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Redefining the Archive: Feminist History and Memories of Home

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Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India is an ambitious and rewarding book. Antoinette Burton deftly combines a compelling analysis of broad questions important to all historians and feminist scholars with three tightly focused, carefully researched case studies, each profiling the memories of home of an elite twentieth-century Indian woman: Janaki Majumdar (1886-1963), Cornelia Sorabji (1886-1954), and Attia Hosain (1913-1997). By redefining what constitutes an “archive,” the volume problematizes numerous familiar categories of analysis, exploring such relationships as those between history and memory, public and private, nation and home. As a result, Burton makes important contributions theoretically, empirically, and professionally, challenging her readers to think in new ways about the meaning and practice of history.

Burton expands the definition of an archive beyond its usual meaning of a repository of official records and documents. She conceives of an archive as both a “source of evidence” and a “historiographical opportunity in and for the present” (p. 5). The book reminds readers to broaden their idea of what constitutes a legitimate historical source and to empower historical subjects by recognizing that all evidence is already an interpretation and not a transparent fact. Burton seeks to “interrupt the bi-

nary logic of the discipline that segregates primary from secondary sources and privileges the archive as some originary—and therefore somehow pure—site of historical knowledge or evidence” (p. 26). Consequently, she redefines “archive” to include Janaki Majumdar’s handwritten “Family History,” Cornelia Sorabji’s many writings on *Purdahnashin* (secluded women) and the *zenana* (women’s domestic quarters), and Attia Hosain’s novel of the 1947 independence and partition of India and Pakistan, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

The ways in which Burton explores the meanings of house and home, linking them to her concept of the archive, make this book distinctive. Burton argues that in their writings, “all three [of the authors] 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” (p. 5). The elusiveness of an enduring physical home in the experiences of each of these highly mobile women, who spent years in Britain as well as South Asia, contributed to the power of the idea of home in their imaginations. As a result, home as both a dwelling and a nation, a physical place and an artifact of memory, unifies the volume. Historians of women and gender will appreciate the ways in which Burton places female writers at the center of her analysis while considering the relationship between gender, domesticity, and national identity. Postcolonial scholars will be interested in how the volume conceptualizes history, memory, and colonial

modernity while seeking to move beyond “the apparent dichotomy of ‘discourse’ versus ‘reality’” (p. 5).

The book is organized into four chapters and an epilogue. Informed by a command of the historiography, Burton’s theoretical perspective dominates chapter 1, “Memory Becomes Her: Women, Feminist History, and the Archive,” and the epilogue, “Archive Fever and the Panopticon of History.” Impressively endnoted, both sections provide an excellent analysis of the literature on gender, memory, and history. Majumdar, Sorabji, and Hosain are also sufficiently well introduced in chapter 1, as is the “woman question” and its relationship to imperial and nationalist politics in twentieth-century South Asia, so academic readers who are not specialists in Indian history will find the book accessible.

Burton deflects potential criticism by readily acknowledging that her “project has a modest aim” (p. 4) and that her three subjects are elite women, who were “more likely to produce memories centered on house and home” (p. 105) than were people of lower classes. Specialists in comparative history, however, might like to see a lengthier discussion of the rationale behind juxtaposing these particular case studies. Despite their similarities, interesting differences in politics and identity separate the women. Majumdar’s father was Indian nationalist leader W. C. Bonnerjee, and her Bengali family possessed a Hindu-Christian background. Sorabji was a self-described anti-feminist and anti-nationalist. Brought up in a Parsi-Christian family in Poona, she earned a law degree at Oxford and held an official government position under the Raj as Lady Assistant to the Court of Wards of Bengal and Eastern Assam. A generation younger than the other two, Hosain offers a third perspective. The product of a nationalist, Muslim family from the United Provinces, Partition and the creation of Pakistan uprooted her from her home in Lucknow, and Hosain spent most of the rest of her life in London.

