

# Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India

By Antoinette Burton

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Much of the history of colonial and post-colonial India has been written either from the archive or in opposition to the archive - through the eyes of the paper generated within the offices of the British Empire or through reading across and against the grain of various documents to find the voice of those unrepresented in libraries and India Office documents, the subaltern. In her recent book, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, Antoinette Burton has crafted a book that responds to current scholarship on the writing of Indian history while providing a novel outlook on what archival research might mean. Through reading the narratives of three women who intersected with important moments in Indian history, Burton extracts their relationship with home, broadly considered, to understand the way that home can be both a national, political space and an extremely personal arena of identity and contestation. While *Dwelling in the Archive* engages with major debates in South Asian scholarship, it also demands of its readers a different view of history, suggesting that diverse texts can be read as archives and that these documents must also be seen as "...historiographical opportunities in and for the present." (5)

Burton shifts the story of late colonial India from a story of major figures to those women who lived at a tangent to the presumed central events. In the three chapters that make up the body of the book, Burton explores the writings of a daughter, a lawyer and novelist, each caught up in different ways in Indian nationalism and partition. Following the work of authors such as Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Dwelling* explores the intersection of gender and nation. Although she finds much to applaud in these scholars' accounts, she also suggests that by looking at the home as an archive one finds "...a

counternarrative to the family romance that underpinned elite discourses of nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." (33) Her first account is of the writings of Janaki Majumdar, daughter of the first president of the Indian National Congress, and of her transnational travels through multiple houses and changing relationships to 'home'. Majumdar's memoir, entitled "Family History," is her attempt to tell the underlying story of her father's career but with an emphasis on how she and her mother wove in and out of important events. Focusing particularly upon the houses allows Majumdar to move away from the political narrative to look at her family's history outside this narrative. In her discussion of "Family History," Burton sees the opportunity to provide an alternative to the public sphere versus private space dichotomy to illuminate how these are intimately connected. The Bonnerjees' houses in both India and Britain, as described by Majumdar, provide a vista for rethinking the diasporic home as well as demonstrating the way in which the public life of her father is always already a part of domestic life. By focusing on women's lives and spaces, Burton sees Majumdar creating a history which is "...within the reach of national memory, yet just outside the grasp of a fully public history." (63)

The account of "Family History" in many ways provides the background for Burton's discussion of Cornelia Sorabji and debates over the zenana as well as Attia Hosain's stories of homes and families caught up in the traumatic movements that were a part of partition. If Majumdar gives her readers a private view of public political life, Sorabji asserts herself as the authority on private/secluded women. Her ethnographic descriptions sought to give a glimpse inside the hidden lives of women behind compound wall. In Sorabji's accounts, Burton sees the creation of an

alternative museum of the nation which transformed the lives of secluded women into a consumable commodity, for both colonial officials and interested voyeurs. Burton chronicles Sorabji's quest to make herself both an authority on this world and an alternative - both through her personal alternative path to public success and her lauding of an alternative of South Asian womanhood against the Gandhian model. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, discusses both the houses that her family moves through as a part of their journeys but also of the home left behind, and the inability to return, initially physically and later emotionally. In Hosain's account, Burton - following Mushirul Hasan - sees novels as "...implicitly small histories - family histories - that supplement the extant magisterial histories..." (106) complexifying the traditional narratives of partition. In uncovering the lost domestic spaces of partition, Hosain is able to make home a central character in the political drama, a space of longing and familiarity that can be read with as much nuance as any text.

The conclusion of *Dwelling in the Archive* brings to the fore an issue that is mentioned throughout the book, the very

practical difficulties of getting these alternative outlooks on historical evidence accepted within the academy. In the fallout from postcolonial scholarship, Burton senses a return to more traditional forms of scholarship, a new conservatism, and a call for a return to the 'real' academic work of dusty files. As a response, Burton suggests that the archive, like the home, is always in the process of vanishing and that "...loss itself is nothing more or less than *the* subject of history, in whatever form it takes." (144) *Dwelling in the Archive* is a text that will prove illuminating to a wide variety of audiences, including those seeking an unusual view of Indian national history, those interested in gender and women's narratives and finally to those seeking a radical new way to do history. Burton skirts a fine line, working within traditional understandings of the events of the late colonial period while questioning some assumptions. Although she remains within a textual tradition, her provocation to read domestic space as an archive is an innovative way of rethinking the public and private sphere tension and has the potential to allow historians to get "...beyond the panoptical presumptions of the traditional discipline." (143)

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