



**Betty Joseph.** *Reading the East India Company, 1720-1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xiv + 220 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-41203-0; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-41202-3.



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### Alibis in the Archives

Reading not only the fine print but between the lines, as well of the archives of the East India Company, is an exacting undertaking, and it exacts a no less demanding accounting, as Betty Joseph concludes in the final sentence of *Reading the East India Company, 1720-1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender*: “Such critical genealogies,” Joseph reflects, “must track the forces that continue to animate the markings of women of the South as cheap labor, objects of population control, bearers of ecological burden, veiled victims of fundamentalism, and premodern subjects” (p. 180). The archival excursion, that is, is no mere retreat into an arcane and often furtive past—even one, like that of the East India Company, spiced as it was with pepper, woven of silk, intoxicated by opium, and stimulated with teas both green and black—but entails an engagement with the colonial Company’s activities then and their outcomes subsequently. Joseph thus introduces her study, aligning it with that more contemporary “currency,” now of “postcolonialism,” with the encomium that “postcolonial criticisms task lies not in excavating the past but in revealing the arenas, agendas, and subjects that are hidden when history is told one way rather than another” (p. 3). *Reading the East India Com-*

*pany, 1720-1840*, in other words, is committed to redrawing the lines that connect—and conceal—the fine print of the archives, not just in the something more than a century of the title, but also with the lineages (or genealogies) of the critics own politico-cultural context.

The East India Company, chartered in 1600 by Queen Elizabeth, was in its long lifetime “England’s (and later Britain’s) single biggest commercial enterprise,” and yet in “terms of the total volume of Asian maritime trade it was never more than a tiny percentage.”[1] Nonetheless, the Company did set a precedent for “chartered companies,” imperial enterprises such as Cecil J. Rhodes British South Africa Company (chartered in 1889) which at the end of the nineteenth century expropriated South Africa’s vast mineral wealth of diamonds and gold as its own. And if its share in the “total volume of Asian maritime trade” was minimal, the archival riches that the East India Company generated for its legatees was in turn nothing less than voluminous. As Anthony Farrington describes those archives in his companion to the British Library’s 2002 exhibit, *Trading Places: The East India Company and Asia 1600-1834*:

“All business at all stages was carried on in writing, which gives us the term “writer“ for the most junior grade of overseas servant. The result survives today as the massive East India Company archive, deposited in the British Library’s Oriental & India Office Collections. ‘General’ letters exchanged between London and the Presidencies laid down and responded to the Directors’ decisions, which were based upon copies of all correspondence between the Presidencies and their subordinate factories, annual returns of all accounts, copies of the minutes or ‘consultations’ of the meetings of all the Presidency and factory councils, and the ships’ journals or logs of all voyages from London. Millions of pieces of paper gradually accumulated in London to form the inherited administrative and commercial memory of the Company, the product of never than two to three hundred personnel actually resident in India.”[2]

And in that same “massive archive,” made available for public scrutiny only after Indian independence in 1947, Joseph finds the various alibis, writ both small and large, for the duplicities and depredations committed by the British imperial project in South Asia, or, as Ranajit Guha terms it, that “sore that refused to heal [and] went on festering by being compulsively touched.”[3] Through probing the “official record” and pushing literary analysis beyond the bounds of the academic distinction dividing “literature” and “history,” Joseph proposes to “contextualize the official record, to remove its continuing documentary power, by reading it within the larger discursive formation in which it emerged (p. 10), indeed to “force open issues of distortion and complicity in the historical record“ (p. 25). From Defoe’s *Roxana* through mid-eighteenth century narratives of colonial violence, family histories, and representations of “up-country settlements,” to the storied succession struggle waged by the Rani of Burdwan, and the contest over the illegalization of sati, or widow-burning, *Reading the East India Company* rehearses the “colonial currencies of gender.”

Writing—and reading—in the post-*Orientalism* (1979) era of literary critical studies, Joseph acknowledges the considered and considerable influence of the late Edward Said’s work on the directions of her research, citing in particular the “theoretical problem” raised in his critiques of the “relationship of historical representation to historical reality” (p. 17). Equally significant to her critical analyses is the collective project of the Subaltern Studies associates and their unflinching approach to the archival gates and relentless foraging behind the lines in their stacks. As Partha Chatterjee, one of those “sappers in the stacks” (see Harlow 1998), points out in a recent in-

terview on the Subaltern Studies methodology, “in terms of the methods, I think those were in some ways innovative. As I said, there was no ready archive for this sort of work. What we tried to do was use the official archive in such a way that you could actually read peasant consciousness, that is, read the official reports and the official archive against the grain in order to try and find the voice of the subaltern, as it were.”[4] Like Antoinette Burton too, who recognizes in the archive a “dwelling-place of a critical history rather than the falsely safe space of the past” and whose *Dwelling in the Archive* relates the story of “women writing house, home, and history in late colonial India,” Joseph finds in the archives of an earlier period not only the documentary record of official decision-making and implementation, but the “evidence of rebellious subjects”—especially women—as well (p. 26).[5]

*Reading the East India Company, 1720-1840* is composed of five chapters, framed by its discussion of the regenerated significance of archival research—archives and alibis, as it were and would be. These chapters provide the transgressively close textual readings of fictions and facts, and focus in particular on the “presence of women in official and unofficial texts (as figures or historical subjects) [that] can be read as metonyms of significant historical changes” (p. 26). Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana*, for example, the heroine of the 1724 novel named for her, “stages the self-constitution of its female protagonist against the background of British commercial expansion” (p. 33). In her analysis of *Roxana*, Joseph lays the grounds for her cross-referencing of contracts both social and sexual as well as the setting of the parameters for identifying the controversial positioning of the woman—in the metropolis as well as in the colony—in imperial negotiations as they developed in the transition from mercantilism into colonialism, involving, as this process did, not only the profits of trade but the rewards of prostitution (p. 41).

The critical reader then turns to “memories of violence in the age of sensibility,” an assessment of a sequence of eighteenth-century memoirs that serve to recast “large-scale historical events into various emotions at the level of individual perception” with special reference to the trope of the “Black Hole” as symptomatic of the English experience in and of its colony (p. 63). John Zephaniah Howell’s *A Genuine Narrative of the Deploable Deaths of the English Gentlemen* (1758) tells the lamentable story of Siraj-ud-Dawlah’s attack on the English factory at Fort William two years earlier. Robert Bage’s *Mount Henneth* (1782) in turn moves between rural Wales and the Company’s 1756-1757 war in Ben-