



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.

Reviewed by Barbara Harlow (Department of English, The University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (November, 2004)

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 Company, 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 interview 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 sex-

ual 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 Desplorable 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 Bengal, whereas Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House* (1789) relays the reminiscences of an Englishwoman sojourning in Calcutta—or, alternatively and rather less salubriously, of the "traffic of females in the colonies" (p. 81).

By the time that Francesco Renaldi painted the portrait of the Palmer family resident in India in 1786 (the portrait that appears on the book's cover), however, it was less traffic than settlement that was at stake in this "great game." Thus, chapter 3 turns to the "politics of settlement" with Captain Williamson's *East India Vade-Mecum* (1810) and its advice to the young men recruited by the East Indian Company to do its bidding and carry out its work in India along with Mrs. Monkland's domestic novel, *Life in India: Or, the English at Calcutta* (1828), where the choice of husband from among the eligible soldiers on the one hand (who may or may not have read the *East India Vade-Mecum*) or the by now pukka civil servants on the other is crucial to finding satisfactory married life in a bungalow. Each of the two texts functions as at once ethnographic and novelistic, suggests Joseph, with both genres collaborating eventually in the project to "reterritorialize India into a place of potential settlement" (p. 122).

The tale of the Rani of Burdwan provides the occasion for inquiring into the language of "women's rights as human rights" as providing a rhetorical strategy—if not an alibi—in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed "Eurocentric strategies of narrativizing history" (p. 124). The Rani's case is, according to Joseph, reviewing the opinions of Montesquieu and Marx on "oriental despo-

tism,” perhaps the “most pathetic case” in the harrowing if hallowed story of the “so-called confined or secluded woman of despotic societies” (cited on p. 125). Unlike the French and German philosophers, however, Englishman John Stuart Mill is cited for his very different “encounter with the rani in the India House archives” (p. 151). According to Joseph, for Mill, in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), the rani is “no longer the degraded and gendered limit case of Western democracy, an object of sexual despotism, but rather the evidence of potential the Englishwoman had yet to achieve” (p. 151). Perhaps after all, Aouda—the sati rescued by Phileas Fogg and whom he marries at the end of his journey, *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873)—will yet, in some no less fictitious forthcoming sequel, find a new future in England leading the ranks of the British suffragettes.

While the debate over sati/suttee is the topic of “Critical Genealogies,” in the final chapter of *Reading the East India Company*, Joseph focuses not on the 1829 banning of the practice—as much discussed now as it was debated then—but instead reads its framing in the “Minutes of Evidence” from the 1813 Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company which pitted trade, shipping, and missionary interests against each other, with the “poor rural woman” serving as the “alibi for continuing deindustrialization” (p. 166). The critic then concludes with a reconsideration of the contemporary position of the much vaunted indigenous reformer railing against sati, Rammohun Roy, as the “enlightened native nodding assent to the takeover of his land by an alien power (pp. 175-176). If the Company, that is, had trafficked in both commodities and women, Roy, Joseph argues, was now trading on his cachet of “enlightened” indigeneity with an eagerly receptive British colonial consumer, all too

greedy for such returns on their investment as promised by this spoiled example of their influence peddling.

Joseph, at last, concludes her “reading of the East India Company” and its “colonial currencies of gender” in the epilogue, “Recon(figur)ing Women,” by citing the critique of Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana on the “use of women as alibis for new political configurations” (p. 179). Whereas as Tharu and Niranjana are addressing “problems for a contemporary theory of gender,” Joseph has traced the origins of at least some of those new political configurations back even to the hallowed books kept so officiously by the overseers and shareholders of the East India Company as it made its way—and its profits—in and across the subcontinent. The alibis are there, along with the spoils, to be found and exposed, in the archives.

Notes

[1]. Anthony Farrington, *Trading Places: The East India Company and Asia 1600-1834* (London: The British Library, 2002), p. 23.

[2]. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-74.

[3]. Ranajit Guha, “Not at Home in Empire,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Spring 1997), p. 485.

[4]. Partha Chatterjee, “Towards a Postcolonial Modernity: AsiaSource Interview with Partha Chatterjee,” <http://www.asiasource.org/news/specialreports/chatterjeeprint.html>. For the reference to “sappers in the stacks,” see Barbara Harlow, “Sappers in the Stacks: Colonial Archives, Land Mines and Truth Commissions,” *Boundary* (1998), pp. 179-204.

[5]. Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Barbara Harlow. Review of Joseph, Betty, *Reading the East India Company, 1720-1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10016>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.