Burton’s unique access to Majumdar’s “Family History,” discussed below, and her earlier research on Sorabji for her book *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* suggest practical, personal reasons for their inclusion in the volume.[1] The author’s relationship to Hosain is less apparent, although Burton discusses her unsuccessful efforts to obtain access to Hosain’s unpublished diaries from the woman’s family (p. 135). It appears Burton may have initially planned to introduce new evidence about Hosain, as she was able to do for Majumdar, and hoped consequently to juxtapose different types of writ-

ing from different periods in the author’s life, which she does for Sorabji. Particularly given her interest in challenging traditional assumptions about historical methodology, Burton might have addressed more explicitly some of these considerations. Contrasting multiple genres—family history, government reports, and a novel as well as letters, memoirs, and oral history—also raises intriguing considerations about the book’s implicit comparative approach (p. 16). While Burton makes compelling use of a range of sources and persuasively analyzes the nature of each woman’s “archive” within the individual chapters, a broader statement comparing and contrasting the nature of the evidence across chapters would aid readers such as graduate students who will want to look at *Dwelling in the Archive* as a model of historical scholarship. Such explicit linkage of the case studies would be particularly welcome since versions of the Majumdar and Sorabji chapters have been previously published in journals.[2]

Many readers will be particularly drawn to chapter 2, “House, Daughter, Nation: Interiority, Architecture, and the Historical Imagination in Janaki Majumdar’s ‘Family History.’” Even those historians more comfortable with empiricism than with post-colonial theory will applaud Burton’s achievement in bringing to light Majumdar’s manuscript. Due to “good luck and the serendipity of history” (p. 4), Burton was introduced through her own mother to Majumdar’s great-grandson, Amar Singh, and his wife, Sally, who were living in the suburb where Burton grew up. The Singhs shared with her Majumdar’s two hundred-page, handwritten memoir. The text has now been published by Oxford University Press in a volume Burton has edited and introduced.[3]

Majumdar wrote her family history in 1935, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Indian National Congress. Intending the document to be read by her children and grandchildren, Majumdar describes “nationalism in the making” (p. 60) by dramatizing the sacrifices made by her mother Hemangini to maintain homes in southern England and Calcutta, while Majumdar’s father W. C. developed his career as a nationalist leader. The memoir creates vivid spatial images of the interior of the family’s houses, for example presenting revealing anecdotes about the visits of other male nationalist leaders, such as the time Majumdar’s father and R. C. Dutt took possession of the kitchen in the family’s house in England to make dinner. By thus restoring men to the home, while foregrounding Hemangini’s sacrifices, Majumdar shows “how domestic space is inevitably public space as well” (p. 53), thus redefining how we think about nation-

alism itself.

Burton provides a different vision of the politics of home in chapter 3, "Tourism in the Archives: Colonial Modernity and the Zenana in Cornelia Sorabji's Memoirs." An expert on elite Hindu and Muslim women secluded within their homes, Sorabji was herself a homeless public official who lived in hotels, dedicating virtually all her time to her work. She wrote within a well-established tradition whereby diverse observers including colonial officials, nationalist leaders, and feminists related the status of women to Indians' capacity for self-government. Practices such as child marriage, and in the early nineteenth century *sati* (immolation of Hindu widows on their husbands' funeral pyres), engendered vigorous public debates. Believing that an understanding of women in *purdah* was the key to Indian politics, Sorabji "focus[ed] on the zenana as a microcosm of colonial governance, a kind of domestic miniature" (p. 75). On the one hand, she produced an extensive ethnography of *purdahnashin*, in which she cast herself as a sort of tourist guide through museum-like domestic spaces of various zenanas she visited, while at the same time conceiving of a boundless domestic sphere (p. 78) of which she possessed expert knowledge. Burton persuasively argues that reducing these contradictions to mere ironies misses the complexity of the situation. Sorabji and her subjects were doubles, the one constitutive of the other as Sorabji's status was dependent on her control of knowledge about the *zenana* women. The chapter also invites readers to think about the relationship between historians and their subjects. Burton argues against the privileging of traditional archival primary sources such as government documents over more supposedly subjective materials further removed from the period in question, such as published memoirs. By investing the former with credibility as the legitimate stuff of history, while distrusting the other as the unreliable work of memory, researchers miss the analytical opportunities Burton explores so fruitfully here. Sorabji's government reports and official correspondence held in the India Office Collection of the British Library are not more "original" and "authentic" than her published memoirs, *India Calling* (1934) and *India Recalled* (1936). "Both ... are fundamentally self-representational" (p. 83).

