



## Threads of Creation: Interrogating the Dialectics of Religion, Female Sexuality, and Motherhood in *Mahabharata*

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### Abstract

*Mahabharata* incorporates themes of political struggle, court intrigues, social hierarchization, cultural clashes, Brahmanical myth-making, sexual tensions and so on. However, one distinctive characteristic of *Mahabharata* is that theological and metaphysical discourses constitute the strongest undercurrent that not only runs throughout the text but also heavily influences the myriad themes and narratological concerns of the text. Since no critique of motherhood in *Mahabharata* could be premised outside the theological and metaphysical framework of *dharma* and *adharma* i.e., righteousness and unrighteousness, it is therefore imperative to begin the discussion with a comprehensive account of the religious discourse that scaffolds the entire corpus of *Mahabharata*. Since the theological discourse of *dharma* and *adharma* extends strong influence on the treatment of female sexuality and motherhood within *Mahabharata*, this paper aims to present a dialectical analysis of religion, female sexuality and motherhood through a critical interpretation of the narrative and didactic sections of the *Mahabharata*. The paper also analyses the narratives surrounding parturition, fertility, and the maternal obligations, highlighting the conflicts and negotiations the women characters within the narratological schema of *Mahabharata* face in balancing their roles as mothers and their adherence to metaphysical norms. By employing a dialectical lens, this paper seeks to unravel the tensions, contradictions, subversion and negotiations that emerge when theological concerns, female sexuality, and motherhood intersect within the *Mahabharata* corpus. The paper therefore aims to contribute to the broader discourse on religion and gender by shedding light on the ways in which theological norms and metaphysical themes influenced and in turn were influenced by women's experiences of sexuality and motherhood.

### Keywords

motherhood, *Mahabharata*, sexuality, asceticism, female body

“A mother’s word, after all, is to be respected above that of the highest *guru*, for a mother supersedes all in authority.”

(*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, I.199.14)

## Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. This epic is a vast narrative that encompasses over 100,000 verses and its sprawling storyline revolves around the legendary eighteen-days Kurukshetra War, a conflict between two factions of the same clan, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, for control of the throne of Hastinapur. The presence of several hundreds of regional variations of the *Mahabharata* is perhaps the most striking testament to the epic’s adaptability and enduring relevance. Each regional retelling integrates local traditions, religious beliefs, and societal norms, making the *Mahabharata* not only a pan-Indian epic but also a deeply localized expression of cultural identity. Though theological, metaphysical and metaethical doctrines exert the strongest influence on the thematic concerns of *Mahabharata*, yet it could not be classified as a religious text, the way *Vedas* and *Dharmasutras* could be. The term ‘religion’ being used in this paper does not reflect the semitic theological connotations of ‘religion’.

The etymological origin of ‘religion’ could be traced back to Latin or Old French. The eleventh century C.E. Anglo-French word *religioun* meant “state of life bound by monastic vows” (Biardeau 12). However, when used in the context of *Mahabharata*, religion does not refer to any universal state of life bound by a set of obligatory laws or vows, for in *Mahabharata*, unlike the semitic doctrines, there is no universally prescribed state of life that ought to be followed by every member of the community. The Sanskrit terms used in *Mahabharata* which are most commonly mis-translated and mis-represented, perhaps owing to the lack of linguistic tools are *dharma* and *adharma*. In English translations, both the words are usually translated as religion and sin/immorality, and alternatively as righteousness and unrighteousness, respectively. However, in the *Mahabharata*, *dharma* refers to the way of life one ought to follow according to one’s *varna*, gender and social station. Conversely, *adharma* in *Mahabharata* refers to a digression from the path determined for one by their *varna*, gender and social station. Interestingly, there is neither a universal *dharma* nor a fixed path of *dharma* determined for each individual. Throughout the *Mahabharata* it is iterated that ‘the ways of *dharma* are subtle’, thus implying that there isn’t any fixed course of *dharma*, one has to navigate through its subtleties and determine for oneself the most accurate *dharma*, also known as *svadharma*, depending upon the situation. Hence, this paper attempts to analyse religion as an intricate path emerging out of the interlinking matrix of *varna*, *ashrama*, gender and occupation, rather than the semitic theological connotations of religion, vis-à-vis motherhood in *Mahabharata*.

