

**A Review of Emily Hauser's *Penelope's Bones: A New History of Homer's World Through the Women Written Out of It*. University of Chicago Press, 2025. 467 pages, ISBN hardcover- 9780226839684, Rs 2890**

## **Reframing the Canon: Feminist Historiography and the Imperial Afterlives of Homer**

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Homer's epics have been foundational to Western civilisation, and as such, have travelled the world by means of canonised literary traditions. Emily Hauser mediates in this tradition with her book *Penelope's Bones: A New History of Homer's World Through the Women Written Out of It* (2025), by recovering the lives of "the women waiting voiceless and ignored behind the walls of Troy and in the Greek camp" (Hauser 2025, "Author's Note"). Penelope in Hauser's text represents the real, often overlooked women of the Bronze Age, and is not limited to the mythological wife of Odysseus. The book makes use of a 14th-century B.C. female skeleton ("I9033") found in a royal Greek tomb—to reconstruct the lives of "real" women behind Homeric myths. The bones refer to archaeological excavations of elite women, living during the Bronze Age, and not the fictive character of Penelope. Hauser reconceptualises history by analysing the archaeological remains of powerful, so-called "mythical" women like Penelope, Thetis, and others through an extensive body of interdisciplinary research. In doing so, she revisits the historiographical understanding of classical studies and the male-centred historiography that has dominated human history for centuries (at least since classical times).

Firmly positioning itself as a feminist recovery project, *Penelope's Bones* calls for a broader postcolonial feminist critique regarding the formation

of canon, epistemic authority, and the imperial afterlives of classical antiquity. Hauser's Introduction begins with a simple and radical claim—the stories of the Homeric women have been “told by men”. Using an interdisciplinary method, she combines archaeology, material culture, and fragmentary historical evidence to recover women's lives omitted from Homer's texts. Hauser's narrative style is accessible to both academic and non-academic readers, thus making a feminist critique of historical writing plausible and fascinating. Using language that is simple yet engaging, *Penelope's Bones* brings together literary study, archaeology, and historical context, thereby inviting readers to participate in discussions that are typical of classical studies. Furthermore, as a powerful example of feminist reconstruction it will appeal to research scholars and academicians alike.

Hauser insists that women in the Homeric world are not marginal. They do have a crucial role in the narrative, but the way “the ancient world – the discipline of Classics” is studied, their centrality is “invisible” (Hauser 2025, “Introduction”). Her feminist intervention becomes evident in her refusal to treat domesticity, labour, marriage, and sexual violence as peripheral to Homeric history—they are crucial to understand how power is divided along gendered lines. By restoring the sidelined contribution of women and placing sexual violence within the framework of kinship, relations, and patriarchal control, *Penelope's Bones* questions the masculine perspective of history as merely a saga of male heroism. Penelope is presented not as an allegory but as a historical actor, and this authenticates the feminist effort to recover women's history, while also prompting questions about the potential for writing women back into the same archives they were excluded from.

The text poses crucial questions about the politics of “writing women back into history, to tell ‘their story, in their voices and their words’” (Hauser 2025, “Author's Note”). The recovery of women's lived experiences challenges the patriarchal erasure of women from history, while also showing the challenges of reconstructing women's experiences from an archive that has excluded women. Thus, the work

contributes to an existing feminist debate around how to recognise women's historical agency while taking care not to reproduce the epistemological structure that marginalises women in the first place.

The book's central claim, that the absence of women from historical records is not proof of their actual absence from history, can be seen as a broader critique of archival power. A postcolonial reading of Homeric texts carries this reasoning to the imperial archive by specifically examining how canonical texts get the status of global "origins" through the processes of selection and erasure. In that sense, *Penelope's Bones* provides an opening to rethink the Homeric canon as more of an imperial archive than a literary inheritance, one that has contributed to Eurocentrically framed narratives of "Western civilization". Significantly, Homeric texts have been circulated globally through colonial education systems, classical curricula, and nationalist historiographies that situate texts as civilisational origins rather than as culturally constructed artifacts within a historical context. In this regard, Hauser's endeavour of "bringing women to the foreground" for the simple reason that "women's experiences deserve to be examined in all their diversity, that every voice deserves to be heard" (Hauser 2025, "Introduction") questions an archive already shaped by imperial logics of selection, preservation, and value.

From this perspective, the book raises a critical question: what does it mean to recover women's histories without fully decolonising the archive in which those histories are embedded? While *Penelope's Bones* successfully challenges patriarchal erasure, it largely retains the Homeric world as a central and universal point of reference. In this case of feminist recovery, the reconstruction of women happens within a classical antiquity framework, without interrogating or even challenging how such framework got naturalised through colonial methods of knowledge creation.

A postcolonial feminist analysis of *Penelope's Bones* helps in recognising the successes as well as the shortcomings of attempts toward recovery

of women's histories from classical sources. While Hauser's text challenges the patriarchal narrative in history, Homeric texts remain unquestioned as foundational to civilization. This leads to larger questions about the ability of feminist revisionism to dislocate Eurocentric systems of knowledge if the record itself remains unaffected. The book therefore highlights a crucial paradox: feminist recovery may expand the canon's subjects without dismantling the imperial conditions that have been instrumental in sustaining the authority of canonical texts.

While the book does a good job in challenging histories written by men about men, the limited attention to race, empire and the global legacy of classical sources seems to be a major limitation. For feminist scholars working within postcolonial contexts, it may be necessary to support feminist recovery with a clear examination of the colonial legacies that have been instrumental in establishing classical literature as universally foundational. Nevertheless, with her attention to archival absence and material evidence, Hauser provides methodological resources that could support more explicitly decolonial futures for classical studies.

*Penelope's Bones* is a significant and timely intervention in feminist classical studies, challenging the male-centred historiography that has long shaped interpretations of Homeric antiquity. It will be useful not just to classical historians, but also to feminist scholars, postcolonial theorists, and literary as well as cultural historians working with archives/canons and epistemic authority. The thematic concern with absence, recovery, and material traces reverberates with larger discussions regarding the means by which histories get formed, whose voices are valued, recorded, and retained in history, and the construction as well as circulation of cultural foundations. Although the book does not explicitly claim to be a post-colonial endeavour, it provides conceptual means by which such readings can be achieved.

*Penelope's Bones* helps us see women's stories from the past, while allowing people to think about the women who have been left out of history and

also about how we understand history. It is an important resource for those who want to learn about how women have been treated throughout time and how this is connected to power. It tries to bring women's stories back into history but it does not do justice in talking about how race and empire have affected these stories. While looking at how women lived in the time of the Homeric world, the book does not think about the bigger picture of how these stories have been received and used, and assumes that the stories of Homer are the basis for our understanding of history. Even though it tries to bring women into history, it does not question whether the stories of Homer should be the standard that we use. The book is mainly about adding women to history, and does not really challenge the reasons why they were left out in the first place. Hauser does not think about how people of different races and ethnicities, such as slaves, colonized people and non-Greeks were treated. While *Penelope's Bones* tries to recover women's stories, it stops short of considering the complexities of the ancient world, such as slavery and colonialism, and how these have affected women's lives.

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