

## **Re-writing history: Oral history as a feminist methodology**

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### **Abstract**

Feminist historians (Kelly, 1984; Scott, 1998) have argued that documented History is inherently 'masculine' and marginalizes women's life experiences. In order to bridge this gap in History, feminist oral historians in the 1970s began collecting women's oral testimonies to highlight their subjective experiences (Patai and Gluck, 1990). Building on existing scholarship, this paper argues that oral history as a methodology is indispensable in a feminist re-writing of history. It analyzes oral histories conducted by Indian feminist historians with women survivors of India's Partition. The first section uses a gendered historical lens to argue that feminist oral history is crucial to writing a women's history. The second section outlines what constitutes as a feminist methodology to envision what women's history should look like. The final section examines the difficulties of working with oral testimonies. The objective of this study is two-fold: examining non-hierarchical ways of researching through feminist oral history and drawing attention to oral narratives in the global south.

### **Keywords**

oral history, women's history, feminist theory, feminist methodology, Partition, India, memory/testimony.

The recognition of Oral History as a feminist methodology emerged with the knowledge that women's lives have been obscured and excluded from traditional accounts of historical events. This idea was accompanied by the realization that oral history could be used as a tool to incorporate women in history, questioning the prevalent ideas of what is socially, politically and economically important in a society that functions to marginalize women's lives. The potential themes addressed by oral history: "the possibility of putting women's voices at the center of history and highlighting gender as a category of analysis; and the prospect that women interviewed will shape the research agenda by articulating what is of importance to them" (Sangster, 1994, 87) are all instrumental in challenging the dominant ethos of the discipline of History. Sangster (1994) argues that oral history is also a methodology "directly informed by interdisciplinary feminist debates...about research objectives, questions, and the use of the interview material" (87).

Following Sangster (1994), this paper argues the significance of oral history as a feminist methodology in documenting and surfacing the experiences of women. In the first section of the paper, I position myself alongside Joan Scott (1988) and Joan Kelly (1984) to highlight how women have been marginalized within the discipline of History; and that, in order to write a "her-story", historians need to consider 'gender' as a category of historical analysis. In the following section of the paper, I draw on Mary Maynard (1994) to outline the tenets of a "feminist" methodology and examine how feminist oral history fits within this framework. The final section of this paper closely examines some methodological and ethical issues inherent in working with oral history.

This essay was developed as part of my thesis research which analytically compares two distinct kinds of oral history projects of women survivors from India's 1947 Partition. My research contrasts oral histories conducted by grassroots Indian activists and feminists in northern India with the "1947 Partition Archive", an open-access digital repository of oral testimonies collected by volunteers and housed by Stanford University's Library. Concerned with the relations of power and research, my study examines how the use of grassroots, feminist methodologies can result in the creation of new forms of knowledge informed by women's experiences in comparison to the depoliticized digital accounts of the Partition gathered by the "Archive". Some questions that guided my study were: What forms of research have been used to understand women's experiences of the Partition? How did Partition

affect women's lives? In what ways oral testimonies given by women challenge official narratives about the Partition?

Emerging from these questions, this paper developed as a theoretical framework within which to situate my research. In terms of methodology, I draw on theories of gender by Joan Kelly and Joan Scott to analyze women's experiences of India's 1947 Partition. My corpus for this includes two texts: *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Bhasin and Menon, 1998) and *The Other Side of Silence* (Butalia, 2000). As anti-colonial Indian feminists and scholars, Bhasin and Menon (1998) and Butalia (2000) were among the first to record and document the experiences of women survivors of the Partition. In their respective books, they argue on Partition's historicity and reveal its entanglement with unequal relations of power based on gender, religion, class and caste, as well as illustrate its connections with present-day social and political structures and practices.

While my research also explores women's stories of the Partition, I am primarily interested in the methodologies and research practices adopted by these Partition scholars, especially in talking to survivors of genocide and trauma. My objective is to examine the ways in which they use feminist oral history to conduct research in non-hierarchical ways. These include forming friendships with their research participants, negotiating their own positionalities reflexively, creating a safe space for their research participants, and working through an ethic of collaboration and co-production. Hence, in this essay, I conduct a literature review on feminist oral history and illustrate the ways in which Butalia, Menon and Bhasin fit within its methodological frameworks. Further, I also highlight some continuing debates on the theoretical and methodological challenges of using oral history in research.

Much of western scholarship on oral history focuses on the Global North with little emphasis on the Global South. The second objective of my research is to bridge this gap by bringing attention to oral narratives in a non-western context, especially those of POC women. Gendered modes of power operate in distinct ways in India, across multiple avenues. As I also explore in this paper, the state, the family and respective religious communities co-opt ways in which to control women ranging from the division of labour within families to the policing of women's bodies at the hands of the kin and the state (Das, 2012). By listening to accounts of Partition survivors within this contextually specific and gendered framework, it becomes

possible to understand their unique experiences and circumstances as individuals and women.

### **Gender as a category of historical analysis**

Feminist historians in the 1980s have argued that men have authorized what constitutes as “history”, deeming matters of war, politics, governments and science as worthy of documenting, and excluding women from such epochal events in time. Even when women were recognized in history, it was only as notable exceptions or popular figures. The everyday lives of ordinary women were completely obscured from History (Rowbotham, 1973; Kelly, 1984; Bennett, 2006).