The *Mahabharata* as a literary text is located at a transitioning period, to be precise, at the cusp of ancient Vedic religion and the newly emergent classical Hinduism. During the years spanning from 600 B.C.E. to 400 C.E., the *Aryavarta*, which was the heartland of Vedic religion, witnessed a barrage of socio-political, economic and religious upheavals. Chief among them was the emergence of *sramanic* movements as well as the ascension to throne of the shudra king, Mahapadmananda, the founder of Nanda dynasty. He was the first shudra ruler of the Indo-Aryan heartland of *Aryavarta*. The ascension of Mahapadmananda dealt a blow to the rigid class hierarchisation of Brahmanical society in which rulership was reserved for kshatriyas i.e., the protégé *varna* of brahmins. Similarly, the newly emergent heterodox religious movements posed metaphysical critique of the very foundation of Vedic religion. The Brahmanical orthodoxy which entailed elaborate ritualism, rigid hierarchisation and gory animal sacrifices was challenged by the newly emergent *sramana* movements that heavily influenced the heterodox tradition of Buddhism. The *sramanic* movements with their emphasis on ascetism and soteriological inclusiveness presented a theological and metaethical critique of Vedic religion. According to Arti Dhand, “The *Mahabharata* and the Puranas are a record of the intense anxiety experienced by orthodox Brahmanism, as a result of the foreign incursions, the changing socioeconomic environment, and the ideological challenges mounted by the various *sramanas*” (Dhand 23).

### **The Doctrinal Dyads of *Pravritti* and *Nivritti Dharma***

The religious doctrine of *Mahabharata* is explicated in the *mokshadharma* section of *Shantiparva*. The *mokshadharma* section forms the third and final part of the larger schema of narrative, which entails the education that is imparted by the moribund Kuru patriarch Bhishma to Yudhishtira after the Pandava army emerges victorious in the Kurukshetra war. Generally comprehended, the theological discourse of *mokshadharma* categorises the religious doctrine of *Mahabharata* into two strands, namely *pravritti dharma* and *nivritti dharma*. Bhishma, while explaining the subtleties of dharma to Yudhishtira says, “Listen to dharma, as stated by the believers, and also to what the non-believers say. Both sides may seem to be similar, but there are differences between them. There are two paths on which the Vedas are established” (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, IX.1561.233). *Mahabharata* employs the categories of *pravritti dharma* and *nivritti dharma* to harmoniously assimilate the diversified religious doctrines and practices of classical period in India. However, the categories of *pravritti dharma* and *nivritti dharma* are not pioneered by the composers of *Mahabharata*, there are evidences of the conceptualisation of the categories of *pravritti dharma* and *nivritti dharma* in pre-*Mahabharata* texts.

The nomenclature of *pravritti* and *nivritti dharma* espouses a two-tier value system that accommodates and assimilates the divergent strands of orthodox and heterodox religious doctrines. In principle the two categories of *dharma* should be

antithetical to one another, but the composers of *Mahabharata* had deftly assimilated the opposing ideological stance of orthodoxy and heterodoxy by modelling *pravritti* and *nivritti dharma* as complementary to each other. However, *Pravritti dharma* and *nivritti dharma* differ from one another on four major counts: a) they are meant for different sets of practitioners, b) they espouse different soteriological goals, c) each follow its own set of metaethical obligations, and d) they differ in their approach towards attaining their soteriological goals. *Pravritti dharma* can concisely be described as the religion of the householder. Arti Dhand states that “*Pravritti dharma* is an evolute of what the Gita occasionally disdains as ‘the religion of the Vedas’” (28), thereby suggesting that *pravritti dharma* represents the Brahmanical orthodoxy. *Pravritti dharma* refers to such religious activities that necessitate an active immersion in the worldly affairs. The practitioners of *pravritti dharma* were obligated to be engrossed in the highly specialised and complicated ritualism that harkens back to the hoary past of Vedic religion.

