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Introduction to Postcolonial Literature

May 10, 2019

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Rewriting History: Exploring the Margins of The British Museum

Postcolonial theory encourages critics to examine a text from the margins in order to identify elements and voices missing from the central narrative. Without determining what is missing, one might overlook important tensions or implicit biases at play; without the margin, there is no center, no heart to the work (196). In this case, the British Museum functions as a collection of texts and a work in it of itself. Each artifact contributes to the overall narrative the exhibit and Museum as a whole strives to craft. The Museum is world renowned for the millions of artifacts curated in its collection, with several key pieces drawing millions of visitors annually. While the mission of education and celebration of world history and culture at first glance occupies the center of the text that is the Museum, examining it from the margins suggests an alternative. As beneficial as it is to have the world at the fingertips of visitors to learn about and explore, the blatantly missing component of this narrative is the source of the artifacts themselves. The answer to this can be found in the ever-increasing in frequency of requests from origin countries and native peoples for the return of their artwork and other artifacts. Much of the Museum's collection results from colonizing activities at the height of the British Empire. Acknowledging this marginalized and omitted narrative restructures the perspective on what could be determined as the center of the Museum's narrative. It transfigures from a center of learning to a living documentation and celebration of imperial Britain- a reminder that the

Empire has not fully disintegrated, and in appropriating the history of oppressed societies, the Museum perpetuates the country's tradition of construing reality to fit a eurocentric myth of universality, suppressing subaltern voices, and exercising neocolonialist power over postcolonial societies.

The British Museum, located in London, England, boasts an extensive collection of over 5 million artifacts from all over the world. At its opening in 1753, it became the world's first national public Museum, and today it attracts nearly 6 million visitors a year. The Museum started with the collections of Sir Hans Sloane, who bequeathed his extensive accumulation of natural species, manuscripts, books, coins, and other artifacts to King George II. Today's collection that is on display and accessible to visitors includes artifacts from Africa, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and Rome, Mexico, China, Korea, Japan, the Ancient Middle East, including Assyria and Mesopotamia, and Europe. While the Museum is a center of knowledge and provides learning opportunities for its visitors, to some degree, it is also a sort of shrine to the British empire.

For instance, many of its most notable artifacts on display were removed from other locations and brought to England as the British set out to conquer and colonize the world. Their Ancient Egyptian collection is the result of British imperial rule in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century and the excavations of historical sites by British archaeologists. The Rosetta Stone, renowned for its role in cracking the hieroglyphic language, was discovered by French soldiers in the Napoleonic wars and subsequently seized by the British and brought home. It has since been credited for facilitating remarkable academic advancements in language and translation. The sculptures from the Parthenon have incited a legal battle between the Museum

and the country of Greece, because at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a British nobleman, Lord Elgin, bargained with the Ottoman Sultan ruling Greece to take the marble statues. One of the Easter Island Heads was originally taken from the Island as a gift to Queen Victoria and is now on display, despite the fact that the sculptures are historically significant to the Island and its people, since they are modeled to depict past leaders. The Lewis Chessmen are artifacts from the British Isle that still reflect the colonial tension between the territories; the chess pieces are considered by some to be Scotland's greatest archaeological treasures.

These artifacts, as well as the millions of other culturally and historically significant pieces in the Museum's collection, open the conversation for a multitude of postcolonial theoretical ideas and their relevance to today's institutions. In particular, the aforementioned highlights of the Museum explore ideas of nationalism, subaltern agency, continual imperialism, and the shift from colonialism to neocolonialism.

The Rosetta Stone is likely the most well-known part of the British Museum's collection. Napoleon's soldiers discovered the stone at el-Rashid, also called Rosetta, when they were digging to build a fort in 1799. Under the Treaty of Alexandria in 1801, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the British received custody of the stone, among other artifacts. The stone is inscribed with a decree traced back to the royal cult of Ptolemy V of Egypt celebrating the anniversary of his coronation. While fairly unremarkable as far as content goes, the most significant aspect of the archaeological discovery is that this decree is written three times, each in a different script: Greek, Egyptian demotic, and Egyptian hieroglyphs. These three languages have significance, because Greek was the language of the rulers, demotic was the language of the common citizens, and hieroglyphs were used in religious or other important documents. The

context of the Rosetta Stone itself suggests the power of language; this administrative declaration was important enough to be translated across scripts for all to read, and language is a discourse of power (71). Further, it enabled British and French scholars to unlock languages from the past, since hieroglyphics had been undecipherable to that point.