Prominent among these feminist historians, Joan Kelly (1984) argues that “in redressing this neglect, women’s history recognized from the start that what we call compensatory history is not enough” (2). Women’s history then has a dual goal: “to restore women to history and to restore our history to women” (Kelly, 1984, 1). According to Kelly (1984), when women are understood as equal counterparts to men within humanity, an observable shift occurs in the way history is organized. Elaborating further, she states that when a feminist theorization of history focuses on “women’s status” or the roles and positions women hold in society in comparison to men, what is revealed is “a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women” in established periods of “so-called progressive change” (2). Feminist historiography then serves to disrupt widely accepted evaluations of history. Kelly (1984) gives the example of how liberal historiography falsely claims that men and women shared the same level of progress during the renaissance when in truth, women faced numerous hurdles. She establishes that a feminist rendering of history “has disabused us of the notion that the history of women is the same as the history of men, and that significant turning points in history have the same impact for one sex as the other” (3).

In the late 1980s, Joan Scott (1988) highlighted the importance of understanding the ways in which women’s everyday experiences are vastly different from those of men. She argued that we need to theorize women as “historical subjects” in their own right in order to write a “her-story” (18). The creation of such a “her-story” involves a departure from the way traditional history was written to offer “a new narrative, different periodization and different causes” (Scott, 1988, 19) with the ultimate goal of unveiling how ordinary women lived their

lives, and discovering how their actions and behaviours were motivated by “the female or feminist consciousness” (19). The emphasis in this approach is exclusively on female agency and on the causal role women play in their own histories, with focus on “the qualities of women’s experiences that sharply distinguish it from men’s experience” (Scott, 1988, 20).

Further, Scott (1988) argues that the periodization of women’s history is relational, meaning, it relates the history of women to that of men. Hence, it is essential to consider how major structural changes in society effect women as distinct from men. A women’s history should, then, include an examination of women’s actions, ideas and self-expression as articulated and interpreted “within the terms of the female sphere” (Scott, 1988, 20). This includes their personal experiences, the familial and domestic structures they are a part of and networks of female friendship they derive support from. In the Indian context too, scholars of women’s history (Chakravarti and Roy, 1988; Basu, 1991) have insisted on viewing women as active agents with rich everyday lives. Likewise, according to Anderson et. al. (1987), oral history is an important methodology within feminist historiography that can be employed to achieve these feminist objectives by integrating “the previously overlooked lives, activities, and feelings of women into our understanding of the past and of the present” (104). They claim that when women voice their own experiences and perspectives, “hidden realities” (104) are unveiled that pose a challenge to the legitimacy of official accounts and established theories. Thus, they argue that by conducting oral histories with women about so-called “private” subjects of reproduction, child-rearing and sexuality, feminist oral historians will be able to explore how women experience these realities instead of learning what “experts” think about women.

The “her-story” approach has had an immense impact on historical scholarship. In recognizing the lives and roles women played in the past, it refutes the ideological message in conventional history that “women had no history, no significant place in the stories of the past” (Scott, 1988, 20). It also repudiates the historical dichotomies of ‘private’ and ‘public’<sup>1</sup> by asserting that personal subjective experiences are as significant as “public and political activities,” with the former

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<sup>1</sup> “Public/private” refers to the historical dichotomy that arises from the association of masculinity with the public (i.e. men belong ‘outside’ of the home in order to provide for their family) and of femininity with the private (i.e. women belong ‘inside’ the home as caretakers of the husband and the children) (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004).

influencing the latter (Scott, 1988, 20). Further, it demonstrates the significance of conceptualizing not just gender, but also (as I discuss below) sex in historical terms (Scott, 1988, 20). It establishes that while narratives about women are important, it is also important to note how gender difference plays into conceptualizing and organizing social life.

Joan Kelly (1984) was among the first scholars to argue for “sex” as a fundamental category in analyzing the social order, citing it as crucial as class and race when it comes to studying social and political life.<sup>2</sup> She insists that in order to find the reasons for the historic separation of the two sexes, we need to re-examine the economic, political and cultural “advances” made in certain periods from which women have been excluded. Reassessing History’s complex periodization reveals two things: “one that women do form a distinctive social group and second that the invisibility of this group in traditional history is not to be ascribed to female nature” (Kelly, 1984, 4). Arising from a feminist consciousness, these notions “effect another related change in the conceptual foundations of history by introducing sex as a category of social thought” (Kelly, 1984, 4). Joan Scott (1988), however, goes a step further in arguing for “gender” instead of “sex” as an important analytical tool if we want to investigate women. For her:

“the term gender suggests that relations between the sexes are a primary aspect of social organization; that the terms of male and female identities are in large part culturally determined (not produced by individuals or collectivities entirely on their own); and that differences between the sexes constitute and are constituted by hierarchical social structures” (Scott, 1988, 25).

