
February 2020

Book Review: Women in Britain. Voices and perspective from twentieth century history

Shivani Singh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Singh, Shivani (2020). Book Review: Women in Britain. Voices and perspective from twentieth century history. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(1), 412-417.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss1/33>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. ©2020 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Reviewer's name: Shivani Singh

Academic degree: Ph.D.

Title: Dr.; Assistant Professor

Contact details: B.A. Liberal Arts, Inter-Disciplinary School of Science, IUCAA road, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Ganeshkhind, Pune, Maharashtra, India. Pincode: 411007. Phone number: 9503532176; email: shivanisinghbhu@gmail.com

Information about the reviewed book:

Book Title: Women in Britain. Voices and perspective from twentieth century history.

Author: Janet H. Howarth

Publication Year: 2019

Publisher: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.

City: London, Great Britain

Total number of pages: 320

Illustrations: None

Photographs: 15 (listed after contents)

Appendix, or index: Included as Index of Persons and Subject Index at the end.

Price: \$22⁵⁶

Paperback

In her book, *Women in Britain. Voices and perspective from twentieth century history*, Janet Howarth (2019) presents a compendium related to the history of women in Britain over the period of the twentieth century. The voices and perspectives of women provide the main theme, which centres on the continuity and changes in women's status, their representation, and equality of opportunities.

Arguably, the history of women cannot be developed in isolation but often the depiction of women in history has not included the context specific to their status. Presently, women's history has emerged with an aim to unveil their past in accompaniment to their present. Howarth sensitively discusses the change and continuity experienced by the women relative to the perceptions of their contemporary male counterparts. The patterns of continuity and transition also reveal the undercurrent of contention between the status of men and women and their respective claims in political, economic, social and domestic arenas.

The book has two distinct sections, the first part serves as an introduction and provides a foundation to the themes addressed and second part is a theme-wise, excerpt-based and dated illustration of the women's position as observed in Britain's national life. The excerpts chosen from primary sources are extensive and are presented in the form of speeches, poems, personal diary writings, editorials, and chapters from novels, and other written works, however claimed not to be comprehensive. The sources come under the newly sought method adopted by the historians to represent the history of emotions in context to women's history.

Self expression in forms of poetry, letter or art by women demands attention of the researchers to reveal the hidden sense it makes. A salient feature of this kind of methodology reveals the way women have been undervaluing themselves (Thebaud, 2014). Howarth's excerpt selection provides a compiled thematic narration of the triumphs and tribulations justifying the core theme of *voices and perception* of women in twentieth century Britain. Although, there are methodological challenges to the extent of personal bias in selection of excerpts, and unwanted emotional scrutiny of women's historical writings, Howarth's excerption of the women centric issues makes the interpretation simple yet valuable enough to explore and cogitate.

Indicating towards the abundance of resources available on women's history, covering varied issues, Howarth combines and addresses the major themes surrounding twentieth century British women. These themes equally hold salience to contemporary women issues worldwide. In her presentation, Howarth leaves interpretation to the reader. For example, in the discussion of the history and ideological development of the women's organizations and development of the structure of contemporary feminist agendas, excerpts have been specifically selected for a personalised reading providing history through the eyes, mind and heart of British women.

"Different kind of inequality- ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, (dis) ability and religion-affect, and sometimes exacerbate, the disadvantages women face" (Howarth, 2019). The broad thematic outline encompasses issues including: women's perception of class and their own position in class structure; assessment of women's social roles; traditional domestic gender roles despite growing affluence and cultural changes; liberalization of divorce laws; one parent family; single mothers; under-representation of women in elite circles; isolation experienced by the migrated Asian women; gender inequality in education and gendered pattern of careers; trends towards co-education; sexual harassment of women teachers; gaps between ratio of men and women in higher education; sexist traditions of the trade unions; arguments for and against contraception; same sex relationships; unmarried mothers; premarital sex; teenage pregnancy; sex education; protection of coloured women; improved maternity services; artificial insemination; female enfranchisement; and women in war and women's peace initiatives. These themes build

the base for the entire discourse on the issues pertaining to the women not of just twentieth century Britain but women in recent times anywhere in the world. The scope of the themes presented, provides a measure to assess the move made by women, as progressive, regressive or stagnant. Several personalised and self-narrated excerpts surface how the discussion includes personal opinions and responses to the changing position of women with the representation of different social, educational, ethnic, economic and political backgrounds.

The spirit of womanhood with all its ups and downs gets celebrated in this anthological narrative. The inner voices of women, their muted words and unsaid expressions get a vent through the excerpts presented. Specifically addressed are:

- How did women think of or perceive their surroundings; narrowly as well as panoramically?
- Why did women accept what they were offered and when they started refusing and making their own choices?
- What role did the simplest of women have in the development of Britain?

Howarth reveals that the changeover from what wasn't to what became or happened was directly related to deficiencies in the social and political structure. For example, in discussing suffrage, Howarth notes, "Members pledged themselves not to rest content until every woman was entitled to a vote in virtue of her womanhood on exactly the same terms as every man is now in virtue of his manhood" (Howarth, 2019). The statement of problems and priorities presents a journey of women facing different social issues and disadvantages and lays the foundation for the discussion of the women's movement. For example, 'genderquake' defines the gradual impact feminism had on women in Britain to the extent it changed their outlook; made them self-confident, and determined a raised self-expectation (Howarth, 2019).