In *pravritti dharma* each and every stage of an individual’s life was extensively regimented, and each individual was expected to follow a formulaic path of life that was determined according to their age, *varna* and gender. The religious activities prescribed within *pravritti dharma* were performed by the practitioners with the aim of attaining worldly goals. Even when the religious activities were oriented towards the afterlife, the goal was to attain heaven and indulge oneself in the sense pleasures. According to the *mokshadharmas* section, *pravritti dharma* refers to that strand of religious values that is practised by the majority of humanity because it reflects the aims and aspirations of an ordinary human who cannot think beyond the realm of worldly affairs. Hence, *pravritti dharma* which is described in Bhagavad Gita as ‘the religion of the Vedas’ is characterised as representing such religious values and practices that are deeply rooted in the day-to-day activities of human life, pragmatic and suited for the aspirations of an ordinary individual. *Pravritti dharma* is, according to Arti Dhand, “the level at which the vast majority of humanity functions” (28).

The axis of *Mahabharata*’s theological discourse is the *dvija* householder man. The text explicates its doctrine of *pravritti dharma* by regulating and systematising the relationship of a *dvija* householder man with every other element in the universe. Hence, it can be inferred that in the theological discourse of *pravritti dharma* the *dvija* householder man is posited in the centre as the Subject while all other categories of individuals are relegated to constitute the marginal Other. *Pravritti dharma* explicates in extensive detail the responsibilities and obligations of each and every stage of a *dvija* householder man’s life, and thereby in a derivative manner also pronounces the duties and obligations of all other groups of individuals in relation to the *dvija* householder man. In Vedic religion, women and children were not accorded the status of separate individual, they were instead viewed as adjutant to the *dvija* householder man, they were not assigned any independent set of duties and

responsibilities but instead were expected to assist the *dvija* householder man in fulfilling his religious and social obligations.

*Pravritti dharma* extended the paternalistic leanings of Vedic religion into the literary and theological discourses of classical Hinduism. The androcentrism of *pravritti dharma* begs the question of how women's lives were organised within the framework of the ritualistic religion which centred itself on the lives of *dvija* householder man. As mentioned earlier, women were seen as adjutant to the *dvija* householder man, they were not expected to have a separate existence but rather their lives were inextricably intertwined with the lives of their husbands. *Pravritti dharma* emphasised the concept of repaying debts, which entailed that every *dvija* man was supposed to be born with a set of debts to the divine, preceptors, ancestors and society. However, women did not incur any debts but they were assigned the duty of assisting their husbands in repaying their debts. Hence, *pravritti dharma* developed the paradigm of *pativrata* woman, 'woman steadfastly avowed to her husband' to emphasise the absolute immersion of woman into her husband's life. The ideology of *pativrata* was modelled as the ideal set of behaviour ought to be followed by every woman and consequently the *pativrata* ideology evolved into being the highest goal to be aspired by every woman within the fold of *pravritti dharma*.

### **Procreation and Gendered Dharma**

In both *pravritti* and *nivritti dharma* sex and childbearing constitute a contentious issue. Sexual intercourse and procreation not only form the foundation of humanity but are also among the most primitive drives of human beings. Since *nivritti dharma* emphasises renouncing the worldly life, therefore sex and procreation find no place within the schema of *nivritti dharma*. However, *pravritti dharma* is firmly ensconced within social and communal life, and it is the platform on which majority of humanity operates. Therefore, *pravritti dharma* has to deal with the question of sex since sex is the incontrovertible basis of life and therefore is impossible to be negated. Since *pravritti dharma* has to compulsorily deal with the question of sex, it devises an innovative approach to reformulate the concept of sex. In *pravritti dharma*, sex is not perceived as a primitive drive but rather it is reconceptualised into a sacred duty that should be fulfilled by every *dvija* householder man in order to repay his debt to ancestors. While indulging in sexual intercourse the *dvija* householder man is expected not to be driven by desire and lust, but rather to consider it as a sacred duty undertaken for procreating new life. Sex in *pravritti dharma* is reconceptualised into a spatially and temporally circumscribed sanctified ritual that has the sole aim of procreating new life.

