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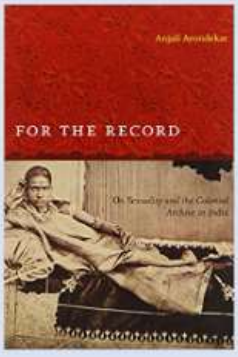


# Voice of Archival Absence

Devika Sethi

**FOR THE RECORD: ON SEXUALITY AND THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE IN INDIA by Anjali Arondekar** *Duke University Press, 2011, 215 pp., 395*

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The relationship between sexuality and empire in the context of South Asia is one that has received much, and muchneeded, scholarly attention in recent years. Since one kind of archive or another is used by scholars and activists in the field of sexuality studies to form and/or legitimize their case, Arondekar finds it necessary to interrogate the nature and authority of the archive itself, specifically with regard to its value as a source for studying sexuality. In doing so, she follows in the path of what is now a wellestablished tradition, but adds new dimensions to the critique. The archive is, for Arondekar, a repository, but one that does not yield its secrets easily, is easily amenable to being read simplistically, and contains multiple meanings. Following Ann Stoler, and extending as well as illustrating her thesis with very relevant and illuminating examples, Arondekar argues that the context from which traces of sexuality emerge is as (if not more) important as the content of the traces. In this work as in her earlier essays, Arondekar repeatedly cautions against recognizing the archive as the total site of colonial knowledge.

The critique of the archive as a sourcein fact, the legitimate sourceof academic inquiry questions the vision of a total, comprehensive archive, where facts await the eager historian, and then, having been found, speak for themselves. The central premise of this book is that absence, from and in the archive, speaks louder than presence. Arondekar questions the model where the archive is the place of both first and last resort for those seeking to find the historyand from that, the legitimacyof sexuality. She does not reject the archive (and depends heavily on archives of various kinds herself), but rather makes a wellargued case for treating the archive more as a subjectthan merely a source–of study.

Each chapter in the book takes one form of absence from the archives as part of the mosaic of the larger argument: an absent report, an absent victim, an absent representation of male

sexuality (specifically Indian male sexuality in Victorian pornography), and the absent focus on obvious depictions of Sexuality in Kiplings literary corpus. The examples are wideranging both in terms of time (1840s to the 1920s) as well as in their manifestation (from anthropology to law, pornography to literature).

The first chapter takes up the curious case of a report on male brothels in Karachi that Richard Burton was supposedly commissioned to write in 1845 shortly after the controversial annexation of Sindh. Although Burton himself referred to this report in another work, the report itself has not been recovered. It is Arondekars case that the report generates interest and power not despite its loss, but because of it. She states at the outset that she is not interested in the existence or otherwise of the report, but in the power it generates on account of its absence. In other words, rather than answering the question of whether the report was actually present or absent, she questions the question. The absence of the report has bolstered its credibility rather than damaging it, and this is taken by Arondekar as proof of the seductive power of archival mythmaking. In her words, a missing record of sexuality promises the (impossible) success of colonial intelligence (p. 54).

In the second chapter, the focus shifts to a failed sodomy prosecution in 1884 (Queen Empress v. Khairati). Although archival traces remain in the form of law reports, the case against Khairati failed precisely because of the absence of other kinds of traces: since there was no victim, no crime could conclusively be proved. Arondekar provides a vivid illustration of colonial difference by deftly contrasting this particular allegation of sodomy with that against an English priest. Arondekar argues that what the lost report of the previous chapter and this legal case record have in common, despite their very different forms, is that they both try to fix sexuality (specifically native sexuality) as simultaneously invisible (in forensic terms, since it is difficult to establish proof) and hypervisible (in anthropological terms, when evidence for criminality is assumed to be so obvious as to need no reiteration). This causes tension in the archival sources, and it is this tension that Arondekar finds revealing in its own right rather than something incidental that needs to be smoothed out.

Colonial pornography in the latter half of the nineteenth century forms the core of the third chapter, where both texts and a material embodiment (the India Rubber dildo) are invoked as a cautionary tale against the seductions of historical recovery and access (p. 98). The author draws ingenious and convincing linkages between the possession of empire and its natural resources (rubber, in this instance), to show how Technologies of sexuality fuse with technologies of colonial industry (p. 101). The chapter is a skillfully written instantiation of how the historicity of pornography opens through the historicity of colonial modes of production and vice versa; neither history is thus complete in itself (p. 117). This picture can be complicated still more if one takes into account the fact that the import into India of finger ticklers and babies (imitations of human sexual organs) was proposed to be banned by the Bengal government in 1905 since, it was argued, the appliances undermine the morality of young girls. On the other hand, the magnitude of their demand can be gauged by the fact that there were twentynine importers of these in Calcutta alone, and they were exported to India by eight firms located in Paris, Sussex and Leipzig. She also points to a revealing discourse of contradictory lament in the official archives with respect to the question of obscenity and pornography in the Indian context (p. 108), as colonial officials characterized Indian culture as perverted, but sought simultaneously to protect Indians from pornographic representations produced in the West.

Arondekar illustrates with examples how pornography, which claims to shock because it rejects conventions, nevertheless sticks to colonial ones (such as not describing interracial sexual acts). The last chapter of the book takes up the case of the primary literary archive of the British Empire, that of Rudyard Kipling. Arondekar takes up the few stories that refer to the events of 1857, and argues that they offer an insight to his overall archive: through these stories he attempts to settle archives of chaos, such as the memory of the Indian Mutiny, into contained narratives of everyday AngloIndian life (p. 162).

This book makes for demanding but rewarding reading. In places it assumes familiarity with various theoretical interventions in the fields of literary and sexuality studies, which may intimidate a beginner in the field. Although such beginners will benefit from reading this book, so will established academic practitioners and activists, who will perhaps be inspired to question the assumptions they make, and perhaps even the questions they raise. Each chapter is whole on its own, and each relies on different kinds of archives (bureaucratic, legal, newspaper and literary, to name a few) to make its case. It is precisely the centrality of archive (state, institutional or literary) to academic study, and its mobilization for political causes, that magnifies the dangers of reading it uncritically, and this work goes a long way in facilitating critical readings such that it becomes a subject in its own right.

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