However, Howarth contextualizes her discussion by describing the native social scenario of British women, especially of the first half of the twentieth century and the following decades, as an embodiment of patriarchal tradition and the most predominant feature of gender distinctive history. Howarth highlights the continued existence of masculinised work cultures, for instance, 'marriage bar' for women teachers and civil servants. Factors like labour movements protecting men's jobs, especially after world wars; romanticising women's domestic role and strong sentiments for traditional family. "For many women, there is a glass ceiling blocking their aspirations, allowing them to see where they might go but stopping them from arriving there. In any given occupation, and in any given public office, the higher the rank, prestige or influence, the smaller the proportion of women" (Howarth, 2019). Nevertheless, by the end of the century manifestation of contemporary values, individualism and rejection of stereotyped gender roles led to the increased and favourable approval of concepts like divorce, cohabitation and lone parent family. Howarth acknowledges that the perceptible changeover in the socio-economic components enabled female labour force participation. In the second half of twentieth century onwards enhanced workforce participation became a nation-wide tendency in urban locations due to factors such as increased life expectancy and smaller families, labour shortage, growth in service sector, changing pattern of household consumption and need of two incomes with rise in house prices and rent.

Howarth highlights that women have been limited by gender and sexual objectification resulting in differential treatment in education. The concept of femininity and its prominent attributes is implicitly defined by men. "Men like girls to be feminine; and what being feminine means to a large number of men is, it seems, being sexy and silly. And most women, alas, accept this definition, and what men want is what they choose to be" (Howarth, 2019). In education, girls

were discriminated against as observed in gendered curriculum; slow progress in higher education and recognition for women (till 1970); absence of academic contact networks as most scientific societies did not accept women; single sex tradition in elite education; and exclusively male dominated state scholarships. “Sharpest contrast between the education of boys and girls for much of the century was found in the upper/upper middle-class families. Sons went to exclusive public schools versus parents economising on the cost of educating daughters whose fortunes in life would mostly depend on making a good marriage” (Howarth, 2019).

Juxtaposed was the female majority representation in the teaching profession in Britain, although the treatment meted out to them by the state and local authorities underlined their inferior status as workers and contributors. “The vital influence of women as women is to civilize men and thus preserve civilization. This mission of women is a far greater one than can ever be fulfilled by attaining the minor political or professional successes, which in the past generation they have imitatively adopted from men as a criterion of social usefulness” (Howarth, 2019). The educational scene for women began to transform in later twentieth century. However, the progress was decelerated in appointing more women to tenured and senior academic positions; thus a glass ceiling conspicuously existed. “The whole pyramid of discrimination rests on a solid extra-economic foundation-education. The demand for equal work, in Britain should above all take the form of demand for an equal educational system, since this is at present the main single filter selecting women for inferior work-roles... It goes without saying that the content of the educational system, which actually instils limitation of aspiration in girls needs to be changed as much as methods of selection” (Howarth, 2019).

Historical discourses on women have always been interpreted dependent upon the males as the focal point, leading to structuring of gendered identities giving way to inequalities or dependencies of minor upon major determinant and strengthening the concepts of masculinity and femininity and the incommensurate arrangement between the two. Women have undergone century’s long struggle against the existent biased opinion regarding their abilities and behaviour. For instance, Howarth quotes Jim Black, presentation editor of Radio Four, “If a woman could read the news as well as a man there would be nothing to her doing it. But I have never found one who could... A news announcer needs to have authority, consistency and reliability. Women may have one or two of these qualities, but not all three.”

A closely relatable narrative is built by Howarth with the excerpts of the period of the two World Wars; the war-experiences of the twentieth century British women making a logical connection with the contemporary world situation, for instance, women in war-torn countries. Visualizing war from the women’s viewpoint makes her a visible participant and thereafter, assessing their status in a wartime society; their day to day life, problems endured by them, bereavement, loneliness, poverty, overwork taken as suffering, per se (Thebaud, 2014). Howarth notes, “Whatever war did to women in home, field, service or factory, it undoubtedly snapped strings that had bound them in so many ways to the Victorian age” (Howarth, 2019).

Howarth adds to the literature on women’s history, providing validation for the historical progress that accompanies a generation and is often not validated at the time given the speed of living versus that of historical reflection. From this perspective the reader can readily comprehend how history writing cannot be definitive. It changes over time to the extent that the lessons from it have been taken in earnestness. “Anyone who has taught on a women’s studies course learns to mistrust the whole idea of a ‘canon’” (Howarth, 2019). Howarth’s book would be a welcome entry point to understanding how history is constructed, the many sources of historical documentation and the significance of context in defining and addressing historical outcomes in the form of

evolving social norms. The novelty in the presentation of the book's is valuable from a historical point of view, especially to researchers studying work culture and gender roles; female labour force participation; urban studies and gender roles; women in education; women in conflict; and structured gendered identities. Howarth surfaces the pertinence of historical continuity with respect to the study of women's issues, highlighting the significance of multisourced context in the understanding of the challenges faced by women in their economic and social advancement.

References:

- Delap, L. (2018). Feminism, Masculinities and Emotional Politics in late Twentieth Century Britain. *Cultural and Social History*, pp.1-23.
- Fara, P. (2014). Women, Science and Suffrage in World War I. *Notes and Records*, pp.11-24.
- Gales, K.E. & Marks, P.H. (1974). Twentieth Century Trends in the Work of Women in England and Wales. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 137(1), pp. 60-74.
- James, E. (1962). Women at Work in Twentieth Century Britain: THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF FEMALE EMPLOYMENT. *The Manchester School*, 30(3), 283-299.
- Thebaud, F. (2014). Understanding Twentieth-century Wars through Women and Gender: Forty Years of Historiography, *Women Gender History*, pp. 152-178.