In *pravritti dharma* the axis of all ritualistic activities and theologising discourse is the *dvija* householder man. Conversely, in *nivritti dharma* the particular emphasis is on ascetism and renunciation. The doctrine of *nivritti dharma* does not centre itself on any one category of individuals. In fact, *nivritti dharma* repudiates

every categorisation and hierarchisation that are entrenched in *pravritti dharma*. Given the premises of the text could it be inferred that the path of *nivritti dharma* was open to everyone including shudra and women? The heterodoxic ideologies emphasised on renunciation, detachment and ascetism, which is reflected within the doctrine of *nivritti dharma*. Asceticism gained huge popularity even within the heartland of *Aryavarta* which presented a welcome change from the mechanised ritualism of Vedic religion. Hence, even *pravritti dharma* which reflected the principles of Vedic religion was compelled to accommodate asceticism within its theological framework. The *ashrama* paradigm which constituted a fundamental component of *pravritti dharma* was employed to accommodate the ascetic urge of the population. The *Brahmacharya*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sannyasa* stages of the *ashrama* paradigm *dvija* men were encouraged to immerse themselves in ascetic pursuits by detaching themselves from worldly affairs. However, in *pravritti dharma* only *dvija* men were endowed with the *adhikara* (authority) to practice ascetism in the above mentioned three stages of their lives.

Since *nivritti dharma* is based on asceticism, the question arises whether the path of *nivritti dharma* was reserved exclusively for *dvija* men because in *pravritti dharma* only *dvija* men were endowed with the authority to partake in ascetic activities. Counterintuitively, *nivritti dharma* is not as exclusionary as it appears to be so. In fact, there are numerous instances within the text to suggest that many women and shudras have chosen the path of asceticism without facing any serious challenge from the authorities. *Pravritti dharma*, on the other was open only for the *dvija* householder men, while shudras and *mlecchas* were strictly prohibited from it. While *dvija* men were born into the web of *pravritti dharma*, women belonging to the three upper varnas were not born into it but could sacramentally be inducted into the system of *pravritti dharma* through marriage and childbearing. According to Arti Dhand, “They (women) are not acknowledged in any independent way within the *ashrama* scheme” (73). Women however played an essential role in the *grihastha* stage of a man’s life. She assisted her husband in fulfilling his domestic duties, repay debts and perform sacrifices. A woman was even permitted to follow her husband into forest during the *vanaprastha* stage of his life, however the final decision in this regard rested with her husband. Likewise, the sixteen *samskaras* which marked the different stages of development of a human’s (*dvija* man) life were not meant for women, but she was inducted into the scheme of sixteen *samskaras* through the sacraments of marriage and childbearing.

Within the overarching framework of *nivritti dharma* there runs two discourses counteracting one another. The ultimate goal of the renunciators who steadfastly pursue asceticism is attaining *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of life and rebirth. However, male ascetics perceive the reality around them differently than their female counterparts. Male ascetics view the female body as a threat that can obstruct them on their path towards attaining *moksha*. Male ascetics perceive the female body as

an embodiment of sexual desire and the entrapments of worldly attachments, from which they are steadfastly determined to escape. Several passages of *Mahabharata* give voice to the 'danger' which male ascetics perceive from the female body such as, "They are demons who go about with wondrously beautiful forms. They are incomparably beautiful and very cruel, and always connive to destroy austerities" (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, III.113.1). Likewise, several passages assume an ominous tone cautioning male ascetics against the threats posed by women such as, "Women lead [men], ignorant or wise, again and again down the wrong path, in the control of lust and anger. The nature of women is such that it is harmful to men. Therefore, the wise do not delight in women" (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XIII.48.36–37). The discourse that is clearly intended for the audience comprising male ascetics establishes a negative relationship between and ascetic pursuit of *moksha*. This discourse suggests that not only women are fundamentally unsuited to follow the path of asceticism of *nivritti dharma*, but also pose a serious threat to the soteriological goals of male ascetics. Interestingly, the male ascetics are not blamed or even admonished for their sexual vulnerability, in fact it seems that the text rather indulged in their numerous amorous escapades. The text does not find fault with the sexual desires of the male ascetics, it rather places the onus on female body and female sexuality for enticing and diverting men from their ascetic pursuits. As Arti Dhand notes, "It is not simply that women are a disturbance; it is that women exercise enough sexual appeal to derange men and fill them with passion... The fear is of their power to attract men to them sexually" (76).

