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Star Literature

Alice Beck Kehoe's *Girl Archaeologist* and gender relations in US society

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Alice Beck Kehoe (1934-) is a family friend, and I have her permission to use her first name in short for this essay. After reading Alice's autobiography *Girl Archaeologist: Sisterhood in a Sexist Profession* (2022), Raudah, my wife, recommended the book to me with confidence that I would love it.

Given my training in feminist literature, the title of the book immediately sparked my enthusiasm. I read it voraciously and conceived an idea of using it for major research. The content of the book extends across a whole spectrum of issues including gender, class, race, Native Americans (First Nations), anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, ethnohistory, pre-Columbian America, politics, colonialism, (the "moral imperative" of) postcolonialism and the decolonization of education. All these made it important for me to engage with the book. In what follows, I will focus mainly on its feminist aspect.

Women in the US today are increasingly visible in public life and have access to many opportunities to exploit their talents and capabilities in almost all sectors. But their condition was quite different in Alice's early days. For example, female education is now taken for granted,

but Alice had to fight cultural myths and gender stereotypes to have a fair chance at reaching her full potential in educational attainment.

In *Girl Archaeologist*, she opens a window into an America of the pre-1964 Civil Rights Act where male privilege was quite pervasive. In the book, she shares her experiences as a Jewish girl, woman, wife, mother and academic.

During her high school days in the 1950s, being a good student and bicycling to school bore a double burden of stigma for girls. This constituted a reason why a male classmate was afraid to date Alice in those days, fearing negative social judgment. It was also not considered appropriate for girls to go hiking or enjoy ecstatic mountain views.

Alice's father adopted a "masculine judgment" and believed that women should be homemakers and therefore did not need formal education, as "the thinking" was considered men's job and manual household work, women's. He believed that women who went to college were sluts and whores.

Young women had to abandon their education upon marriage in order to run households, raise children and keep the family together so that their husbands could focus on work in academic and other fields. A generation earlier, Alice's mother stopped composing poetry "the year she married."

Interestingly, even though women's education faced headwinds and their entry into prestigious sites of learning such as Harvard was denied, their intellectual abilities manifested perhaps in unrecognized ways. Many academic husbands had their wives at home write and publish for them to get tenure – a widely-condoned practice of plagiarism. Or, in academic administration, where a male Head of Department was not very capable of performing his job, his female assistant or secretary managed the department.

At an early age, Alice developed interest in anthropology and archaeology. Academic disciplines like these were off limits for women. Despite that, through a tortuous and obstacle-strewn path, Alice stands very high as an anthropologist and archaeologist. Her struggle bumped her up to the post of president of the Association of Senior Anthropologists, a branch of the American Anthropological Association. She held this position from 2003 to 2008.

In the autobiography, Alice narrates stories of hostility to women in academic settings. For instance, in 1958, in an academic conference, she sat in a back row with her baby boy to listen to a presentation. Even though her son was asleep and didn't cause any disruption whatsoever, both of them were physically forced out of the conference venue.

Publications in her field were dominated by men who "hardly mentioned women" in their writings. In 1977, all these prompted Alice and her sister academics to organize an archaeological session and title it "The Hidden Half." With passion and perseverance, she and other women professionals broke out of the cycle of sexism and overcame "thickets of disrespect" and "a lot of condescendence." Alice's lifetime has coincided with the transition from male to female numerical superiority in archaeology with implications for the modes and methods of research in the subject.

Among the many challenges women academics during Alice's career faced was husbands' refusal to share the responsibilities of childrearing and home management. In her family life, her husband "never did any housework or child care or cooking and precious little yardwork" (97). Conversely, Alice had to do "teaching, committee duties, cooking, grocery shopping, cleaning, laundry, yardwork, the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association], and the Cub Scouts pack" she and a female friend ran for their sons (97). This evasive attitude of husbands to working wives forced most women anthropologists to make the difficult choice between motherhood and career.

A common form of gender discrimination was the absence of recognition for women academics. Despite a Harvard PhD in anthropology under her name, Alice was considered only a woman and a wife, and not a professional, whereas her non-PhD husband "looked like an archaeologist" because of his gender.

Given that Alice had an archaeologist husband, one extremely well-meaning Harvard professor advised her against writing a dissertation in archaeology so that people would not presume that her husband did the research for her. Hence, despite her deeper interest and years-long experience in archaeology, she had to choose cultural anthropology for her doctoral research. The title of her memoir – *Girl Archaeologist* – marks her defiance of the notion that she could not become an archaeologist independent of her husband.

Alice entered Harvard as a PhD candidate in 1957, but her enrolment was in the university's Radcliffe College. Two years later, in 1959,

Harvard acknowledged female students, so Alice's degree was awarded by it. Opened in 1949 and established mainly for undergraduate library services, Harvard's Lamont Library denied entry to women "so that the men studying there would not be distracted" (63). The library opened its doors to women in 1967 and the official merger of Radcliffe College with Harvard University occurred in April 1999.

At Harvard, one male professor was reluctant to let Alice enroll in his course because she was pregnant. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended such discrimination on the basis of race, religion and sex. That was the year when Alice completed her PhD, so the landmark legislation didn't make any difference for her student life at Harvard.

Upon graduation, Alice continued to face gender discrimination. One of her employers refused to put her on tenure track on account of her gender. Finally, she became a professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee, but upon retirement she found out that she "had been paid nearly 30 percent less than a man with [her] years in rank and a good publication record" (89). Her gender has always coloured her career and somewhat overshadowed her achievements as an academic.

As Alice mentions in *Girl Archaeologist*, in the US, gender and race coalesced as a system for oppression. For example, she refers to a Columbia University law professor, the African American Patricia J. Williams, whose great-great-grandmother Sophie, aged 11, was purchased by a white man "to practice sex upon her in preparation for his marriage to a young lady" (xiv).

On a final note, *Girl Archaeologist* shows that the America of Alice's early life was not what it is like now. Interestingly, many aspects of her gendered experiences and the male domination she experienced resonate with South Asian cultural beliefs and gender norms, especially those described in the work of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). That itself is an interesting point for a separate study.

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