Scott (1988) further argues that the study of gender cannot be detached from the study of politics. Thwarting the distinction between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ realms, she insists that “the private sphere is a public creation” (24) because all aspects of life, including public discourse, are inevitably shaped by political institutions and ideas. Thus, even the “non-actors” (Scott, 1988, 24), or those who are excluded from participating in what mainstream society identifies as “politics”,

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<sup>2</sup> Kelly’s (1984) articulates “sex” as the “universally distinguishing feature of all women” (6) and claims that women are a category in themselves. She irons over differences of caste, class, race and ethnicity to state that “we are a sex, and categorization by gender no longer implies a mothering role and subordination to men, except as social role and relation recognized as such, as socially constructed and socially imposed” (6).

are not only defined by the concurrent politics, but also act according to the rules established in political realms. Hence, even those missing from official historical records were a part of the making of public and political history. It is essential for historians to think about gender historically when examining the ways in which laws and policies are created and implemented as doing so implies a “social rather than a biological or characterological explanation for the different behaviours and the unequal conditions of men and women” (Scott, 1988, 24). According to Scott (1988), such an approach would “end...seeming dichotomies...state and family, public and private, work and sexuality” (26), and allow feminist historians to question the interconnections among the different realms of life and social organization – both private and public. This argument has been echoed in the works of a number of other feminist scholars who have also argued against this arbitrary distinction between the public and the private. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) challenges women’s compliance and submissiveness towards the heteronormative society by arguing that the 20th-century woman is more restricted than ever to the confines of the private sphere. Massey (1994), in her book *Space, Place and Gender*, presents a similar argument, outlining the symbolic meaning attached to spaces and places and the gendered messages that can be deciphered from these. She makes a distinction between the traditional private or “domestic” spaces where women are confined or “safe” versus public spaces that might endanger their safety (for instance, by walking alone at night) and threaten the ‘order’ of society. In their oral history work, Bhasin and Menon (1998) also bring into focus the public-private dichotomy embedded within Partition history.<sup>3</sup> They examine how, despite an undeniable presence in the public sphere, official Partition histories continue to refer to women as “non-actors” that were primarily relegated to the private sphere of household and child-care. Despite stepping out to work in

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<sup>3</sup> In 1947, as the British crown prepared to exit colonial India after nearly hundred years of rule, various social, political and historical factors resulted in the division of the Indian sub-continent into the independent nation states of India and Pakistan. According to Bhasin and Menon (1998), the main factor was the colonial state’s social, political and ideological manipulation and the mobilization of Muslims in response to the growing animosity and fear of increased Hindu hegemony in a post-independence India. Some scholars, however, point to the role of other determinants such as “class compulsions, the politics of power, and the pressure on the British to arrive at a negotiated settlement” (Bhasin and Menon, 1998, 6). Regardless, according to Gyanendra Pandey (1998), “the singularly violent character of the event stands out” (2). The end result was that by the year 1948, “more than fifteen million people had been uprooted, and between one and two million were dead” (Dalrymple, 2015), along with millions of people who were transformed into refugees (Pandey, 1998, 2).

large numbers, women were still written as victims and casualties in official records of the Partition. Therefore, listening to their accounts of their experiences, would enable a critique of political history and allow us to write it differently (Bhasin and Menon, 1998, 16).

Within feminist historiography, 'gender' and 'politics', unlike the mainstream articulation of these terms, were considered "antithetical neither to one another nor to recovery of the female subject" (Scott, 1988, 26). Feminists claim that by treating gender as a category of historical analysis, we can "challenge the accuracy of fixed binary distinctions between men and women in the past and present, and expose the very political nature of a history written in those terms" (26-27). Scott (1988) emphasizes the importance of rearticulating gender as a political issue and making it the departing point for historical analysis. She argues that by doing so women's history could potentially be used as a tool to rewrite history altogether by focusing on women's experiences and analyzing the ways in which "politics construct gender and gender constructs politics" (27). Additionally, such a re-articulation of history could also reveal how gender continues to influence and organize societies in significant ways (Carroll, 1976).

Scott (1988) further argues that a study of women's history should not only involve the addition of new subject matter, but "a critical re-examination of the premises and standards of existing scholarly work" (29). Further, such a methodology would allow for the creation of a new history by redefining and expanding traditional notions of history to include women's subjective experience and their political and public activities. Scott claims that the manner in which this new history would both include and account for women's experiences would in turn rely on the extent to which 'gender', defined "as a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes" (Scott, 1988, 28) by feminists, could be developed into an analytic category.

According to Scott (1988), the attempts made by historians in the late 1980s to theorize about gender remained within "traditional social scientific frameworks" (32). In these frameworks, knowledge about women was either generated only in relation to men, or in relation to systems of relationships that involved men and women such as families and children. No one questioned why these relationships are constructed, how they work and how they change. While feminist historians employed a variety of approaches to the analysis of gender, a concern with theorizing gender as an analytic category emerged only in the late twentieth century



(Scott, 1988, 32-33). Feminist scholars such as Rubin (1975) and Butler (1986) also made the distinction between sex and gender, arguing that while 'sex' was determined biologically, 'gender' was socially produced based on cultural practices and social expectations.

