

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 Sacrificers 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, Manus cups, in which a woman barely escapes being sacrificed with the consent of her husband. This story, Jamison shows, raises questions about womens 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 womens 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. Jamisons 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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