### Can the Female Body Walk the Path of Asceticism?

*Mahabharata* presents, perhaps as cautionary tales, several examples of accomplished rishis who succumb to sexual arousal on seeing the beautiful bodies of *Apsaras*. For example, Vyasa experienced sexual excitement (*kaamamohita*) on seeing the attractive figure of the *Apsara* Ghrtaci. Likewise, Bhardvaja was also sexually aroused by the *Apsara* Ghrtaci and consequently fathers Drona. Gautama also inadvertently fathered the twins, Kripa and Kripi on being sexually aroused by the *Apsara* Jalapadi. The venerable *rishi* Vibhandaka Kashyapa could not control his sexual desire on seeing the *Apsara* Urvashi and thus fathered Rishyashringa. In fact, many gods especially Indra felt threatened by the *tapas* accumulated by several accomplished male ascetics, and hence in order to divert such ascetics from their soteriological goals the gods used to send beautiful *Apsaras* with the sole intention of disrupting their *tapasya*.

The male ascetics faced threat not only from the divine beauty of the *Apsaras*, but there are instances when the illustrious ascetics succumbed to their sexual impulse at the sight of mortal women. For example, the revered Parashara became so smitten with Satyavati, who at that point of time was merely an ordinary fisherman's daughter, that he was ready to grant her any boon that she asked for in

order to consummate his desire for her. The text does not deem the male ascetic's occasional lapses into lust and desire as problematic, rather as mentioned earlier the text assumes an indulgent tone while describing the sexual escapades of male ascetics. Hence, the real threat posed by women is not sexual attraction, but rather the entrapment of men into the web of *samsara*. *Mahabharata* cautions men that their desire for women might be potent enough to drag them back into the quagmire of worldly life. Women are perceived as embodiments of not only sexual desire but also of the pleasures of domesticity and worldly attachments. Hence, the male ascetic's desire for women is not just limited to her body but also incorporates the yearnings of domestic life, which he has left behind in his ascetic pursuit. Desiring a woman can entrap a man into the webs of worldly life and attachment, and this according to the text is perceived to be the greatest threat posed by women. As Dhand notes, "One of the reasons to avoid sexual contact with woman, therefore, is to avoid a relapse into domesticity" (76).

*Nivritti dharma* requires of its practitioners the ability to restrain their raw emotions and impulses. Self-disciplining is one of the fundamental principles of Hindu religious doctrine especially within the ideology of asceticism. Self-disciplining entails single-minded immersion of oneself in rigid austerities, restraining of one's emotional impulses especially sexual drives and stern control of one's physical needs. Through intense self-disciplining an individual generates a subliminal energy or heat, which is known as *tapas*. The intensity of one's accumulated *tapas* could be increased through consistent involvement in rigid austerities and insistent self-disciplining. Though one does not practice self-discipline and austerities for accumulating *tapas*, it is considered as a sort of 'by-product' of self-disciplining, it however is an essential component that assists one in attaining the ultimate goal of *moksha*. The subliminal heat or *tapas* burns the accumulated *karma* of an individual that keeps one trapped within the bounds of worldly life, and thereby assists him/her in releasing from the cycle of life and rebirth. However, one's accumulated repertoire of *tapas* could be depleted if one wavers from the path of self-discipline. According to the *Mahabharata*, one of the chief reasons that results in the attenuation of one's accumulated *tapas* is yielding to the passions of lust. Sexual attachment with women could therefore lead to disastrous consequences for male ascetics as it would dissipate their store of *tapas* that burns their *karmic* bonds and thereby releases them from the captivity of *samsara*. This is chief the reason why gods orchestrate situations of sexual intrigue for ascetics. Fearing the accumulated *tapas* of formidable ascetics, they contrive the ascetics' sexual involvement with women so as to deplete the repertoire of their accumulated *tapas*. As soon as the ascetic yields to his sexual desire, he dissipates his store of *tapas* and thus no longer poses serious threat to the gods.