In her book *Gender and the Politics of History*, Scott (1988) rejects the historical binary opposition of 'male' and 'female' in order to conceptualize "gender" as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" and as "a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (42). She further outlines gender in a two-part definition. The first half of the definition theorizes gender as involving four interrelated elements: the cultural symbols associated with gender binary; the ways in which these symbols are interpreted based on existing normative concepts; how gender is constructed and legitimized through social and political institutions; and the subjective identity of gender. The second part of the definition highlights how gender serves as the primary field within which power is articulated. Here, Scott illustrates how gender and power determine the ways in which society is organized and the role of state institutions in maintaining gender hierarchies. The paragraphs below outline the four elements of the first part of her definition followed by a brief explanation of the second part.

According to the first element, gender is defined by "culturally available symbols that evoke multiple (and contradictory) representations" (Scott, 1988, 43). These include socially constructed myths of "light and dark", "innocence and corruption" (Scott, 1988, 43), which serve to reinforce the gender binary. For feminist historians working with gender as an analytic category, the question to explore then is – which ideological representations are invoked, how, and in what contexts?

The second element refers to "normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of the symbols, that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities" (Scott, 1988, 43). These normative concepts are legitimized by religious, educational, scientific, legal, and political doctrines and institutions, further strengthening the fixed binary opposition, and unmistakably asserting the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine. Of these, "the position that emerges as dominant however, is stated as the only possible one" (Scott, 1988, 43). Further, these normative positions are treated as a "product of social consensus rather than of conflict" (Scott, 1988, 43) and determine how history is written. Following this, the objective of feminist writing of history in this

period was to interrupt the belief that gender binary was fixed and permanent and instead aimed to explore “the debate or repression” (Scott, 1988, 43) behind such notions.

The third element outlines the importance of studying gender relationships in tandem with political and social institutions. Scott (1988) argues that “gender is...constructed through institutions of kinship, economy and polity” (44). In doing so, she echoes Millett’s (1971) claim that gender differences are culturally determined and are produced through the socialisation of individuals as men and women. Such a problematic articulation of gender-roles has been particularly evident in Partition oral histories where women’s narratives reveal their complex relationships with the state, family and religious communities. Referring to the Indian state’s Abducted Persons Bill<sup>4</sup>, Butalia (1993) argues that restoring women back to their kin served two purposes for the state – that of restoring its own legitimacy by safely recovering “what had been lost: prestige, women and perhaps property” (Butalia, 1993, WS-19); and acting as the figure of the patriarch for the families and communities that came to it for help in a time of crisis. What also becomes apparent from Butalia’s (1993) argument is that the state, family and religious communities operated under a normative consensus when it came to treating women as the figure upholding their collective ‘honour’ and how the threat of violence loomed over it.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, they presented women as being not only subjected to violence at the hands of the ‘Other’ but made evident that their own families and kin also killed them in the name of ‘martyrdom’ in order to defend their ‘honour’. Further, they were also subjected to violence by the state in its efforts to forcefully recover them and their ‘honour’.

In outlining the fourth element, Scott (1988) argues that gender is a “subjective identity”, implying that historians need to investigate the various ways in which “gender identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to

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<sup>4</sup> The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill was passed in the Indian Parliament on December 15, 1947 to recover abducted Hindu women in Pakistan and Muslim women in India. It was arbitrary in the sense that it defined abducted persons as ‘a male child under the age of 16 years or a female of whatever age’; and gave unlimited powers and absolute authority to the tribunal responsible for recovery with no legal mechanisms to question its decisions (Butalia, 1993, WS-4).

<sup>5</sup> Women were the prime targets of violence by the men of the ‘Other’ community because assaulting, raping and murdering women meant violating their ‘honour’, and by default, the ‘honor’ of the religious community they belonged to.

a range of activities, social organisations, and historically specific cultural representations” (Scott, 1988, 44). Similarly, as MacKinnon (1989) points out, gender is “constitutively constructed” i.e. notions of masculinity and femininity are determined by social and cultural factors. In the case of Partition, for instance, the oral testimonies collected by Bhasin and Menon (1998) reveal how women were viewed and situated within the Indian public sphere – as upholders of the sanctity, purity and honour of their respective religious communities, families and countries. Sexually violating women was seen as a direct attack on the sacredness of the institutions of the state, kin and community. The bursting forth of widespread sexual violence and mutilation against women in the face of communal conflict, therefore, was seen as a symbolic manifestation of familiar, everyday forms of violence that women were subjected to, pointing to the “precarious position of women in the patriarchal arrangement of society” (Chakraborty, 2014, 44).

Scott (1988) further theorizes gender in the second part of her definition, stating its function as the “primary way of signifying relationships of power” (44). She defines it as the primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated. Here, referring to French sociologist Bourdieu, she talks about his reference to “biological differences” notably in the “division of the labour of procreation and reproduction” (Scott, 1988, 45) as “the best founded of collective illusions” (45). Thus, according to her, “the extent to which these references establish differential distributions of power, gender becomes implicated in the conception and construction of power itself” (45). She, therefore, concludes that gender and power are linked, and gender plays a crucial role in the organization of equality and inequality. MacKinnon (1989) has also argued that genders, by definition, are hierarchical and underlined by sexualised power relations. According to her, males and females are socialised differently due to these underlying power inequalities leading to further power differences between men and women. This is made explicitly visible in the oral histories of Partition survivors where the inhumane treatment of women reveals how power was held by men in all forms; and by attaching notions of ‘chastity’, ‘purity’ and honour to women’s bodies, the family, community and the state-operated in a patriarchal nexus to police, regulate and restrict the agency of women, both in their private and public lives. As also evidenced by Bhasin and Menon (1998), when historians explore the ways in which the concept of gender legitimizes and constructs social relationships, they develop an insight into the particular and contextually specific ways in which “politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics” (Scott, 1988, 46). By challenging

the dominant ideologies shaping women's worlds, feminist oral history allows us to listen to women's words and understand how they comprehend, negotiate and sometimes challenge these dominant ideals (Sangster, 1994).

