

## **An Analysis of Women Ascetics as Projected in the Mahabharata**

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Literature is the mirror of society. India is enriched with two great epics –the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The epic Mahabharata is mainly based on heroic wars with less room for women in home or religion. Yet some lady ascetics are portrayed to be not only enriched with perfect knowledge of Vedic education and religious thoughts but also as established participants in debates and discussions with their male counterparts.

It is the object of this paper to project these female seers with gender identity and equality based on the debates and discussions with male seers, putting focus on the socio-philosophical aspects. These lady-seers may be classified as ‘*Munivrata*’- the solitude hermit, ‘*Yoga-siddha*’- proficient in Yoga, ‘*Brahmacharini*’-life-long ascetics and ‘*Sannyasini*’- renouncers.

*Arundhati*, *Brahmajna-Gautami* and *Brahmani* in the *Kaushika-vyadha* legend are *Brahmavadini*. *Siddha Siva* and *Shandilyaduhita*- the daughter of sage-*Kunigarga* are *Brahmacharini*. *YogasiddhaSulabha* has a meticulous discussion on *yoga*, *samadhi*, *moksa* and philosophy of emancipation with the king *Janaka*, wining the debate. Truth seekers, sages, deities and ancestors have come to listen and learn the secrets of religion from *Arundhati* and *Siddha-Siva*. The discussions, debates and interactions made by these enlightened women seers have demonstrated that there are no fundamental differences in achieving the ultimate truth through renunciations due to gender. Furthermore, women can also reach heaven by the yoga of *pativratya* (imagnanimous-*Shandili*) without performing any rigorous emancipation.

In this paper, I have discussed the socio-religious issues for analyzing the subject matter through the epic Mahabharata, attempting to clarify these issues with the objective of evaluating, appreciating and exploring the identity of women seers who have participated in a variety of asceticism in the age of Mahabharata.

**Key words:** *Women ascetics, Mahabharata, Religion, Gender issues*