Beside the depletion of accumulated *tapas*, sexual attachment with women poses another hazard for the male ascetics. Sexual union with women more often



than not results in the birth of children. Children are perceived as nooses that bind one to the web of worldly life, and owing to the affection one has for one's children an individual loses the mental resoluteness that is required for practicing the renunciatory ideals of *nivritti dharma*. The text therefore advises men who are keen on escaping from the cycle of life and rebirth to "Cast off those vermin born of one's body, made as if of one's limbs and one's consciousness. Cast off those leeches whom one regards as one's children, born of oneself and one's mind...Sons, family, community life all lead one to the realm of rebirth" (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XII.290.67). In *Mahabharata* most of the instances of sexual encounter between male ascetics and *apsaras*/women resulted in the birth of children. For example, Bharadvaja fathering Drona and Sruvavati, Gautama fathering the twins Kripa and Kripa, Parashara fathering Vyasa on Satyavati, *Rishi* Dadhichi fathering Sarasvat, Vibhandaka Kashyapa fathering Rishyashringa, to cite a few instances of male ascetics fathering children. However, contrary to the anxiety expressed by the text that men would immerse themselves in the rhythm of domesticity once they father children, none of the male ascetics cited above returns to the web of worldly life after fathering children.

It is clear that in the male ascetics' discourse of *nivritti dharma* women are condemned as sexualised objects that bind men to the web of worldly attachment. However, unlike *pravritti dharma*, in *nivritti dharma* women are endowed with the *adhikara* to pursue asceticism. Hence, there were sure to be women who, leaving behind worldly attachments, followed the ascetic ideals of *nivritti dharma*. The question thus arises how does the female ascetics who are committed to the ideals of *nivritti dharma* deal with the misogynistic discourse of male ascetics? Do the female ascetics reverse the narrative, conform to the narrative or refute it outright? Also, in the discourse of male ascetics the female body is sexualised and seen as an embodiment of worldly attachment. It makes one wonder whether the 'condemned' female body refers to all women in general, which quite obviously would include the women ascetics who follow the path of *nivritti dharma*, or does the sexualised female body refer only to women, both mortal and divine, who are outside the fold of *nivritti dharma*. The female ascetics, understandably, cannot reverse the misogynistic discourse of their male counterpart because of the biological functions of human anatomy. While the male ascetics could insouciantly indulge in their sexual desires, female ascetics could not do so mostly because of the biological functions of their body and also because the text is not as lenient while dealing with women's lapses into sense pleasures as it is in the case of male ascetics' indulgence. As mentioned earlier, there were many accomplished and revered male ascetics who yielded to their sexual desire and fathered children, for whom in most cases they didn't assume any responsibility.

However, if the gender dynamics are reversed i.e., if female ascetics experience sexual arousal on seeing male bodies and yield to their impulse then

unlike their male counterparts, they would not just be at the risk of expending their *tapas* but would be compelled to relinquish their ascetic pursuit of moksha and be firmly ensconced in the web of worldly ties. While the text surely cautions the male ascetics about the disastrous consequence of fathering children and being re-immersed into the soothing rhythm of domesticity and worldly ties owing to the love and affection one feels for their children. But in practice, as could be concluded from the numerous examples cited, male ascetics who father children as a consequence of yielding to their sexual desire continued on their ascetic journey without returning to the entrapment of worldly life owing to love and affection for their children, as the text feared would be case. If female ascetics conceived as a consequence of their succumbing to sexual impulse, they could not leave behind their infants in the wilderness and continue unbothered with their asceticism. The maternal obligations that are drilled into the psyche of every female since her early years coupled with the societal pressure would not allow a woman to abandon their children the way male ascetics are allowed to do. Hence, the question of reversing gender roles in the misogynistic discourse of male ascetics becomes untenable as an option.

### **Female Ascetics, Desires and Motherhood**

The female ascetics countered the misogyny of male ascetics by constructing a new narrative that presents an alternate view of female sexuality and proposes a new dimension of man-woman relationship within the ambit of *nivritti dharma*. Within the text one finds several references to women who immersed themselves in the pursuit of soteriological goals. Though these references are neither as numerous nor as frequent as those of male ascetics, nevertheless the mere mention of the names of a few female ascetics suggest that the tradition of female asceticism was already well established in society, which makes the narrative of female ascetics seem plausible. The text presents us with references to women *brahmacharinis* who practised sexual abstinence, stern self-disciplining, restrained raw emotions and impulses, and were keenly engaged in the pursuit of the soteriological goals of *nivritti dharma*. They too, like their male counterparts, escaped the entrapments of domesticity by shunning the binding of family, children and worldly ties. But when the overarching spiritual framework of *nivritti dharma* under which the women *brahmacharinis* operated conceptualised the female body as an embodiment of domesticity, which is absolutely antithetical to the soteriological orientation of *nivritti dharma*, the female ascetics surely found themselves in a disadvantaged position and had to put in extra efforts than their male counterparts to even justify their pursuit of soteriological goals. Hence, constructing an alternative narrative that challenged and countered the misogynistic narrative of male ascetics became essential for female ascetics in order to justify and assert their identity as *brahmacharinis*.