Scott's definition of gender also notes the ways in which "changes in gender relationships can be set off by views of the needs of the state" (Scott, 1988, 46). She gives the example of authoritarian regimes and their control of women arguing that "emergent rulers have legitimized domination, strength, central authority, and ruling power as masculine (enemies, outsiders, subversives, weakness as feminine) and made that code literal in laws that put women in their place" (47). The central motivation behind this kind of oppression can only be understood by looking at the state machinery's role in constructing and consolidating its power by forming policies that are grounded in sexual difference and domination of women in a clear assertion of the state's control on female bodies. Butalia, in her article, "Community, state and gender: on women's agency during partition" (1993) criticized the Indian and Pakistani state's involvement in the recovery process of abducted women on both sides of the border. She theorizes that during Partition, in their failure to protect women, men experienced an "emasculatation of their own agency" (Butalia, 1993, WS-19) which compelled them to hand this task of defending 'their women' to "the state, the new patriarch, the new super, the new national, family" (Butalia, 1993, WS-19). Since women were viewed as representatives of national dignity, their abduction and conversion were a direct challenge to the country's honour and was the impetus for the state to "recover 'their' women, if not land"<sup>6</sup> (Bhasin & Menon, 1998, 116). Thus, India was seen as the "parent-protector, safeguarding not only her women but, by extension, the inviolate family, the sanctity of the community, and ultimately, the integrity of the whole nation" (Butalia, 1993, WS-8). It is under this pretext of guarding its country's women that the Indian state passed 'The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill' that effectively stripped women of all control over their own bodies and reproductive agency. In their investigation, Bhasin and Menon (1998) reveal how during the recovery process, child-bearing women, regardless of their disagreement, were given a full state-mandated medical check-up – a euphemism for illegal abortions – before being handed over to their 'original' family or kin. Further, women whose children were born in Pakistan after Partition were ordered to leave them behind on the pretext

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<sup>6</sup> This refers to the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir parts of which lie in both the countries.

that Hindu women bearing Muslim children and Muslim women bearing Hindu children would never be accepted in their respective families and communities.

In further defining gender, Scott (1988) states that “massive political upheavals that throw old orders into chaos and bring new ones into being may revise the terms (and so the organization) of gender in the search for new forms of legitimation” (49). Such a disruption could constitute changing patterns of employment, for instance, and creating new arenas of participation for women, especially in the public sphere. At the same time however, straying away from traditional gender roles is only encouraged to the extent that it benefits male interests. Further, it may also give way to additional state policing in the form of policies that seek to “safeguard” and highlight the significance of women’s reproductive capacity and notions of motherhood. For instance, oral histories from West Bengal reveal that India’s Partition on the eastern border (leading to the formation of East Pakistan) had a different outcome altogether. The Communist Party of India took over the city of Calcutta in West Bengal, transforming it from a metropolis for cultured upper-class men to an arena of leftist advocacy (Guha-Choudhury, 2009). Here, middle-class women, in protesting the Partition, were compelled to “come out of the private domain of domesticity and child-rearing to take up significant public duties” (Guha-Choudhury, 2009, 66). In this case, the Partition was central to the liberation of Bengali women who, in becoming the providers of their families, came to be seen as “a symbol of female emancipation” (66). There was a rise “in employment of (migrant) women in mills and factories and in administrative and miscellaneous services” (66); and eventually, as women’s contact with the outside world gradually increased, “the houses in Calcutta became susceptible to the mobilisation of women into the political, economic, social and communal spheres” (67). Women increasingly took up more active roles in the economic, political and social arenas; and organised and participated in rallies and protests, demanding “the right to rehabilitation, compensation, employment and franchise” (68). However, this ‘emancipation’ was limited in the sense that it only benefited the upper-class ‘bhadralok’<sup>7</sup> women. Additionally, even though women gained employment and participated in activism, it was either to fulfill positions abandoned by men or to provide support to the larger political efforts fronted by the men in their communities.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Bhadralok’ (English translation: gentleman; well-mannered person) refers to an elite social class of upper-caste educated Bengalis that arose in Bengal during British rule in India.

What becomes clear from the above analysis, as aptly phrased by Joan Scott (1988), is that “political history has, in a sense, been enacted on the field of gender. It is a field that seems fixed yet whose meaning is contested and in flux” (49). Gender, therefore, not only refers to, but also produces, the male/female binary; and it continues to remain one of the persistent orientations through which “political power has been conceived, legitimated, and criticized” (Scott, 1988, 48). In this manner, therefore, the binary opposition and the social process of gender relationships both come to define the meaning of “power” itself; and “to question or alter any aspect threatens the entire system” (Scott, 1988, 49).