Burton extends her analysis of the archive to include fiction and oral history in chapter 4, "A Girlhood Among Ghosts: House, Home, and History in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*." Placing Hosain within a broader context of "Partition fiction" (p. 105) and oral histories of 1947, Burton analyzes the significance of spa-

tial descriptions of home in such narratives and considers the ways in which the process of remembering is often expressed through architectural idioms (p. 105). She argues that Hosain's novel, which was published in 1961 and includes many autobiographical elements, is "an attempt to account for the past by producing the history of one family dwelling" (p. 106).

At the beginning of the book, the protagonist, Laila, is an orphan living with an aunt and uncle in the family's ancestral home, Ashiana, which is also the name of Hosain's family's house. Feeling marginal and uncomfortable, Laila resists making the traditional marriage her family expects. Marrying for love, she flees with her husband and returns fourteen years later, in 1952, to visit the ruins of Ashiana. Laila moves through the ghostly rooms like "a kind of tourist in her own past" (p. 130). In Burton's view, the house has become an archive, a physical space that "can be used to retrieve a specific temporality, to commemorate a discrete past" (p. 132). Hosain's vision is not, however, nostalgic, since Laila remains critical. Because it had never been a fully comfortable home, the house becomes a source of history, a ruin commemorating the tragedy of Partition.

Assessed in terms of Burton's stated goals, *Dwelling in the Archive* succeeds as a thought-provoking book. One notable omission, however, is illustrations. Given the importance of architecture to the volume's thesis and Burton's assertion that "historians must be as concerned with space as they are with time" (p. 143), readers would welcome images of the places and people presented. Since Burton does address the inaccessibility of Hosain's diaries, one wonders if photographs were also unavailable. If so, Burton might have addressed this in her analysis, enriching the already subtle and sophisticated treatment of the women's writings with a more explicit assessment of how their words must stand in for the lost physical spaces they recall. Also, the book engages with many of the same themes of domesticity and politics explored in the work of Mary Procida.[4] In light of Burton's mastery of historiography, the absence of Procida from the otherwise comprehensive bibliography is surprising but may be the result of her book going to press before Procida's was published.

Given the scope of Burton's analytical achievement with *Dwelling in the Archive*, one wishes that the book's ideas would reach a wider audience than is likely. As the author notes, we live in "a time when the practice of professional history appears to have ... little grip on the contemporary imagination" (p. 139). The theoretical scope

of the book, as well as the intensive engagement with other scholarship, ensures it will be read by academics and graduate students, but popular audiences, including even most advanced undergraduates, would probably find it too challenging. This is regrettable, since Burton's concern with biography and the meanings of home could potentially resonate with a popular audience. In acknowledging the divergence between traditional empiricists, proponents of "the cultural turn," and the wider public, however, Burton's book creates an opportunity for readers to think about nothing less than who makes history, how, and for whom.

Notes

[1]. Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: In-*

dians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[2]. Burton, "House/Daughter/Nation: Interiority, Architecture and Historical Imagination in Janaki Majumdar's 'Family History,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 56:4 (November 1997): pp. 921-46; and "'The Purdahnashin in Her Setting': Colonial Modernity and the Zenana in Cornelia Sorabji's Memoirs," *Feminist Review* 65 (Summer 2000): pp. 145-58.

[3]. Burton, ed., *Janaki Majumdar's Family History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[4]. Mary Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002).

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