There are two remarkable instances in *Mahabharata* that give a glimpse into the alternative narrative constructed by women *brahmacharinis* that counter the misogynistic perception of female body as a sexualised object and an embodiment of the entrapments of domesticity. The character of Sandili makes appearance in the *Udyogparva* of *Mahabharata*. She is described as a brahmana woman who leads a life of recluse in Mount Rishabha and engages herself in acts of rigid austerities. She is an accomplished ascetic and has been referred to as siddha, a term which is used in the text to describe renunciant ascetics as well as forest-dwellers. According to the narrative, a brahmana called Galava and the divine bird Garuda decide to spend the night on Mount Rishabha, there they meet Sandili, who greets them cordially and beseeches them to be her guest for the night. At night before sleeping, Garuda harbours a mischievous thought of abducting Sandili because of her extraordinary spiritual abilities. Upon waking up in morning he finds that his wings have shed. He realises that this is the outcome of the noxious thoughts he brooded over the night before and immediately rushes to Sandili to seek her forgiveness. She warns him, “O son! I have been slighted by you and I do not tolerate slights. Evil ones who slight me will be dislodged from the superior worlds” (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, IV.774.111). She grants her forgiveness but cautions him that the spiritual prowess that she had accumulated over a long period of arduousness and is not to be trifled with, even in one’s thought. She explains to Garuda that “Innocent of any blemishes and blameless in my ways, I have embraced strict conduct, and thus achieved the highest perfection” (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, V.111.14). Having said this, Sandili restores the wings of Garuda to an even grander resplendence. She sends the two of them with the cautionary parting words: “Never despise a woman, even if she is despicable” (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, V.111.16).

In this narrative we see a female ascetic who leads a reclusive life on a mountain encountering two male beings, one a brahmana mortal and the other the divine Garuda. However, there is no implication of sexual tension within the narrative, counterintuitively the female ascetic gains an upper hand over the two accomplished men. In fact, Sandili, unlike male ascetics, does not feel any sexual temptation in the presence of her opposite gender. She seemed to have attained mastery over her impulses and sexual urge, which even the most accomplished male ascetics fail to attain. Garuda undermines Sandili owing to his prejudice about her gender. He cannot comprehend the notion that a woman is *capable* of accomplishing ascetic prowess and hence he gets the impression that Sandili, owing to her gender, need not be taken seriously and could be trifled with easily. However, Sandili presents a substantive proof of her spiritual and ascetic prowess by annihilating the divine Garuda’s mighty wings, which certainly is no easy task. The narrative constructed by or in favour of female ascetics that counter the misogyny of male ascetics becomes apparent in the case of Sandili. Since she is at a disadvantaged position because of the prejudice against her gender, she has to put in extra efforts only to

prove and justify her ascetic prowess and pursuit of soteriological goals. She counters the misogyny of male ascetics by proving that gender is of no consequence in the pursuit of soteriological goals. Also, through her disinterestedness towards sexual temptations and urges she refutes the stereotyping of women as fundamentally sexualised objects, a notion that pervades throughout *Mahabharata*. Through Sandili's story the narrative illustrates that harbouring gender prejudices or succumbing to sexual impulses are hallmarks of spiritual obtuseness, and only those who have transcended such limitations irrespective of their gender are truly qualified to walk down the rigid path of *nivritti dharma*.