### **A “Feminist” Methodology**

While there is a general consensus amongst feminists on the existence of a distinctive feminist mode of enquiry, no such agreement exists when it comes to what this might mean or involve (Maynard, 1994). The notion that “feminism has a method of conducting social research which is specific to it” (Maynard, 1994, 11) was introduced in the early stages of second-wave feminist scholarship and is still widely held by scholars such as Reinharz (1983) and Graham (1983). The central arguments that emerged from the debates about feminist methodology critiqued what were perceived to be “the dominant modes of doing research which were regarded as inhibiting a sociological understanding of women’s experiences” (Maynard, 1994, 11) and instead championed a qualitative approach to understanding women’s experiences over quantitative methods of enquiry (Oakley, 1997; Mies, 1983; Reinharz, 1979; Graham, 1983). This was based on the assumption that quantitative methods were ‘masculine’ forms of knowledge preoccupied with “a value-free” form of collecting data. These methods were primarily concerned with measuring “‘objective’ social facts” by a researcher who was expected to be impartial and detached. In contrast, qualitative methods focused more on the “subjective experiences and meanings of those being researched” (Maynard, 1994, 11), making them appropriate for feminists in terms of the knowledge they wanted to produce (Oakley, 1997; 1998). Drawing on critiques by phenomenological sociologists, feminists have argued that research methods such as questionnaires and surveys produce “atomistic ‘facts and figures” (Maynard, 1994, 11), abstracting a tiny part of people’s experiences for analysis, and consequently, distorting the reality of their respective lives (Pugh, 1990). Scholars such as Graham and Rawlings (1980), Mies (1983) and Oakley (1997, 1998) have

also argued that methods that use pre-coded categories are based on the assumption that the researcher possesses prior knowledge about the object/subject of study. Such methods, therefore, can only assess the extent, distribution or intensity of that which is already being investigated. They are “neither exploratory nor investigatory” (Maynard, 1994, 11) and are insufficient when it comes to examining the complexity of women and their lives.

As feminist ‘methodology’ continued to develop, it became clear that women’s historical experiences were largely invisible. Scholars such as Stanley and Wise (1983) and Graham (1983) emphasized the importance of listening to, documenting and understanding women’s own accounts of their experiences. Further, as Maynard (1994) points out, it was assumed that “only qualitative methods...could really count in feminist terms and generate useful knowledge” (13) and they developed into a benchmark of sorts against which all feminist research came to be measured and judged (Kelly et al, 1992). This tendency to equate feminist research with the qualitative approach, according to Maynard, has persisted largely due to the prevalent belief of associating the doctrine of positivism with quantitative and empirical methods. However, citing Catherine Marsh (1979), Maynard (1994) argues that when it comes to crude data collection, methods such as surveys are not the problem, rather poor research or “naïve quantification” (13) is. Such an approach fails to take into account the fact that participants within social research are “conscious, language-speaking and meaning-creating” (Maynard, 1994, 13) and instead reduces them to numbers and figures. However, by rejecting quantification altogether, researchers were likely to overlook significant numerical data that would help enhance an understanding of women’s larger experiences such as those associated with income and paid work (Westmarland, 2001).

An alternative way to do research then, as feminist scholars (Kelly et al, 1991; Westmarland, 2000) including Maynard (1994) have argued is the use of multiple methods or a mixed-method approach to research. Bhasin and Menon (1998) and Butalia (2000), follow a similar approach in their oral history projects. They use a multi-method feminist framework to research India’s 1947 Partition from the standpoint of women. In picking women as the subjects of their study, they highlight the gross forms of institutional and communal violence that women were subjected to in the aftermath of independence. They use a “combination of commentary and analysis, narrative and testimony...to counterpoint documented history with personal testimony; to present different versions constructed from a

variety of source material” (Bhasin and Menon, 1998, 17). They refer to a multitude of data in their analysis ranging from detailed personal interviews with women survivors to an examination of government reports and records, as well as newspapers, legal documents and parliamentary debates. Additionally, they study other diverse material such as memoirs, autobiographies, letters, diaries and audio-tapes in order to allow a number of women’s voices to emerge - voices that at times challenge pre-existing narratives about the Partition, and at times approve of official histories. Such a reading of women’s stories allowed them a degree of control on their own narratives and compelled the reader to interpret the text through their gendered lenses.

In the book *Researching Women’s Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, Mary Maynard identifies some key elements of research that can be defined as “feminist”. These are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Maynard cites Liz Kelly (1988) who argues that what distinguishes feminist research from other forms of research is “the questions we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purpose of our work” (Kelly, 1988, cited in Maynard, 1994, 15). She, much like Duelli Klein (1983) and Oakley (1997), further argues that a “theoretical perspective, acknowledging the pervasive influence of gender divisions on social life” (Maynard, 1994, 15) is central to the study of women. However, she also points out that researchers might employ this idea differently depending on the focus of their given research – and each of these approaches will ask different questions and produce different kinds of knowledge. Further, it is important to note that a focus on women in research could mean a number of things – it could involve being concerned with women alone or understanding women’s perspective of their experiences in a predominantly male world, or studying gender in relation to other forms of oppression such as race and class (Ramazanoglu, 1992).

