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Counter-histories of sexuality through vernacular archives and literature

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Abstract

The connections between vernacular archives, literature, and history are discussed in this paper. Although vernacular archives, literature, and history appear to be disparate, they are inextricably linked. Before we discuss their relationship, we must first comprehend the relationship between history, facts, and interpretation. Many theorists have stated that the role of interpretation and documentation is very crucial in any sort of historiography, arguing that history is a dispassionate exercise of facts production. However, this argument concerning the idea of fact production has been contested by many theorists who have argued that the role of interpretation and documentation is very important in any kind of historiography. This Rankeyan view of the historian's "innocent eye" has been called into question. Nietzsche, like earlier theorists like Hegel, emphasised the significance of interpretation in history. It is possible to say that historian or agency can construct and sculpt facts or prejudice.

Keywords: Vernacular, literature, history, facts, mentality, interpretation, obscenity, sexuality, homosexuality, women, gender

Introduction

Although vernacular archives, literature, and history appear to be disparate, they are inextricably linked. Before we discuss their relationship, we must first comprehend the relationship between history, facts, and interpretation. Many theorists have stated that the role of interpretation and documentation is very crucial in any sort of historiography, arguing that history is a dispassionate exercise of facts production. However, this argument concerning the idea of fact production has been contested by many theorists who have argued that the role of interpretation and documentation is very important in any kind of historiography. This Rankeyan view of the historian's "innocent eye" has been called into question. Nietzsche, like earlier theorists like Hegel, emphasised the significance of interpretation in history.¹ It is possible to say that historian or agency can construct and sculpt facts or prejudice.

History encompasses not just facts, but also representation, mentality, and interpretation. Because history is based on facts, sources, and evidence, and literature speaks a new perspective beyond all of these boundaries, not dependent on these facts but based on memory, oral lectures, folk tales, fictional stories, and so on, historians like Hayden White have almost merged history and literature. There is an element of interpretation in all historical accounts that cannot be diminished or expanded. The historian must employ his sources in a fluid pattern that may be seen in various stages of the historical process. The historian must include an account of an event with a credible interpretation so that the gaps in the information he provides can be filled in.² Historiography has recently been relegated to the world of literary arts, where historians' perspectives are valued. History, like poetry, is about creating rather than gathering facts.

It was considered that the records in archives were absolutely real, that they could not be questioned, and that they were "fixed" and "finite."³ Feminists, Dalit scholars, Postmodernists, and others questioned the concept of archives.

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¹Hayden White, "Interpretation in History." *New Literary History* 4, no. 2 (1973): 281-314. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468478>. 284-85.

² White, *Interpretation in History*, 281.

³ Anjali Arondekar. *Without a trace: Sexuality and the colonial Archives*, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 14 (1), 2005, 11.

During the colonial period, archives were thought to be neutral, but post-colonial historians such as Hayden White and Michel Foucault critiqued and disputed colonial archives, raising many concerns about the accuracy, neutrality, and validity of colonial documents. Archives have existed since the colonial period. These imperial archives, according to Charu Gupta, were sites where material was collected, catalogued, and maintained for political surveillance, suppression of dissent, and, more significantly, to "understand" the colonised society.⁴ We should not write history using records as a mere source, but rather, from time to time, try to unearth such secret pasts, mysterious history, history of 'silence,' history of 'margins,' which do not find a place in the Official records, whose archives are zero in context of their history. Because the archive is the means through which we interpret the past, we should be creative with it. If we wish to write history from the below about marginalised groups and sexuality, we need to expand our archives to include crucial materials like vernacular literature, autobiographies, oral sources, memory, fiction, and so on.

