

Antoinette Burton. *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. x + 202 pp. ISBN: 0-19-514425-2, \$21.95..

Review by Vinay Lal

Dwelling in the Archive, which extends Antoinette Burton's previous explorations of some of the intersections between India and Britain in late Victorian culture to the waning days of the British empire in India, constitutes an attempt on her part to stretch the parameters of what professional historians would ordinarily construe as "history," and in particular, the "historical archive." Over the course of the last two decades, the study of history has been emboldened, howsoever insufficiently, by various theoretical trajectories such as poststructuralism and postcolonialism; at the same time, the notion of who constitute the proper subjects of history has been considerably expanded to include women, sexual and ethnic minorities, orphans, social "deviants," and many others previously consigned to the margins of history. These additive histories have had a remarkably long run, and show little signs of abatement; indeed, since they are embraced with unbounded enthusiasm by the innumerable adherents of identity politics, one can be certain that they will be around in the foreseeable future. By the late 1970s, the received notion of the "text" was also beginning to be thoroughly discarded, and the idea of the "text" was rendered malleable enough to include the private diaries of working-class women, folktales, comics, and even public statuary. *Dwelling in the Archive* stands, one might say, at the intersection of such developments.

Just how capacious is Burton's conception of the archive becomes evident enough in the central ethnographic chapters that focus on three South Asian women, but Burton initiates her inquiry into the politics of representing the archive with a broad historiographic sweep. The archives, too, must be represented, for to represent is also to endow with an identity. At one time the notion of archives brought to mind political history, state documents, property ownership deeds, and tax records, but Burton suggests that the archive can be rendered, if one may use a term that evokes its own sexual politics, infinitely more fecund as a site of other histories. It is commonly imagined that archives yield public and political histories, and that such archives have little room for private memories; but Burton's intent is to fragment the opposition of public and private, of history and memory, and in particular, of history as the site of masculinist thinking and grand narratives, and of memory as the site of feminine desire and domesticated ruminations. For Burton, such a political and hermeneutic exercise leads to questions that appear with insistent effect. What histories do domestic interiors yield? What are the architectural idioms of history? How can a home be the foundation of history? Why do the metaphors of home and house occupy

such a prominent place in history and memory? What is the relationship of women to the archive? Why, when the study of gender has become so paramount, have we not understood the numerous ways in which archives are themselves repositories of a gendered politics? It follows, then, that Burton is working with a more expansive conception of who counts as an “historian” and what counts for “history,” just as she seeks to give politics a reach that was always anticipated in feminist theory.

The women who form the centerpiece of Burton’s attempted democratization of the archive embodied, in many respects, vastly divergent politics. As the daughter of W. C. Bonnerjee, the first president of the Indian National Congress, an organization of Indian elites that was transformed under Mohandas Gandhi into a mass organization agitating for freedom from British rule, Janaki Majumdar was privileged to be a witness to the emergence in India of institutionalized politics of the modern variety. Her narrative, called a “Family History,” points however to the preoccupations which appeared to weigh most heavily in Majumdar’s mind. A number of houses in Bengal, and later in Britain, where the Bonnerjees took up residence are recalled at considerable length, but Majumdar was particularly moved to recount the hardships endured by her mother, Hemangini. Indeed, the transiency of their lifestyles is contrasted with the endurance that the written text perforce implies, as well as with what might be described as the permanent sense of affliction that Hemangini experienced. Majumdar’s “Family History,” writes Burton, “foregrounds the contributions of one unsung heroine who made W. C. Bonnerjee’s professional success possible by her private sacrifices” (59). Lest one should mistake this for the clichéd observation that behind the success of every “great man” is a woman, which would turn women into the mere handmaidens of men, indeed of destiny, one might productively recall the nature of colonial knowledge production. Though the credit for the “discovery” of Indian texts and artifacts, and even of such innovations as fingerprinting, went to Europeans, we now know that “natives” played a considerable, often decisive, role in these enterprises. Burton’s endeavor, in bringing Majumdar’s “Family History” to light, is to point to the politics of knowledge which inheres in domestic as much as public arrangements. The domestic genealogies of Indian nationalism, Burton submits, have hitherto largely been obscured.