The British Museum's path to acquiring the Rosetta Stone offers an interesting glimpse at the intersection between culture, history, and imperialism. This artifact that draws millions of visitors annually and has enhanced academic research and understanding of ancient Egypt is a spoil of war; first seized by the French, then used as a reward for the victors of a clash of European power, and taken from the land whose history it helped reveal. The people living in Egypt did not have a voice or any degree of agency as to whether this tool to decipher a formerly dead language so prevalent to their country's history remained or not. The British ignored any local value, assumed intellectual dominance, and instigated a tradition of appropriating Egyptian culture that would continue into aristocratic funded archaeological excavations in the twentieth century.

However, there is an argument to be made for the value of bringing the Rosetta Stone to England. While not necessarily theirs for the taking, it has allowed immense progress in European and eventually American understanding of Ancient Egypt. If learning about history is deemed valuable to a holistic education, and ancient Egypt has sufficient historical influence and importance, then hasn't the Rosetta Stone and by relation, the British scholars who seized it, done the world a great service? But, thinking about the Rosetta Stone in this way ignores the nuance of education, and where the power lies within world history. Eurocentric institutions, such as the British Museum, have been able to use their lingering imperial significance to

determine what is and is not historically important to the rest of the world. But what is important to Britain may not be as important to those in the Middle East, or Central America, or Pacific Islands. This is not to discount the value of ancient Egypt as a society and the tremendous innovations in technology and fascinating instances of governmental power and conflict, but rather to bring to light the fact that the rest of the world is allowed to value this historical era spanning millennia because those with influence in the intellectual space have deemed it worth appreciating and studying. Yet, despite the flaws in obtaining the Rosetta Stone, its aid has been indispensable in global scholarship; there is an underlying tension between its role and its ownership, and the discussion surrounding to whom such a valuable object can truly belong.

Exploring the archives of the British Museum is an exercise in power deconstruction; the curators have the ability to determine what artifacts and stories are worth putting on display for their millions of visitors. Given the Museum's world renowned reputation and influence, the curators have the agency to continue the myth of universality surrounding Eurocentric practices and beliefs. In relation to Edward Said's piece on Orientalism, the curators and trustees have the ability to create a discourse of western domination, thereby restructuring history and asserting authority over the Orient. While they have the potential to exercise this power, they make an effort to display works from a wide range of locations and historical eras, but they have not yet divorced their anglo-perspective from their exhibitions. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critical essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she discusses the degree of agency traditionally suppressed or subaltern voices experience. She encourages readers to examine works for issues of "speaking for" and "re-presentation"; instances of both can be found in the construction and design of the British Museum's exhibits. They have the power to present a country or territory however they

see fit, and quite literally “re-present” their entire history and culture (31). The artifacts do not necessarily speak for themselves, but rather depend on the context in which they are placed.

Spivak argues the construction of an English cultural identity was inseparable from othering the native as its object; as the British Museum functions as a collection of colonizing activities, this analysis rings true.

Another exhibit exposing the tension between cultural appreciation and artifact ownership, as well as the question of national identity is the display of statues from the Parthenon in Greece. The Parthenon is a 2,500 year old structure with a varied list of former occupations, including a temple for Athena, a Church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and a mosque. In 1687, when the Venetians were attacking Athens, the Parthenon was used as a storage facility for gunpowder, and an explosion blew the roof off and destroyed many sculptures. By 1800, only half of the original sculptures remained, and according to the Museum, archaeologists across the globe agree that the surviving sculptures could not be reattached. The Museum obtained the Parthenon sculptures through Lord Elgin, a British nobleman acting as ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during their occupation of Greece. His time abroad inspired an appreciation for the classical art proliferating Athens, and when he witnessed the rapid deterioration of the Acropolis and the Parthenon, he sought to acquire pieces from the structure before they were ultimately destroyed from time, conflict, and foreign visitors. Between 1801 and 1805, he removed half the statues from the Parthenon and brought them to England; they have been on display in the British Museum since 1817.

Today, the Museum houses the sculptures in a cavernous room, installed along the walls to recreate the original Parthenon construction; this massive display strengthens the Museum’s

claim to the pieces, since they best emulate their original presentation. The sculptures are made of white marble, and depict famous scenes from Greek mythology.

