies under different conditions. From this emerges psychological responses such as mate guarding, jealousy, and reputation. Buss and Schmitt (2019) argue that sex differences in reproductive strategies and parental investment creates distinct patterns of jealousy: men are generally more devastated by sexual infidelity, while women are more affected by emotional infidelity. Within this framework, female reputation assumes particular importance, as female sexual exclusivity functions as a cue to paternity certainty, reducing the male's risk of cuckoldry.

Human non-paternity (cuckoldry) is a terrain of sexual conflict which generates coercive and aggressive behaviours and man, cross-culturally develop anti-cuckoldry measures (Reader and Workman, 46). Studies by Martin Daly and Margo Wilson (1988, 1994) reveal that men in all societies tend to control female behaviour as a mechanism to ensure norms around fidelity and sexual access. Daly and Wilson's work on homicide, jealousy, and spousal violence demonstrates that extreme behaviours often involve situations of sexual rivalry, mate desertion, or possible dishonour. These theories, however, only explain patterns without endorsing them: the psychological patterns and behaviours are evolved responses to reproductive pressures under certain social conditions, and they highlight how ancient mating systems can leave enduring psychological residues in modern societies.



CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Analysed through the prism of Dharmic traditions and Evolutionary Psychology, the narratives in Sanatana mythology articulate neither a misogynistic nor a narrowly patriarchal ideal, but serve as a guide to sustaining balance, stability, and ethical coherence in human life.

One of the most frequently cited episodes offered as evidence of the alleged misogyny inherent in the Sanatana tradition is Sita's trial by fire and subsequent banishment in the *Ramayana*. The *agnipariksha* is often interpreted as a public humiliation of a woman, while her exile – based on rumour – is read as a form of patriarchal chastisement and honour punishment. Such readings, however, overlook both the dharmic framework within which the episode unfolds and the evolutionary logic governing human mating systems. Rama is not a private individual acting on personal suspicion but a king bound by *rajadharma*, which requires that his queen be above reproach and that his rule reflect the moral will of his subjects. Dharmic injunctions further demand that royal lineage remain uncontested; when an heir is to be born, there can be no ambiguity regarding paternity. Evolutionary psychology consistently demonstrates that males face inherent uncertainty over genetic paternity and that mechanisms such as chastity testing, reputation management, and mate guarding function as adaptive responses across cultures and historical periods. Thus, the *agnipariksha* operates as a public signal of sexual fidelity and serves as a paternity-assurance mechanism rather than an act of degradation. Female sexual fidelity is highly valued in long-term mating contexts because violations directly threaten male parental investment. Sita's ordeal, therefore, signals her value and indispensability, not her disposability. Moreover, as Buss notes, damage to reputation constitutes a primary male concern in long-term mating, making public perception as significant as private belief (Buss, 198). Rama's actions address societal judgment rather than personal doubt. Daly and Wilson further observe that leaders in honour-based societies are expected to exhibit zero tolerance toward sexual transgression, even at great personal cost. Rama's conduct thus exemplifies the endurance of private loss in service of social and coalition stability. The washerman's remark in the epic reflects an underlying evolutionary reality: "those men who paid no attention to their female partner's behaviour with other men would be less likely to pass their genes on than those who paid closer attention" (Reader and Workman 45). As Buss similarly argues, marriage provides repeated—and often exclusive—sexual access; without such exclusivity, paternity certainty is compromised (Buss, 111). Read through the framework of Evolutionary Psychology, the episode reveals not misogynistic punishment but the operation of dharma in alignment with evolved human psychology.

Similarly, the story of Ahalya illustrates the evolutionary challenges faced by males in relation to sexuality and reproductive certainty – notably, the threat of cuckoldry. Indra's impersonation of Sage Gautama activates an evolutionary fear, as deception leading to cuckoldry entails the highest reproductive and parental-investment costs for males. Ahalya's petrification functions symbolically in this context as a mythical

analogue of sexual death. This reflects what Daly and Wilson identify as the ultimate penalty for sexual transgression: violence or social death.

Interestingly, one of the most significant aspects of the liaison between Indra and Ahalya is Ahalya's willingness to engage in a short-term sexual relationship with a non-partner, despite the fact that the evolutionary costs of casual sexual encounters are higher for women. According to Buss's Sexual Strategies Theory, men and women deploy different mating strategies depending on context, status of the partner, and perceived reproductive advantages. While women generally prioritise emotional commitment and long-term provisioning in mating decisions, research shows that in short-term mating contexts they may relax these preferences and favour men who display markers of high genetic quality or social dominance – such as being “daring, confident, strong ... and successful with attractive women,” traits that Indra embodies (Buss, 201). Ahalya's choice, thus, reflects an agentic sexual strategy shaped by evolutionary predispositions and individual desire. This illustrates how female sexuality in the Sanātana texts is represented not as inert, controlled, or coerced but as active and morally accountable. Significantly, the Sanātana texts do not absolve the male agent of responsibility: Indra is also punished, underscoring the necessity of regulating both male sexual opportunism and female sexual deception. The myth thus encodes the imperative of sexual vigilance as serving both a dharmic function and an evolutionary logic. It reinforces social order while mitigating the risks inherent in reproductive asymmetry.

