



**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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## The Secrets of Archives

This book is about archives and the various gendered uses they were put by the early British colonial state. The East India Company was a prodigious record-keeper as anyone who has ever used the Oriental and Indian Office Reading Room on the third floor of the British Library can readily attest. Betty Joseph, a professor of English at Rice University, employs the tools of literary criticism and postcolonial scholarship to interrogate just how ideologically driven the process of archiving was under early colonial rule, particularly in regard to discourses about British and Indian women. In particular, she examines an important paradox of early colonial rule: why it was that colonial officials and other Britons in India kept invoking gendered discourses even when the topics for discussion had little, if anything, directly to do with women.

Methodologically, Joseph is a moderate deconstructionist and a historicist. She adopts Foucault's notion of the archive as a mechanism of truth-production rather than a repository of objective facts; she also embraces his concept of governmentality. In the case of early colonial India, Joseph argues colonial officials "construct[ed] representation[s] they [could] work with" (p. 17) of Indian and British women so that India could become "a manageable and governable object" (p. 123). She also draws upon Subaltern Studies historian Ranajit Guha's division between "primary" and "secondary discourse" (pp. 135-136) in juxtaposing sources typically used by historians such as the archival records of the East India Company and parliamentary testimony with those usu-

ally examined by cultural critics such as novels, memoirs, portraits, and advice books. Such juxtapositions are necessary, in Joseph's view, if contemporary feminist scholars are ever to satisfactorily deconstruct "the rules that determine[d] the constitution or usage of knowledge and the historical conditions that allow[ed] various utterances to emerge textually" and which continue to inform Western understandings of Third World gender practices and relations (p. 15). Unlike postcolonial feminist critics Gayatri Spivak and Gauri Viswanathan, though, Joseph takes seriously the need to recover the real women buried beneath colonial representations even if they are nameless or seemingly voiceless (pp. 18-20). [1] Paraphrasing Guha, she maintains that the colonial archive, although dominant, never completely attained hegemony in the debate over who Indian women were.[2] There were always discordant native female voices which the colonial regime never entirely succeeded in muffling and which can still be heard, even in a neat colonial archive, if a scholar listens carefully.

Although the early British colonial state never quite achieved its goal of hegemony, Company officials and their elite Indian male allies over the century-long period of colonial conquest and consolidation nevertheless engaged in a constant reiteration of certain gendered premises as part of their strategy to attain political dominance over India. A main presumption on the part of colonial officials, originating in the early eighteenth century, was that Indian women lacked any real subjectivity because of caste and religion, a narration which went

through several permutations as the century wore on and which would stand in more than once as an alibi for major transformations brought about by early Company rule. Thus, in its implementation of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, Joseph demonstrates how British officials systematically prevented Indian women from owning land on the basis that because elite Indian women were often secluded within the home, they must be the victims of oppression by Indian men and, thus, not good tax collectors despite real evidence to the contrary (p. 147). Joseph argues a second major iteration of the discourse came in 1813 in debates over the renewal of the Company's charter as it attempted to protect both its monopoly trading privileges and its powers to restrict the entry of Britons in India in the face of sustained attack by free traders and missionaries. Former Company officials testified before Parliament claiming to "protect" Indian women both from being inundated by foreign British manufactures and from lower-class Britons supposedly more prone to despotism.

The Company was totally unsuccessful in its deployment of representations of oppressed Indian women in 1813 when it was forced to let in missionaries and British goods. Even so, according to Joseph, the discourse itself was not discredited but would go through a third reiteration two decades later. This time, as the Company was finishing its conquest of India and engaged now in colonial consolidation, urbanized, high-caste, middle-class Indian elites such as Rammohun Roy sought to recast "Indian tradition" in order to enhance their power vis-à-vis other Indians. In 1818, Roy opposed *sati* as having no foundation within Hindu scripture and, in 1829, praised Governor-General Lord Bentinck for prohibiting female immolation and, thus, "protecting" Indian men from themselves (pp. 172-173). As Joseph demonstrates, colonial representations of Indian women as helpless victims of Indian male oppression now came full circle. Whereas once the Company was cautious, deferring to the interests of Indian men whom it needed as commercial allies, now this discourse became a crucial prop for recasting empire as liberal paternalism (p. 177).

The colonial archival project of disciplining and ordering India gradually came to need not only the active participation of British men but also British women. This, however, necessitated a parallel discursive change in representations of British women in India and the East. Joseph explores this process in novels from Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724) to Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789), written during the Hastings's impeachment trial before the House of Lords. Only with the latter

novel, Joseph contends, are there the faint beginnings of a new discursive role for British women as the embodiment of moral virtue and as the fount of British moral and cultural authority in India (p. 83).

Yet this new colonial discourse was not without problems, chiefly among which was how to police newly emerging racial and cultural boundaries between rulers and ruled increasingly seen as essential to colonial rule. As Joseph maintains, before British women could assume their new positions as moral guardians of British colonialism, Indian women who were once the romantic lovers of British men had to be shunted to the background or recast as prostitutes. In addition, the mixed-race children of these now illicit relationships had to be denied the colonial status of their British fathers. Much of the new onus, however, fell upon British women as those who acted badly were thought to put at risk the moral prestige of British rule. Thus, in Mrs. Monkland's *Life in India* (1828), it is Harriet Panton who almost completely undermines British colonialism through her infidelity as she indirectly causes both the ambush of her soldier-lover and the theft of the Company's revenues—which are under his protection—by jungle bandits (pp. 120-121). At the same time that Indian allies such as Rammohun Roy were championing the Company's liberal paternalism, the last thing colonialism could afford were unruly British women dispelling the governing fiction that British colonial rule was virtuous and had the best interests of its Indian subjects at heart.

In any book which crosses multiple disciplinary boundaries, there is bound to be at least one complaint from scholars in any one of these disciplines. At times, I found myself wondering who Joseph's intended targeted audience was. Use of jargon such as "archontic" (p. 91) and "ideologemes" (p. 120) only added to this confusion. This relatively minor criticism, however, ought not to detract from the true merit of this book. Joseph is to be applauded for attempting and generally pulling off that rare breed: the interdisciplinary monograph that speaks to concerns in literary and cultural studies as well as history and Asian studies and which points the way for further investigation. Likewise, the University of Chicago Press is to be praised for publishing the book with both a full bibliography and endnotes as well as for offering a relatively inexpensive paperback edition. *Reading the East India Company* deserves the attention of all scholars of early British colonialism in India, social scientists as well as scholars working in cultural studies, feminist critics as well as women's and gender historians, if for no other reason than that it reminds us that archives are not

what they always seem.

Notes

[1] Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985); and Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Con-*

*quest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

[2] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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