The first individual request for the return of the statues was in 1816, but in the 1980s, the Greek government lobbied for the return of the statues, disputing the legality of the Museum's claim, and thus instigated a legal, cultural, and political debate that is still ongoing. Legally, Lord Elgin had full consent from the governing body at the time when he removed the statues, and he bequeathed his collection to the Museum, therefore, the British Museum's Board of Trustees maintains they have the legal right to the statues. Politically, the British government has deferred judgement to the Museum, rather than escalate the conflict into two nations' governments arguing. Culturally, the Museum argues that because the statues have been in London longer than the modern state of Greece has actually existed, "they have become part of this country's heritage and have acted as a central focus for western European culture, and its admiration of ancient Greek culture." In an institution founded on Enlightenment era ideals, the Parthenon sculptures have found a place in international education, thereby transcending national boundaries.

The British Museum argues the presentation of the marble statues at the Museum most closely imitates their former glory in the Parthenon during its prime. Their place in the Museum puts them in a position to be enjoyed by millions of visitors annually, and contribute to scholarly research. The Museum has been able to curate an incredible range of artifacts spanning across millennia in order to provide a public service. The extensive collection allows the public to "re-examine public identities" and look for similarities or influences between cultures and eras (The British Museum). For instance, having the Parthenon sculptures on display allows visitors to experience Ancient Greek culture in person, and recognize its pervasive influence across

history. Within the context of the Museum's collection, the Parthenon sculptures facilitate cultural comparison across a multitude of artifacts. On the other hand, the Acropolis Museum solely presents the sculptures in a Greek context, rather than in a general, broader perspective of the world. To question the Museum's right to the sculptures is to question the validity of all Museums and curated collections around the world in presenting world history; "It calls into question the whole notion of a world collection in which visitors can learn about the cultures of the world, ancient and modern (The British Museum)."

The debate surrounding the rightful location and ownership of the Parthenon sculptures exposes a series of tensions. First, the notion that art is something that can be owned- if it is meant to be an educational resource, or a commentary on humanity, why is possession such an important topic? The various appeals for the return of artifacts from their respective sites of origin provoke the question as to whom culture truly belongs to. One of the pillars of the Greek government's attempts to reclaim the Parthenon sculptures is the cultural and historical value they have towards the country and its people. However, ancient Greek culture has proliferated country lines and territories for millenia. If the legacy and influence of ancient Greece extends beyond the borders of Greece, shouldn't the works of art as well? To some degree, the culture of ancient Greece has become a key factor in cultures across the world, since they themselves were an imperial force. Therefore, one could argue the Museum is justified in keeping the statues, since they contribute to a broader scope of world history alongside other artifacts from all over.

Another important artifact on display is one of the Easter Island statues, a 7 foot 9 inch basalt figure, likely over 800 years old; it sits, stoic and strong, at the entrance for a room displaying pieces following the theme: living and dying. Its name, Hoa Hakananai'a, translating

to “lost or stolen friend”, is eerily representative of its emerging position in the spotlight as another controversial piece of world history essentially abducted by the British. It is one of the Moai statues from Easter Island, and was originally brought to England following the HMS Topaze Expedition to Rapa Nui in 1868. The Moai statues, aside from not being free for the taking, play a significant role in the culture, history, and religion of the Rapa Nui people. They are each modeled after former chiefs and ancestors who they believe have become deified, and are believed to contain their spirits. According to the governor of Easter Island, Tarita Alarcon Rapu, “we are just the body. You, the England people, have our soul (Smith).” Rapu visited the British Museum in the fall of 2018 to appeal for the return of Hoa Hakananai'a, or to obtain a brief loan following its 150 year absence from the island; she and her delegation were unsuccessful.

The governments and territories calling for the restoration of their historical pieces speaks to the overcorrection to nationalism in rejecting colonialism. In Edward Said's critical essay, *Culture and Imperialism*, he explores resistance, opposition, and representation and argues for the need to decolonize resistance. As the world shifts towards a postcolonial dynamic, those regions formerly subject to colonization find themselves uniting under the myth of a national history or culture, yet in doing so, subscribe to lingering colonialist ideas of nationhood. While there is certainly an argument to be made regarding the return of their property from the British Museum, the motives behind their request prompt further analysis. In short, the restoration of these pieces will not restore the sense of community and identity that the colonial encounter destroyed. “Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale,” but its worst effect was making people think they were exclusively one thing, as if they are

defined by a national label and reduced to a single identity (98). However, in engaging in conversation with the British Museum, groups like the Rapa Nui people embark on “the voyage in”, the “conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories (97).” In their resistance, they expose the margins of the Museum’s narrative, and further the mission of postcolonial theory in rewriting history.

