



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

By Antoinette Burton

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Dwelling in the Archives uses the writing of three 20th century Indian women to interrogate the status of the traditional archive, reading their memoirs, fictions, and histories as counter-narratives of colonial modernity. Janaki Majumdar was the daughter of the first president of the Indian National Congress. Her unpublished "Family History" (1935) stages the story of her parents' transnational marriage as a series of homes the family inhabited in Britain and India -- thereby providing a heretofore unavailable narrative of the domestic face of 19th century Indian nationalism. Cornelia Sorabji was one of the first Indian women to qualify for the bar. Her memoirs (1934 and 1936) demonstrate her determination to rescue the zenana (women's quarters) and purdahashin (secluded women) from the recesses of the orthodox home in order to counter the emancipationist claims of Gandhian nationalism. Last but not least, Attia Hosain's 1961 novel, "Sunlight on Broken Column" represents the violence and trauma of partition through the biography of a young heroine called Laila and her family home. Taken together, their writings raise questions about what counts as an archive, offering us new insights into the relationship of women to memory and history, gender to fact and fiction, and feminism to nationalism and postcolonialism.

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Editorial Review

Review

"...a very readable and thought-provoking reflection on identity, nation, and modernity that deserves a wide audience."--*The Historian*

"In terms of her theoretical framework, Burton has tapped into a rich seam, producing a work that should be of interest to several different constituencies of readers and scholars."--*Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*

"*Dwelling in the Archive* brilliantly showcases late colonial Indian women's writing not merely as elite, private narrative but as the very material form in which a gendered social memory surfaces through the recollection of homes inhabited in the past. It will productively unsettle the distinctions customarily made between public and private histories and between historical and literary study."--Rosemary Marangoly George, author of *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*

"[A] valuable addition to our own archives of representation of the social. It forces us to rethink settled conventions of knowledge production, and of history (or any other discipline) and confronts us with representation (political) and re-presentation (epistemological and aesthetic) as moments of struggle."--*American Historical Review*

"A bold innovator who extends the concept of archive to include the physical space of houses and memories of homes, Burton documents women's agency in the creation of the Indian nation and articulates their divergent narratives that question dominant constructions of nationhood."-- Barbara N. Ramusack, University of Cincinnati

"Antoinette Burton's subtle exploration of the multiple senses of 'dwelling,' as home or national abode, and as a meditation upon the objects of history and memory makes for fascinating and insightful reading."-- Kamala Visweswaran, University of Texas at Austin

About the Author

Antoinette Burton is Professor of History at the University of Illinois

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