A third episode from the *Ramayana* that has attracted stringent critique from modern feminist critics is the mutilation and harsh rejection of Surpaṇakha. Feminist readings argue that the episode represents an excessive and indefensible punishment of a woman who is merely exercising sexual agency in accordance with the cultural norms of her society. Thus, it is judged as evidence that ancient Indian systems denied women sexual autonomy and criminalised female desire. However, the episode may be analysed on two interrelated levels: first, Surpaṇakha's actions as an expression of evolved mate preferences, and second, the response she elicits within a reproductive and honour-based framework. Surpaṇakha's attraction to Rāma reflects well-documented evolutionary patterns in female mate choice. Research on forager societies indicates that women tend to prefer men who are tall, strong, physically formidable, and capable of protection (Marlowe 2003). Buss similarly observes that women, particularly in long-term mating contexts, favour men who signal health, bravery, physical symmetry, and the capacity for parental investment (Buss, 151). Rama embodies these traits, making Surpaṇakha's desire consistent with evolved psychological predispositions.

However, when Surpaṇakha openly propositions Rama she violates norms of female sexual selectivity that are central to long-term mating systems. Buss notes that ancestral men seeking the reproductive benefits of long-term alliance demanded reasonable assurances of fidelity, since paternity uncertainty carried severe reproductive costs. One adaptive solution to this problem was a preference for females who displayed sexual restraint: “On the assumption that a woman's proclivities toward chaste behaviour would be stable over time, her premarital chastity would signal her future fidelity. A man who did not select a chaste mate risked



becoming involved with a woman who would cuckold him” (Buss, 128). From this perspective, Surpanakha’s overt sexual assertiveness signals reproductive anxiety and lack of long-term stability. Further, sexual threats from rival females can provoke extreme mate-guarding responses, including violence. Female sexual competition operates through seduction, reputation management, and elimination of rivals. When Surpanaka threatens an established bonded pair and the reproductive alliance between Rama and Sita, it arouses mate-guarding response Rama calls to Lakshmana to protect his mate. The episode thus reflects not an intrinsic misogyny, but a symbolic articulation of reproductive threats and the extreme social mechanisms historically deployed to contain them. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, these episodes are not allegories of female oppression but mythic codifications of reproductive anxieties, mate-guarding strategies, and survival mechanisms operating in early human societies. The precepts that are communicated through these stories encodes the Dharmic ideals of righteous living in keeping with the psychological truths that are both universal and enduring.

CONCLUSION

The dominant argument advanced by many academicians, writers, critics, artists, and filmmakers who re/interpret women from the Hindu epics is that these figures are essentially docile and circumscribed – women who remain invisible, regulated, and function as helpmeets to their divine or heroic spouses. Within this structure, the “*Sati–Savitri*” model of womanhood is understood as one that “must embody three values that make her truly an ideal Indian woman in the eyes of society ... modesty, marriageability and silence. The combination of these values makes an Indian woman socially respected and desirable” (Singh 2367). Female mythic figures have been included in this reductive reading as women who have relinquished authority and agency to the male figure and live in strict adherence to prescribed norms. Consequently, the texts themselves are often read as chauvinistic narratives that deny women sexual autonomy, choice, and freedom. However, the uncritical valorisation of sexual permissiveness within certain strands of modern feminist thought proves inadequate on multiple counts: it neither accounts for the evolutionary psychology underlying long-term pair bonding, nor aligns with the deeply ingrained psychological mechanisms governing attachment, trust, and parental investment that have evolved over centuries. Moreover, such readings risk unsettling the relational and social equilibrium necessary for sustained human cooperation and continuity.

A secondary but significant point is that these texts impose an equivalent moral framework on male figures as well. Rama is celebrated as *maryada purushottam* precisely because of his unwavering fidelity, restraint within marriage, and his willingness to subordinate personal desire to *dharmic* duty. Similarly, Indra is not exonerated for his transgression with Ahalya; he is subjected to punishment alongside her for an equivalent duration, affirming that sexual misconduct incurs karmic consequence irrespective of gender or status. Significantly, the logic of *karma* in these narratives is not punitive or permanent: where the male figure



attains absolution through penance, the female figure is equally rehabilitated and restored to dignity and marital legitimacy – Gautama receives Ahalya with the love and respect he once had. Moral failure thus generates proportionate karmic consequence, and ethical restoration follows atonement for both sexes. Far from endorsing a double standard, the *dharmic* framework insists on moral reciprocity, shared accountability, and the possibility of renewal. These principles stand in contrast to modern readings that assume asymmetrical control and gendered injustice.

This paper argues that when evolutionary psychology is read alongside the *dharmic* framework of Sanatana traditions, episodes commonly interpreted as instances of female victimization reveal themselves instead as narrative articulations of sexual selection mechanisms, mate-guarding strategies, and social regulation within an honour-bound cosmology. Rather than measuring these texts against contemporary ideological standards of gender and sexuality, it is more productive to examine how they encode behavioural patterns and prescribe modes of conduct oriented toward balance, stability, and sustained social order that the Dharmic texts prescribe.

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