A more domestic instance of colonial tension manifests in the Lewis Chessmen. These 82 pieces of an ancient chess set were found in Scotland, and have grown in notoriety for a variety of reasons. Primarily, they have been a source of fascination and mystery to scholars because they were found hidden on a beach in Scotland, buried deep in the ground, apparently never used. One proposition is that they belonged to a merchant traveling from Scandinavia to Ireland, and therefore, they demonstrate the existence of some sort of trade route crossing through Scotland. They are likely from the 11-12th century. Their origin has been suggested as Irish, Scottish, or Icelandic, though they also appear to have Norse influence. There are 93 pieces in total, with 11 in Scotland, though the other 82 in The British Museum are often lent out to Scottish Museums and galleries. In recent years however, there have been calls to unite the entire collection in Scotland permanently; “the rise of Scottish nationalism in the previous two decades has brought with it cries to return what some consider Scotland’s greatest archaeological treasure back to the place of its discovery.”

The tension between the British Museum and its Scottish counterparts reflects the historical tensions between the two territories; Scotland is often overlooked as yet another casualty of British colonialism. Additionally, there is something deeply significant over the fact

that this dispute is over a game of chess. The game originated in India after 500 B.C., and eventually reached the Christian Europe in 990 AD from the Islamic world. Original pieces like war elephants were swapped for more European images, like the bishop. The Queen figure was often adapted as a likeness of the grieving Virgin Mary. It is known for being a game of intelligence, strategy, and ultimately, war. Chess is a game of conquering and colonization, and the Lewis chess pieces, along with other Museum artifacts, are being used in a continued game of cultural dominance and a monopoly on artistic and historical value.

As demonstrated by these specific examples, the British Museum is experiencing a time of historical reckoning. While it has benefitted from its status as a national institution for over a century, representing the best of the British Empire and academic scholarship since the Enlightenment era, it now must face the same identity crisis as the rest of the nation and come to terms with the fact that, like the country itself, much of its success derives from the conquering of others. Some may argue the tides of lingering colonialism are finally turning, as former colonies find their own voices and speak against their past oppressors whose damaging effects altered their ways of life permanently. Between Scotland, Greece, the Rapa Nui people, Nigeria, and more, countries, lands, and groups previously silenced are fighting for the return of what is theirs in the form of cultural and historical artifacts in possession of the British Museum. However, this does not mean the power dynamic has completely shifted. The fact of the matter is that these groups may have found a voice, but they are still yet to find agency; the British Museum can listen to their reasoning and requests, and ultimately, still have the power to make decisions about the ownership of these artifacts.

The Museum now faces a dilemma of its own as to whether it will return any or all of the artifacts that have been requested, or by extension, the artifacts whose ownership claims hinge on the conquering activities of the British Empire. It is a slippery slope, because once the trustees acquiesce to any request, they run the risk of losing the majority of their collection by setting this new precedent. Unless legal action is taken, it is doubtful that any of the campaigns for the return of artifacts will be successful.

If, as Said suggests, “survival in fact is about the connections between things”, where does that leave the future of the British Museum? The margins of their narrative expose a dominating and at times violent past in their collection, yet there is some value in collecting pieces from all over the world in an attempt to weave a universal history. We must concede that this version of history comes from a lingering imperial perspective, and that it can never be impartially universal, but at the present, it is the best option available to educate the a substantial portion of the population about the world outside their own biases. “No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about (98).”

The British Museum undoubtedly has its flaws, and the mission to curate a collection of world history, detached from a Eurocentric narrative, may be an unattainable goal. There will always be tensions undercutting the halls and displays of the Museum, as visitors are free to engage with the forcibly removed artifacts that preserve and present a different point and place in time. Chinua Achebe once wrote, “let every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world’s cultural harvest and mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of

the offerings (76).” The “gifts” at the British Museum were not brought, but seized, and the “cultural harvest” is an imposing building in the Bloomsbury neighborhood of London. But do the millions of visitors walk away richer? By bringing the marginalized stories of the collection to light, maybe the Museum’s mission to educate can become further enriching.

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