

Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India. By Antoinette Burton. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; pp. 216, £16.99).

This work merits our attention, not simply as feminist research but more profoundly as a critique on the very nature of the archive. Antoinette Burton's central thesis goes to the heart of the questions: what is history, who writes history and for whose consumption? Burton's powerfully persuasive plea for the democratisation of the archive cannot fail to engage with writers of women's history. In attempting to recover the histories of women who would otherwise remain hidden from history, Burton's work is comparable to E.P Thompson's call for a 'history from below.' It is also a response to Edward Said's advocacy for a counter history that can challenge paradigms of race, class, nationalism and imperialism.

Because of a reliance on traditional archives, history remains gendered. According to Burton, modern South Asian history, dependent as it is on the colonial archive, is additionally biased by Anglo-Americanism. Collected predominantly by white middle-class men for the production of knowledge in imperial administration, such archives reflect power relations between the ruler and the ruled and consequently have little to offer us in capturing the life experiences of South Asian women.¹

Drawing on the approaches of feminist historians in the West, Indian feminist historians, most notably, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin and Urvashi Butalia,² have recently sought to address this neglect by recording the experience of Indian women using sources such as oral testimony, diaries and memoirs, often considered 'unorthodox' by traditional historians. Such evidence incurs the wrath of 'fiercely empirical historians' who criticise the use of the sources as unreliable with their dependence on the fallacies of memory.³

The construction of 'disinterested' and 'superior' histories, they contend, cannot be drawn from sources which are at best distorted and at worst seemingly 'fictional' reconstructions of the past when compared with traditional archives which are repositories of facts. By defining what constitutes legitimate evidence historians thus reproduce knowledge as a product of hegemony:

Given the role of History in legitimating white middle-class hegemony, reading women's memories as supplements to History is not only unfortunate, it is arguably a continuation of the logic of western colonial modernity.⁴

The increasing acceptance of unorthodox sources among feminist historians in the last two decades indicates that things have changed for the better. Yet this has been accompanied by anxieties 'about the contamination of both archival history and disciplinary empiricism', well characterised by Jacques Derrida's work on what he termed 'archive fever'.⁵ For Burton these anxieties are further reinforced at a 'time when

the practise of professional history appears to have so little grip on the contemporary imagination – when history of the academic variety is thought to be so persistently irrelevant to the average person’s experiences, identities, desires – it seems fitting that we are, effectively, all archivists now’.⁶

Burton’s initiative for writing the book was influenced by the ‘serendipity of history’ which brought her to the unpublished diary of Janaki Agnes Penelope Majumdar, nee Bonnerjee, daughter of the president of the first Indian National Congress, W.C Bonnerjee. Majumdar wrote her *Family History* in 1935, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Indian National Congress. This ‘rare and remarkable evidence’, Burton suggests, raises many intriguing questions:

What counts as archive? Can private memories of home serve as evidence of political history? What do we make of the histories of that domestic interiors, once concrete and now perhaps crumbling or even disappeared, have the capacity to yield? And given women’s vexed relationship to the kinds of history that archives typically house, what does it mean to say that home can and should be seen not simply as a dwelling place for women’s memory but as one of the foundations of history – history as conceived of that is, as a narrative, a practice, and a site of desire.⁷

Burton theorises house and home as complex sites of archival evidence, where domestic space is utilised in the production of history through the vehicle of memory. Indian women in history are constructed through these multifaceted dynamics, and thus cannot be seen merely through colonial or nationalist historiographical paradigms which project through their own peculiar specificities upon them.

Burton uses the term ‘archive’ to include both conventional sources housed in official archives and ‘unconventional’ sources, such as, memoirs including Majumdar’s *Family History*, oral testimonies, letters and dairies. For Burton texts such as Majumdar’s memoirs are not simply a ‘site of historical evidence and historiographical opportunity in and for the present’, but in ‘addition to serving as evidence of individual lives, the memories of home that each woman enshrines in narrative act -for us- as an archive from which a variety of counter-histories of colonial modernity can be discerned’.⁸

Burton does not discuss the status relationship between autobiographies or family histories and oral histories which are themselves autobiographical in nature.⁹ Can the latter also count as legitimate sites of archival evidence? However, her concern that ‘unorthodox’ or ‘unconventional’ sources are considered by empiricists to be supplementary to ‘traditional’ archival sources is valid. Both sets of sources suffer from similar problems of subjective bias, selective historical memory and so on. Thus she asserts certain ‘unorthodox’ sources ought to be viewed as alternative or even counter-archives; that both sets of sources should be viewed as equally legitimate.