Though less of a diasporic woman than Janaki Majumdar, the Parsi Christian barrister Cornelia Sorabji was educated at Oxford from 1889–1892, and had occasion to lecture in Britain on a number of occasions later in life. As a Lady Assistant to the Court of Wards, Sorabji became renowned as an expert on the zenana, or the interior quarters of traditional as well as respectable households, which were preeminently the domain of women. Sorabji sought to preserve the “sacred” space of the zenana, and struggled to keep it free from the influence of nationalist politics. However feeble by modern feminist reckoning the attempts of Gandhi and other like-minded nationalists to make

political participation more accessible to women might have been, Sorabji declared herself opposed to such “feminist” politics, and went so far as to say that “the woman question has always been, since organized, an anti-British (and now) Terrorist movement” (86). Sorabji was, to put it mildly, possessive of the zenana, valuing it “above all as an antinationalist model for the modern Indian woman” (67). While Burton is, of course, cognizant of the numerous and often conflicting meanings with which the zenana came to be invested in nationalist, modernist, and colonialist discourses, Sorabji interests her as someone who “turned the zenana into a museum, staked her claim as its authoritative tour guide, and transformed it from an archive into a souvenir for consumption by a variety of imperial and colonial publics” (69). Likening the zenana to virgin or unexplored territory, Sorabji didn’t only construe herself as its gatekeeper; she was also its archivist. Burton notes that Sorabji’s reports for the Court of Wards generated a large body of statistics (71), and statistics, we need not be reminded, do the work of the state and help to keep it afloat. The private and public spaces of politics may not be as far apart as we are accustomed to thinking. Burton rounds up her ethnography, and her discussion of the various idioms in which notions of home and house find expression, with a consideration of the work of the novelist Attia Hossain. The “compulsion to remember through home” is as palpably present in Hossain’s work as it is in Majumdar’s “family history”: living through the partition, Hossain points to the near impossibility of “dwelling comfortably at home in the wake of the unspeakable violence of the past” (106). Fifty years after Hossain had settled down in Britain, she still looked to India as her home; as she confessed in an interview, she had been unable to put down roots in Britain. If anyone should be inclined to think that Hossain’s feeling of homesickness seems particularly anomalous in a novelist who had fittingly made her home in England, Burton is there with a rejoinder: the novel had almost as long a history in India as in its putative home, Britain. (The novel, arising in large part through the “colonial encounter,” was consolidated, Burton argues, “as an already hybrid form” (116)—perhaps not an altogether convincing argument, or with much analytical purchase, considering that a massive range of phenomena could be described as having originated through what has come to be known as the “colonial encounter.” It appears that hybridity should now be taken as the bedrock of nearly any such argument.) Focusing on Hossain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Burton weaves between the novel, Hossain’s own story, and the larger canvas furnished by partition histories and narratives.

Burton all but concedes that, followed to its logical conclusion, her conception of the archive would turn us all into archivists (139). She detects, moreover, a resistance to this endeavor even among those scholars who have been critical of official histories, whether of the colonial or nationalist variety, and wonders whether the characterization of the archive as, in the language of Nicholas Dirks, a “discursive formation in the totalizing sense” that “reflects the categories and operations of the

state itself” does not return us to the conception of the archive as a “panoptical institution” (140). How far one can follow Burton down the road she proposes depends, as well, on the readings that one is prepared to furnish of “memory” and “history.” Though *Dwelling in the Archives* is doubtless an impassioned and elegant book, her readings of some of the theorists could perhaps have been more rigorous and nuanced. She argues, to take one instance, that in considering memory as “the raw material of history,” Jacques le Goff subscribes to an evolutionary view the consequence of which must be to supplant memory (the primitive, the feminine) with history (the civilized, the masculine). No one familiar with le Goff’s dissenting readings of medieval European history and modernity would so readily come to such a conclusion. Indeed, in Indian culture, one might say that the order of the raw and the cooked are reversed. Brahmins are easily contaminated by cooked food, but much less so by raw foods; holy fasts are broken with offerings of grains and fruits. Those who imbibe raw rather than cooked foods are viewed as more evolved. History, one might well argue, is but a fast; memory is a feast. What if nothing much was gained, and a good deal lost, in attempting to confer on memory the epistemological primacy that one mistakenly attributes to history?

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