We need to understand the archives' peculiar form and context, according to Ann Laura Stoler. When we examine archives, we must consider the politics of storage, which transform the archives from a neutral state institution to a questionable space. The emotional economics of archives is shown by examining archival conventions and commission reports. She believes that archival work should be ethnographic rather than extractive. We must research archives both as a source and as a subject. Archives is a process more than a place. She connects archive practises with rule-making technologies because they represent the colonial regime's power structure and she finds a close link between knowledge and state power. To appreciate the texture and imperfections in the archives, we must read along the grain before reading before the grain.⁵ While Stoler articulates the constraints of the archival imperative in colonial historiography, she remains silent on, or at least separated from, analogous issues in sexuality studies.⁶ Sexuality, like other fields of study, has looked to the colonial archive for legitimacy. Queer literature, concepts, and themes have been unearthed and analysed with zeal in the archive.⁷ Through 'silence,' Anjali Arondekar investigates the issue of sexuality in the archive. She follows the logic of 'Open Secret,' without which the archive would be lost.⁸ Where homosexuality emerges as the archive's structural secret. Homosexuality was a widespread occurrence that was rarely recorded in the archives. She takes on a few homosexuality cases. In one of these cases, Queen Empress v. Khairati, there were physical evidences of homosexuality, but the High Court of Allahabad overlooked them.⁹ She also addresses Richard Burton's missing report on karanchi brothels where boys and eunuchs lay for sale, rather than women. When she looked for the missing report in this case, she didn't find it, but she did find literature on its disappearance. Surprisingly, the report only

came into being as an archival object because it was lost. Its existence was only maintained by new rumours concerning its disappearance.¹⁰ The disappearance of this report reveals the archives' sexuality-related politics. The calling of this report demonstrates the colonial regime's contradictory epistemologies. According to her, this act of evocation can connect sexuality, colonial anthropology, and governance.¹¹ On the subject of homosexuality, there was a fierce debate between British and Indian viewpoints. According to the British, homosexuality is an inherent characteristic that represents Indian men's excessively sexualized lives. And it was criminalised on this grounds. Indians were attempting to demonstrate that homosexuality was not indigenous to Indian culture, but rather originated in the West.¹² If we must write a recalcitrant history of sexuality, the colonial archive, whether read along or against the grain, has inherent constraints. Antionette Burton, Francesca Orsini, and Charu Gupta employ literature, diaries, and other vernacular sources to address gender, sexuality, and other issues in this context.

In her book 'Dwelling in the Archive,' Antionette Burton uses these sources, such as diaries, autobiographies, and private memoirs, mostly authored by women, that were disregarded as historical sources due to subjectivity, non-verifiability, and other factors. She claims that these kinds of sources left by women are incredibly powerful sources, in addition to serving as evidence of an individual's existence. Janki Majumdar, Cornelia Sorabji, and Attia Hosain are the three elite women she chooses.¹³ These sources not only provide information on the lives of individuals, but also serve as an archive from which a range of counter-histories of colonial and nationalist rhetoric can be retrieved. Their writings form an archive in and of itself, with the domestic and private spheres playing a critical role in both the material archive for history writing and the political entity. She claims that the household is politically charged, and that these works represent debates in *Janana* and other bigger settings. When it comes to the *Janana*¹⁴ in colonial discourse, women dwell in darkness, shadow, and veil, demonstrating Indians' inability to rule themselves. Partha Chatterjee, a nationalist historian, claims that this is where we keep our culture alive. In some respects, using the home as an archive to critique colonial modernity and nationalist discourse becomes a technique of critique.

Both Francesca Orsini and Gyanendra Pandey attempted to examine the role of popular vernacular literary play in the creation of history. In his piece about the right-wing Hindu movement, Pandey explores how certain types of literature can be turned into histories and the limitations of the vernacular archive.¹⁵ Orsini and Charu Gupta examine *qissas*, ballads, and so-called dirt cheap books in Hindi and Urdu in the vernacular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to investigate the relationship between the sexuality archive and vernacular settings. The growth of cheap technology, the emergence of a print culture, the

⁴ Charu Gupta, Writing Sex and Sexuality, Archives of Colonial North India, Journal of Women's History, vol. 23 no. 4, 2011, 13.

⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, Colonial Archives and the Art of Governance, Archival Science, vol. 2, 2002, 87, 89, 91, 92, 99, 102, 103.

⁶ Arondekar, Without a Trace, 15.

⁷ Arondekar, Without a Trace, 11.

⁸ Arondekar, Without a Trace, 16.

⁹ Arondekar, Without a Trace, 20, 21.

¹⁰ Arondekar, Without a Trace, 22, 23.

¹¹ Arondekar, Without a Trace, 26.

¹² Gupta, Writing Sex and Sexuality, 14.

¹³ Antionette Burton, Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing Home, and History in Late Colonial India (India: Oxford University press, 2003), 4-5.

¹⁴ Burton, Dwelling in the Archive, 8.

¹⁵ Gyanendra Pandey, Modes of History writing: New Hindu History of Ayodhya, Special Article, Economic and Political Weekly, vo. 29, No. 25, June 18, 1994, 1523-1528.

emergence of a new middle class, the blossoming of vernacular language, and the junction of local oral tradition and print culture all contributed to a boom in commercial publishing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁶ According to Orsini, local oral traditions such as song and poetry collided with print culture, resulting in the development of new genres of pleasure.¹⁷

Charu Gupta discusses the history of marginalised groups that were not recorded in colonial archives, such as homosexuality, sexuality, Dalit women, and so on. She also discusses how race, class, gender, and sexuality are all intertwined.¹⁸ Therefore, Charu Gupta and other feminist historians dispute the colonial archives, where sexuality appears to have vanished. She discusses low cost popular literature, such as Pandey Bechan Sharma's 'Ugra' in 1927, which was a commercial sensation and collection of eight stories presented in a salacious manner. This book offers stories about Sodomy and Homosexuality. In condemning homosexuality, Ugra was bringing a taboo subject into the forefront that had gone unnoticed and was missing from the record.¹⁹ She goes on to discuss Yashoda Devi's writings in order to better comprehend the sexuality of middle and upper-class women. She explores the social construction of Dalit female sexuality by colonial authorities, upper castes, and Dalits themselves by contrasting official archives and Hindi literature, myths, memories, and oral traditions.²⁰ In this way, vernacular literature plays a crucial role in writing histories of sexuality from the margins.

We see a lot of "obscene" literature published in India because of the growth in cheap publishing and print culture. However, it is important to recognise that there are limitations, and that not all vernacular literature is progressive or literature from the margins. Gyanendra Pandey uses popular Hindi pamphlets disseminated during the Ram Janm Bhumi campaign in Ayodhya to discuss the limitations of these vernacular archives. He asks, "How did this monument or geographical site become crucial to new popular Hindu historiography?" in addition to textual records and monuments that have taken on the dimension of archives. Vernacular literature asserts a timeless authoritative past that is utterly ahistorical in this case.²¹

To sum up, the notion of a fixed archive must be abandoned when it comes to the interplay between history, literature, vernacular archives, and sexuality. We must examine the archive critically and problematize it. When we look at British publications, canonised literature, nationalists prominent reformists' writings, and the 'Official Archive,' sexuality concerns go away. We obtain a different picture when we add vernacular and literary sources to our archive, such as biographies, novels, cartoons, pamphlets, popular advertisements, and sex guides.²² In his book 'Idea of History,' Collingwood states that historians must have creative imagination in order to fill in the factual gaps.²³ The historian's own consciousness projects and textures the facts.

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¹⁶ Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), 2, 3.

¹⁷ Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, 5.

¹⁸ Gupta, *Writing Sex and Sexuality*, 14.

¹⁹ Gupta, *Writing Sex and Sexuality*, 18.

²⁰ Gupta, *Writing Sex and Sexuality*, 23.

²¹ Pandey, *Modes of History writing*.

²² Gupta, *Writing Sex and Sexuality*, 15.

²³ White, *Interpretation in History*, 290.