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## 2010-02-11: A wives' tale

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## A wives' tale



Religion professor Whitney Kelting's new book examines the effort among Jain women to reconcile their devotion to their husbands with their abhorrence of self-sacrifice and harm. Photo by Lauren McFalls.

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"Sati," a centuries-old funeral ritual among some Hindu ethnic groups in which a widow commits suicide by fire on her husband's funeral pyre, was once considered by some members of those communities to be the epitome of devoted wifedom, says Whitney Kelting, assistant professor of religion at Northeastern.

On the other hand, Jains, an ancient religious sect in India for whom peace and nonviolence are of paramount importance, and who share the same ethnic background as the satimas, reject the outlawed funeral practice but accept their culture's strict discourse on a wife's subservient role in her marriage.

Kelting's new book, "Heroic Wives: Rituals, Stories and the Virtues of Jain Wifedom," examines the effort among Jain women to reconcile their devotion to their husbands with their abhorrence of self-sacrifice and harm.

Her first book on the Jains broke new ground. "Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion," marked the first formal study of the religious significance of Jain music. The Rubin Museum in New York recently showcased Kelting's collection of three-dozen hymns as

part of an exhibit on Jain art.

For her latest work, Kelting traveled to Pune, Maharashtra, and examined eight Jain sati narratives that women use to shape their understanding of wifedom and inform their views on piety and virtue.

In one well-known narrative, a man abandons his soon-to-be wife on her wedding day to become a monk. She becomes a nun to reunite with her would-be-husband.

Though Jain women reject sati rituals because of their commitment to nonviolence, says Kelting, they showcase their loyalty to their husbands by acting in lockstep with their wants, needs and desires.

"They focus on self-cultivation," Kelting says. "They believe they can achieve anything by being more virtuous.

"This notion of joint-renunciation puts them back together again. For the most part, wives strive to balance the use of religious practices to benefit their husbands."

Kelting, who grew interested in Jainism while doing research for a college course on Eastern religions, was taken aback by the complexity and uncompromising nature of its philosophical doctrine. Jains' highly nuanced stance on harm, for instance, turns everyday tasks for members of the religious group into philosophical problems.

But instead of resigning themselves to failure, Jains recognize the impossibility of strict adherence to their religious principles and instead challenge themselves to come up with creative solutions around these ethical dilemmas.

Take the simple but necessary task of cooking: Lighting a flame could accrue bad karma because it might kill an insect, so children—who are perceived to be further away than their elders from the day of reckoning, when karma points are tallied—are tasked with making breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"How do you even get up in the morning," Kelting says, "if you believe that you can harm not only people, but

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animals and plants and earth bodies and water bodies?

Jains take things to the logical extreme. They're always in this mode of compromising.”

To read more about professor Kelting, please visit [http://www.philosophy.neu.edu/faculty/m\\_whitney\\_kelting/](http://www.philosophy.neu.edu/faculty/m_whitney_kelting/).

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