Burton proceeds to present the evidence for her case by introducing three women, Janaki Majumdar (1886–1963) Cambridge educated daughter of the first president of the Indian National Congress; Cornelia Sorabji (1886–1954), Oxford educated and India's first woman Lawyer and Attia Hosain (1913–1997), daughter of Cambridge educated Shahid Hosain Kiwai. These three women, she argues, have left us rich personal archives through which we can access a 'many layered many-voiced counter-archive of colonial modernity'.¹⁰

Burton presents us with readings of the Mujumdar/Bannerjee family history. The central figure of these narratives is most often Janaki's mother Hemmangini. The narrative is reminiscent of the ways in which Indian cinema depicts the long-suffering Indian mother. Janaki's mother is forced to undergo a process of cultural transition in order to accommodate her husband. Originally from a high caste Hindu Brahmin background, Hemangini is urged to exchange her sari for a dress and stockings and even persuaded to eat beef. Her private sufferings began when her husband went to England in order to study law. They are recorded by her daughter Janaki in the following dramatic way:

She told me ... she was hysterical, and sometimes used to suffer from regular fits during which she completely lost consciousness. At one time her elders decided that these fits must be due to evil possession, and accordingly an Exorciser was summoned to drive away the devil; and this drastic treatment used to make her feel worse than ever.¹¹

For Burton, Hemangini's life experiences demonstrate the profound cultural changes of her time effected largely by 'colonial modernity'. But most of all, Janaki's reconstruction of her mother's experiences provides us with privileged access to her mother's emotional life. 'Because she devotes so much of her memoir to recounting how her mother must have felt, the *Family History* becomes a vehicle through which Janaki is able to imagine and preserve a private interior – her mother's emotional life ... It is an archival resource and a rare one at that'.¹²

Cornelia Sorabji's memoirs deal more with the life experiences of India's first woman lawyer rather than her writings. Sorabji was a complex woman who strove to help a certain category of women whilst simultaneously adopting an anti feminist stance. Dismissing feminists as 'Progressive Women', and feminism 'a puff-ball – not an edible mushroom', she was fiercely opposed to the Indian feminist movement. Her life was one of enormous contradiction. A product of colonial modernity, she opposed modernising the *Purdahnashin* women within the Zenana, and

cast herself as the representative of a majority 'Indian' women for whom the zenana was the true – and she would have it, the proud – 'enemy of Progress in India'. The fact that she focussed on the most privileged zenanas in India (those *purdahnashin* who were proprietresses of often quite significant

estates) did not figure in her calculus, an oversight in keeping with her lifelong investment in elite societies in both Britain and in India.¹³

Further, pro-imperialist and anti-Indian nationalist Sorabji publicly criticised Ghandi and his followers for their advocacy of reforms that to her mind only affected the elite. Sorabji did, however, self-consciously create and leave behind a rich archive which was 'fundamentally self-representational in ways that draw revealingly, on Sorabji's skills as a lawyer', but which provides us with a window to the past that cannot be accessed through the usual archival materials.

In chapter 4, 'Girlhood among ghosts: house, home and history in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on the broken column* (1961)', Burton contextualises Hosain's novel within narratives of Partition history and memory, again using it to theorise notions of house and home as archival sites. This chapter also raises important questions, such as how far can we accept historical novels as legitimate archives? Discussing the work of one of Partitions leading historians, Munshirul Hasan, she states 'Hasan, goes so far as to contend that drawing on fiction as an archive of partition experiences offers an opportunity to access 'multiple versions of the truth'.¹⁴ Hasan's elevation of Hosain's novel to the status of historical text holds profound significance for Burton, yet works such as Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* have been hailed as such much earlier.¹⁵

How representative are Burton's women of Indian women in general? Burton is well aware of the elite stature of all three women and states 'the fact that all three women wrote in English for an English-speaking audience ... also follows from their elite locations and from the privileges of both dwelling and mobility that those locations allowed'.¹⁶ However, she insists on their positionality in the domestic sphere as indicative of the importance of such spaces as sites of archival interest. Emphasising the importance of the narratives of house and home in the women's discourse, Burton states:

all three used domestic space as an archival source from which to construct their own histories and through which to record the contradictions of living as Indian women in the context of colonial modernity. Indeed, each of the women under consideration here, writing either in or about the 1930s in India, responded to 'the pressure of historical placement' by using their memories of house and home as the basis for writing histories.¹⁷

