



Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India

By Stephanie W. Jamison

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Jamison examines the conceptual position of women in the culture of early India, specifically the Vedic and early epic periods (c. 1500-200 BC). Jamison begins by focusing on a single, apparently marginal female role, the activities of the "Sacrificer's Wife" in solemn ritual, and isolating the set of conceptual functions filled by the wife in that context. She then turns to a brief but emblematic myth from the middle Vedic period, "Manu's cups", in which a woman barely escapes being sacrificed with the consent of her husband. This story, Jamison shows, raises questions about women's ritual role and about hospitality obligations that the rest of the book sets out to answer. The central portion of the book is then given over to an extended consideration of women's roles in solemn Vedic ritual. Drawing on the vast corpus of textual material on solemn ritual, Jamison is able to delineate a sharply focused picture of women and their functional roles in this realm where abstract rituals are enacted and encoded. She goes on to apply these concepts to the "messy sprawl in everyday life", primarily as depicted in epic narrative (especially the Mahabharata) and regulated in the legal literature. Particular attention is given to the role of women in the areas of hospitality, gift exchange and marriage. Jamison's analysis not only illuminates ancient Indian attitudes toward women and gender, but forces a radical reassessment of the institutions under review.

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- Sales Rank: #7827030 in Books
- Published on: 1996-01-04
- Original language: English
- Dimensions: 9.50" h x 1.13" w x 6.38" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 360 pages

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Review

"The scholarship is extremely fine. Jamison has investigated thoroughly all major literature on the subject....Her writing is very clear and lively. She shows the ways in which these rituals address very human problems and situations. Jamison's discussions represent a significant advance in the methods of ritual analysis, and will enable the Vedic material to be brought into larger discussions of women in India."--Joel P. Brereton, *University of Missouri*

About the Author

Stephanie W. Jamison, Research Associate and Visiting Lecturer, Linguistics Program, Harvard University.

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