The next narrative illustrates the extraordinary of the *tapasvini* (one who engages herself in *tapasya*) Sulabha. She is described in the text as: "In the age of *dharma*, there was a *bhikshuni* named Sulabha, who wandered over the whole earth practicing *yogadharma*" (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XII.308.7). According to the story, Sulabha had heard a lot of praises being showered on the astuteness and acumen of Janaka, the king of Mithila. Hence, she decides to test the credibility of the praises that were being so generously heaped on Janaka by using entering through her subtle (*sukshma*) body into the mind of Janaka by the assistance of her yogic capabilities. "Doubting whether [Janaka] had been freed into *dharma*, Sulabha, endowed with yoga-power, entered his mind with her own" (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XII.308.16). The king however could detect the presence of Sulabha within his body, which he finds inappropriate and objectionable. There follows a grandiose debate on the propriety of Sulabha's act and the king condemns her in the following words: "The triple stick is not for one who is attached to desire; it is for one who is devoted to *moksha*. It is not protected by you. Fair one, you are not liberated" (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XII.308.56). The king's condemnation implied that he perceived Sulabha's intrusion into his body as an act motivated by sexual impulse and therefore objectionable. He deems her unwarranted intrusion into her body inappropriate not only because she is an ascetic who ought to be beyond the temptations of sense pleasure but also because they belong to different *varnas* which make their union societally unacceptable. Thus, he cautions her that, "You are a brahmana woman, belonging to the highest caste. I am a kshatriya. There can be no union for us. One should not cause an intermixture of classes" (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XII.308.59).

Sulabha counters the king's allegations against her through a discourse on the metaphysical reality of the universe. She retaliates against the king's snide remarks by responding how Janaka whose sagacity is praised worldwide could display such spiritual naivete and obtuseness in metaphysical truths. She launches into a barrage of incisive questions, demanding an answer from the sagacious Janaka. Her central question is that when the fundamental philosophical principle of *nivritti dharma* considers all beings in the universe to be essentially one, how can Janaka make distinction between her soul and his? Aren't their souls supposed to be

indistinguishable from one another? “If you see your body in your own body, and your soul in your own soul, why is it that you do not see your own body and your own soul in the bodies and souls of others?” (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XII.308.126). She concludes that since Janaka has not yet reached the level of spiritual sophistication that is required to be able to move beyond the distinction between separate entities, and shed the prejudices about gender, *varna* and sexual propriety, he therefore is not qualified to follow the arduous path of *nivritti dharma*.

She shatters the arrogance of Janaka by asking, “What mark of freedom is there in one who fails to cast an equal eye on the agreeable and the disagreeable, on the weak, and the strong?” (*Mahabharata*. Trans. Debroy, XII.308.130). Thus, Sulabha not only clears herself of the charges of impropriety and sexual transgression levelled against her by King Janaka but also refutes the misogynistic narrative of the male ascetics by explicating the subtle meaning of the principles of *nivritti dharma*. She states that the distinction one makes between genders, *varnas*, classes, sexual orientation and so on are indicative of limited comprehension about the nature of eternal reality. Such distinctions belong to the realm of worldly life, since hierarchisation and categorisation are the fundamental reality of worldly life. However, for one who has renounced the attachments of worldly life and dedicated themselves towards the pursuit of soteriological goals such worldly distinctions should hold no value. As Arti Dhand puts it, “A truly enlightened person knows that there is no essential basis for prejudice between male and female, for both are of the same stuff. Only one uninitiated in the higher truths would be confused by it” (90).

## Conclusion

It could be thus be inferred that the path of *nivritti dharma* is not an exclusionary one. In fact, it is the most inclusive of spiritual paths that ancient India had to offer. It erases the difference between gender, *varna* and class of those who tread on the path of *nivritti dharma*. In *pravritti dharma*, women have no choice but to marry in order to be inducted into the schema of *pravritti dharma*, but following the path of *nivritti dharma* had no such requirements, you can either marry or remain single. There have indeed been instances of female ascetics who had married yet continued their pursuit of soteriological goals without being immersed into the pleasurable rhythm of domesticity, such as Lopamudra who is lauded as being the most commendable *vanaprasthya* wife. It can therefore be said that *nivritti dharma* unlike *pravritti dharma* endowed the women with choice whether to lead a domestic existence or become a renunciant, in fact the women could choose to lead a renunciant life even after being married, their marital status was not seen as an obstacle in their path of asceticism. Thus, in *nivritti dharma* the women were endowed with the authority to choose the life they wanted to lead, the only requirement being the single-minded dedication to attain the eternal knowledge of Atman, so as to liberate from the bondage of worldly affairs.

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