Burton further postulates that 'the frequency with which women writers of different nations have made use of home to stage their dramas of remembrance is a sign of how influential the cult of domesticity and its material exigencies has been for inhabitants of structurally gendered locations like the patriarchal household'.¹⁸ The contested notion of home is

neither a stationary place nor a self-evident trope. Like all historical utterances, it is both fictional and contingent, inflected by the particular social

contexts out of which it is fashioned and, of equal significance, defying the very materiality and permanence it appears to embody.¹⁹

In British India the domestic space of home came under the critical scrutiny of both the colonizers and the reforming male elites. As Partha Chatterjee argues, in the context of Bengal, the nationalist response to the woman question 'was to affirm the domain of the Brahmin home as a redemptive spiritual space that could resist the materialist values and incursions of a Western, colonizing culture'.²⁰ Thus home, subjected to the public gaze, acquired political currency and therefore the strategy of women writers in the early twentieth century to appropriate it as a space for women's history and concerns becomes clear.

To various degrees all three of Burton's women represented what Geraldine Forbes has termed the 'New Woman', referring, as Chandini Lokuge states:

to the Indian woman who emerged in the later nineteenth century as a consequence of British colonialist influences that included educational and socio-religious reforms. Defying institutionalized patriarchal ideologies that enforced her domesticity and subjectivity, the New Woman sought greater equality between men and women. The value of women as educated and self-reliant individuals and active participants in domestic and public life.²¹

Yet if such women were atypical of Indian women then the whole exercise is thrown into question. In addition to being highly educated, Majumdar and Sorabji had families that were influenced by Christianity, the former a Hindu Christian the latter a Parsi Christian. Christian influence afforded a degree of freedom that Hindu women were denied. Hosain as a Muslim woman would perhaps to some extent have had restrictions placed on her agency thus making her experiences closer to 'orthodox' Hindu women. The fact remains, however, that all three are women from Indian minority groups and therefore pose the question to what degree are they representative of the dominant category of Indian women. Burton does not see the need to address this issue.

Notions of house and home as sites of archives are intriguing but need to be treated with caution. For rather than search for house and home as the key institutional sites of legitimate alternative or 'counter-archives' it is women themselves who are the repositories of traces of the past. And here one is mindful of the fact that the majority of Indian women even to the present day are uneducated and therefore unable to leave written traces of their life experiences. Letters, diaries, memoirs or autobiographies of such women will never be made available. Oral history may present a vehicle through which we can access traces of their pasts. This can reveal oral traditions passed on through story-telling from mothers to daughters. Meera Syal, for example, captures something of this in *Anita and Me*, 'My mother grew up in a small Punjabi village not far from Chandigarh. As she chopped onions for the evening meal or scrubbed the shine back onto the steel pan or watched the clouds of curds form in a bowl of slowly setting

homemade yogurt, any action with a rhythm, she would begin a mantra about her ancestral home'.²²

However, aside from all this, this book compares favourably to the works of Thompson and Said, and could just as radically affect research on gender history as the former did for class and race. Perhaps it will go further in gaining a long awaited recognition of 'unconventional' sources as conventional 'legitimate' archives; this is, after all, the central aim of the book. This well informed, well argued work is a must for all scholars of women/feminist/gender history.

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NOTES:

¹ A. Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 138.

² R. Menon and K. Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998). Also see U. Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998).

³ Problems of reliability, authenticity and validity associated with memory have incurred much controversial debate amongst practitioners of oral history. However, it is widely acknowledged that conventional sources suffer from similar problems. Yet, the process of remembering often involves a continuous system of reinterpretation of a single event during which details can be lost or imagined when recounted. See Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), for a discussion on the problems with 'authentic' sources.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 139; See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁶ Burton, p. 139.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁹ For a discussion of the import of oral history to women's history see Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Rutgers University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 39.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 61.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 105.

¹⁵ See M. Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (London: Hurst, 1997).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 32.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 33.

²¹ C. Lokuge, (ed), *India Calling: the Memories of Cornelia Sorabji, India's First Woman Barrister* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 2001)

²² Ibid, p. 31.