


BOOK REVIEW

Fae Dussart. *In the Service of Empire: Domestic Service and Mastery in Metropole and Colony*

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We know now that the employment practices of white households and the introduction of capitalist wage relations reconfigured existing cultures of servitude in colonies in Asia and Africa. Equally, analyzing domesticity, with an emphasis on the intersections of class, race, and gender, was central to the renewal of imperial history in the 1990s. Fae Dussart's *In the Service of Empire: Domestic Service and Mastery in Metropole and Colony* makes a crucial contribution to this body of scholarship. In most studies of imperial domesticity, an implicit link is made between the emergence of the bourgeois domestic sphere in the metropole and its re-scripting in the colonies. Dussart makes this link explicit. The book compares the employment of domestic workers by Britons in Britain and India. This comparative framework has lent considerable power and depth to her analysis of imperial domesticity, throwing into sharp relief the significance of racial hierarchies and colonial difference.

The book helps us understand the centrality of domestic service not only in the British Raj but in Britain as well—in the “British imperial world” (209). It shows the complex layering of categories, such as gender, race, class, and caste, in domestic relations across the metropole and the colony, feeding into each other, and giving coherence to the ideology and management of empire. Three chapters are focused on nineteenth-century Britain, two on India, and one is comparative. Of these, I found the chapters analyzing the “tensions of intimacy” (109–121)—the complexity of combining bodily proximity with social hierarchy and subordination—particularly fascinating. In the context of India, Dussart shows, practices of domestic intimacy were complicated by caste. The fourth chapter explores stereotypes and power asymmetry, arguing that ambivalent and racialized notions of Indian character produced by white employers became influential across the British Empire.

The spread of the notion of a “servant problem,” (58) explored in the opening chapter, is viewed from both ends. A signal achievement of the book is to bring forth the servants' voice, heard most systematically in the last chapter, which explores political mobilization of domestic workers in nineteenth-century Britain. Dussart records several fragmentary attempts at unionization, mostly short-lived, but indicating growing discontent. This account, which can be read as a failure of organization, is nevertheless evocative of some major themes of the book. Dussart makes the point that domestic workers in India did not—or could not—access similar political resources because of colonial subordination. This brings to fore one of the challenges of this study. Historical research in and on domestic work is virtually non-existent in South Asia, especially compared to Britain, where there is a rich vein of such research. There is only one monograph and an edited publication: Swapna M. Banerjee's *Men, Women and Domesticity. Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (2004) and Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma, and Pankaj Jha (eds.), *Servants' Pasts: Sixteenth to*

Eighteenth Century South Asia (2019). Thus, we know little about the politics of domestic workers in colonial India. We do know that formal unionization began in the 1950s after independence, but little is known about modes and forms of resistance in the colonial period. Dussart's concern is with Britons employing Indian servants. In the absence of existing secondary literature, she is unable to set this in the context of the much larger and highly varied sector of Indian employers. Many of the issues she addresses—intimacy, resistance, violence, and agency—should be understood in the context not only of British employers' experience of servants in Britain but modes of cultures of domestic work employment in India. We hope to see research tackle this second strand of comparison in future.

Dussart makes a powerful point about knowledge asymmetry structuring domestic work employment. While servants, by reason of proximity and enforced intimacy, knew a great deal about the individuals, activities and relationships in employers' households, employers had little or no reciprocal knowledge. This was especially true of European employers of Indian servants, given the gulf of language and culture. Incomprehension contributed toward employers' anxieties and insecurities.

These tensions exacerbated violence. The book mines legal disputes and newspaper reporting to compare coercive practices in Britain and India. The unsurprising conclusion is that there was greater tolerance of violence by European employers in India. In accounts of nationalism, the Fuller case (1876–77) is cited as an example of explicit racialization of the judicial system. Fuller, a judge, kicked a servant to death. It was argued in court that the servant's enlarged spleen rather than the force of the blow had proved fatal. The so-called spleen theory caused outrage among Indians, on the one hand; on the other, however, attempts to impose more stringent punishment roused white imperial anxiety. By this time, in Britain, there was clear and outright condemnation of violence against young women servants. The race and gender of the employer and the servant determined the limits of tolerance of physical chastisement. This indicated, argues Dussart, a flux in the domestic work relationship, structured in Britain by discourses of work and rights; in India by discourses of race and nationalism.

In Britain, incipient processes of formalization began in the nineteenth century. The comparative lens helps contrast the very different trajectories in this sector. In South and South-East Asia, long-established customs of paid domestic service were impacted by processes of colonialism but continued in post-colonial regimes. Recent research has shown deep continuities in employment practices of "white families" living temporarily in India even today (Satya Shikha Chakraborty and Shalini Grover, "Care-work for Colonial and Contemporary White Families in India: A Historical-Anthropology of the Racialized Romanization of the Ayah," *Cultural Dynamics* 34, no. 4 [2022]: 297–319). The question of continuity is complex in India because of hybrid labor regimes, combining slavery, servitude, and wage work. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, moreover, the company state put in place punitive regulation of domestic workers to appease European employers. It was only toward the close of the twentieth century that some rudimentary protective regulation could be introduced, and that too was piecemeal. In opening up these questions, Dussart's book makes a major contribution not only to the history of imperial domesticity but also toward understanding long-term trends in paid domestic work.