A second characteristic of the feminist research process includes the ways in which scholars modify existing techniques to fit the gender-conscious agenda and politics of women’s rights. For instance, those using qualitative methods such as interviewing, are “exhorted by [conventional] textbook guidelines to be emotionally detached, calculating and in control of collection of data” (Maynard, 1994, 15) where the research ‘subjects’ were seen as passive sources of information. However, feminist scholars using qualitative interviewing methods have rejected the hierarchical power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee and



have instead argued for the importance of a non-exploitative relationship between the two, marked by a genuine connection between them (Yow, 1995, 1997). While Maynard suggests that one way to work around this could involve the researcher critically examining, reflecting and exploring their research process to “demonstrate the assumptions about gender relations which are built into a specific project” (Maynard, 1994, 16), she did not account for power imbalances of class, caste, race and ethnicity that are inherent in the interview encounter.

According to Maynard, a final distinction that feminist research practice involves is “its insistence on its political nature and potential to bring about change in women’s lives” (Maynard, 1994, 16) and that it should be designed with the aim of “producing knowledge which would transform patriarchy” (16-17). Maynard suggests that this can be done in two ways - by making the knowledge produced from one’s research accessible to the participants; and by democratising the research process i.e. allowing the participants to reflect on their experiences in a safe space. However, this again gives way to a slippery slope where a research project might not necessarily have positive outcomes for the participants; and is based on the presumption that research would necessarily benefit them. For instance, it might result in raised consciousness among research participants but fail to offer them the tools and channels needed to take action (Maynard, 1994, 17). It may also lead to re-traumatization among research participants especially if they are encouraged to recount painful memories. While Maynard points out these issues, she does not suggest what feminist oral historians can do to minimize harm to their participants. However, it is imperative that researchers take adequate precautionary measures and ensure, for instance, that appropriate resources are available for the participants.

In terms of epistemology, the feminist approach is guided by the questions – “who knows what, about whom, and how is this knowledge legitimized?” (Maynard, 1994, 18). According to Maynard (1994), historically, men have had the power to produce their own worldview as forms of knowledge and “truth”, also referred to as the “male epistemological stance” by MacKinnon (23-4). MacKinnon (1982) further argues that while “objectivity and science represent supposedly neutral positions, they are, in fact, gendered and partial” (Mackinnon, 1982 cited in Maynard, 1994, 23-4). Feminist research then not only challenges this bias but also critiques the so-called “generality, disinterestedness and universality of male accounts” (Maynard, 1994, 18) viewed as superior to the subjectivity associated

with women's accounts. It is this concern regarding the invisibility of women in the writing of mainstream histories that compelled oral historians and activists in the 1970s to "place women in the historical record, to listen to women's own voices and to use oral history as a tool for feminist research" (Abrams, 2010, 156). By the late 1980s, feminist oral history as a methodology forged a link between women's past experiences and present lives, allowing researchers to make sense of women's lives based on a "knowledge and understanding of the oppressions of the past" (Abrams, 2010, 157). According to Abrams (2010), a key principle guiding this exercise was that women share common experiences by the virtue of being women. To this end, oral history emerged as a methodology that informs the development of shared experiences or a "female/feminist consciousness" (157) that unites women. However, it is important to note here that Abrams doesn't account for the ways in which these shared experiences vary based on the intersections of race, caste, class and socio-economic status. As Ien Ang (2003) argues, the initial assumptions made by early feminist researchers about all women being part of a "universal sisterhood" have been criticized by non-western, differently-abled, working-class and queer feminists for being elitist and ethnocentric. Building on the intersectional models of oppression developed by black feminists, postcolonial feminists too argue that oppression and power operate across the layers of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, class and caste (Parameswaran, 2008, 410). Fobear has also pointed out that the normative assumption of women as universally being "western, white, heterosexual, middle-class, and cis-gendered" (Fobear, 2016, 63) is false and marginalizes women who do not fit into this mould. By the late 1980s, it could no longer be assumed that all women experienced marginalization homogeneously based on their 'gender' alone, rather it was argued to be "be relational and intersectional in regard to an individual's experience in their daily lives as well as their position in the research process" (Fobear, 2016, 63).

Based on her analysis, Maynard (1994) concludes that though there is no one specific model of feminist research, there are clear recurrent themes within this research process, such as the emphasis on women's experiences, ethical concerns regarding participants and the role of the researcher in a study; and the ways these themes are treated, combined and informed by "feminist theorizing about gender and feminist politics" (21). Scholars argue that as a methodology, feminist oral history is congruent with these objectives. By looking at social life through women's vantage point, the practice of oral history, according to Judith Wittner shows us "that we must change our theories of society to incorporate the activities and

perspectives of women” (Anderson et. al., 1987, 119). She, moreover, argues that in placing individual women and their experiences in specific social and historical contexts, oral history demonstrates “how women' s actions and consciousness contribute to the structuring of social institutions” (idem.). Further, taking the time to build a relationship with women allows us to learn about their invisible and neglected experiences and understand how dominant ideologies shape women’s worldviews in their own words (Sangster, 1994).

### **Debates within Oral History**

While oral history is certainly an important tool in feminist historiography, it is also ridden with myriad complexities. Referring to Judith Stacey (1988), Sangster (1994) argues that “feminist research is inevitably enmeshed in unequal, intrusive and potentially exploitative relationships, simply by virtue of our position as researchers and that of other women, with less control over the finished product, as ‘subjects’ of study” (93). Referring to the interview process, Sangster states that while a level of objectivity is possible, an equalization of the interview process is unrealistic because oral history involves researchers essentially availing their identities as women and professionals to “connect” with their subjects and obtain information to publish books and advance their own careers (93). Further, as interviewers in control of the research process, oral historians evaluate the material collected based on their own interpretation, which may or may not be in congruence with the consciousness of the interviewees, but regardless, would take precedence in the published results. Calling this authority over the data a “privilege”, Sangster argues that “it is our responsibility as historians to convey their insights using our own” (93), while acknowledging the fact that it is, at this point in time, impossible to create a feminist methodology that is ideal and free of power imbalances (93).

In terms of theoretical concerns, Sangster (1994) delineates how the language we use shapes our writing and the meanings we attach to it. She argues that “attention to language and the way in which gender is itself shaped through the discourses available to us can offer insight as we analyse the underlying form and structure of our interviews” (95). A closer reading of interviews for instance may reveal a number of hidden themes and relations of power based on gender, class, culture and race. This reveals the complexity of conducting research with subjective experiences and writing about women across the divides of time, race, class, age and gender (96). It gives way to significant questions that reveal the implicit weaknesses

embedded within the practice of oral history: who can write and about whom? Is it possible to surpass boundaries of ethnicity, race, gender and class in research? How do we define these boundaries? Also, what should we consider when writing about women – aren't their inner lives a part of their 'subjective experiences'? Wouldn't it allow for more nuanced and enriched writing of history?

Didur (2000), in her essay "At a Loss for Words: Reading the Silence in South Asian Women's Partition Narratives" has explored the difficulties encountered by Butalia (2000) and Bhasin and Menon (1998) in gathering verbal testaments from their participants during their respective oral history projects. They were often confronted with silence when inquiring about women and violence during Partition. Referring to Butalia's experience with remembrance rituals in gurdwaras, Didur (2000) says that stories about women treat them as "either anonymous victims or celebrated martyrs" (57), glossing over the actual reality of their circumstances. She further recounts Butalia's meetings with women who, upon recalling painful memories from the past, would be rendered speechless in the face of overwhelming trauma which often left their conversations incomplete. In addition to this, some silences were rather ambiguous in nature – Gyanendra Pandey (1997), in his interviews with survivors of violence for instance, notes how "women especially were vague about the details of the event" (57). In the case of a particular Sikh family, he observed that the mother kept directing questions aimed at her, to her elder son and brother. She repeatedly asserted her lack of knowledge about politics and asked him (Gyanendra) to talk to her son. This incident indicates how testaments given by female survivors of Partition were influenced by the place and context in which they were interviewed, pointing to a glaringly obvious methodological difficulty in oral historiography.

Finally, it's important to note "the theoretical problems raised by the fact that many women who experienced sectarian violence died during or since that time without giving testimony" (Didur, 2000, 58). This creates enduring gaps in the Partition narrative of women and leads to a permanent loss of history. Didur further expands on two varying viewpoints – while, some scholars believe that imagined or literary accounts can be used to fill the gaps in testimonies of women who cannot be reached, others stress the need to acknowledge the "original incompleteness" of history and understanding 'loss as loss' (58-59). However, despite the complexities that come with the oral tradition, oral history projects such as those undertaken by Bhasin and Menon (1998) and Butalia (2000) have been instrumental in retrieving

and emphasizing women's voices and histories that have, in the past, remained hidden from the 'objective', official historical accounts.

Feminist oral historians are increasingly engaging in debates on the nature of oral history, especially in informal contexts, also referred to as "corridor talk" (Yow, 1997), that allows them to debrief and discuss the nuances of their work in a community-based space. Engaging in discussions on the nature of their work, however, has urged these scholars to be more reflexive and pay increased attention to their own positionalities within the research. Srigley et. al. (2018), in a follow-up anthology to the pioneering 1991 book, *Women's Words*, have argued that ongoing contestations about the ethical issues of working with oral history have encouraged feminist oral historians to continue reworking and developing methodologies and practices that are collaborative, inclusive and intersectional without abandoning their goal of listening to marginalized voices.

The ultimate goal for feminists is to potentially find newer ways to "empower women by creating a revised history 'for women', emerging from the actual lived experiences of women" (Sangster, 1994, 92); and as evidenced by the above discussion, oral history as a methodology is becoming indispensable in achieving these objectives. By incorporating oral history as a tool within feminist methodology, scholars work with the understanding that the distinct social and material position of women gives way to a unique, complex "epistemological vision which might be slowly unveiled by the narrator and historian" (92). In doing so, they resonate with Sherna Gluck's (1977) claim that "It (women's oral history) is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women's experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity which has been denied us in traditional historical accounts" (5).

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