**Museums Have Long Overlooked the Violence of Empire**

It took Britain a hundred years to conquer most of the Indian subcontinent, which it then dominated for a further century. The subcontinent also witnessed a partition that led, by a recent estimate, to over three million deaths, and the largest mass migration of human beings in global history. Yet while the violence of colonialism is palpable even in such a cursory rendering of India’s past, scholars have only begun to examine the many forms such violence takes, the rationales behind them and their impact on Indian bodies and minds.

Violence makes an entry into the history of South Asia’s colonial past largely in terms of rebellion and resistance, religious or ethnic violence, and cataclysmic events – approaches that displace violence onto the colonized and underestimate the endemic, everyday forms of violence through which colonialism operated. Such erasure is not unique to Indian history. It merely illustrates the ways in which violence has been written out of the history of Britain’s imperial past.

**Silencing the Past**

Indeed, the past decade has witnessed renewed attempts to ‘whitewash’ Britain’s imperial exploits. Revelations in 2012 that thousands of documents detailing acts of violence committed on colonized peoples in the final years of British rule had been either systematically destroyed or ferreted away in a secret Foreign Office archive were largely ignored by the mainstream media.

Such processes of silencing ensures that belief in a benign and benevolent imperialism, whose purpose was not to appropriate land, labour and goods but to impart the benefits of British civilization to peoples deemed in need of it, remains predominant in Britain. As journalist George Monbiot observes in his struggle to explain the reason for Britain’s amnesia in regard to the violence of its imperial past, “The myths of empire are so well-established that we appear to blot out countervailing stories even as they are told”; the reality of empire, remains, therefore, “untroubled by the evidence”.

Museums and public galleries have played a key role in such a process of silencing, in spite of the fact that many of the non-Western collections in them have been acquired through colonial conquest, exploitation and looting. Although some British museums have begun to make colonial histories apparent in their displays, many still erase them by presenting objects with contested histories as examples of ‘art’ or as representative ethnographic ‘types’. The making and sustaining of imperial museum spaces also legitimizes and aestheticizes violence by utilising interpretation methods that encourage visitors to view mutilated deities or headless torsos as artistic masterpieces to be admired and coveted.

Such processes of silencing hinders our understandings of the nature of empire, its impact on both colonizers and colonized, and its legacies – a particularly pressing concern in light of both the global escalation, since the late twentieth century, of modes of violence that can be understood in terms of what David Harvey and others have referred to as the ‘new imperialism’, and of the rise of ethno-nationalist and religious fundamentalisms. The perpetuation of such myths also prevents a reckoning with Britain’s imperial past. For a nation-state that was forged, in large measure, through empire, and whose identity has been considerably challenged by its demise – most recently by the Scottish referendum on independence and the ongoing debate on Britain’s place in Europe – such a reckoning is, undoubtedly, long overdue.

**Art and Empire**

Art is, perhaps, one of the best mediums through which to attempt such a reckoning. For not only is culture vital to the construction and maintenance of imperial and colonial regimes, but as literature professor Paul Gilroy observes in his preface to the exhibition catalogue, art can “help to reconcile the tasks of remembering and working through Britain’s imperial past with the different labour of building its post-colonial future”. It is therefore has the ability to alter Britain’s understanding of itself.

‘Artist and Empire’ is well aware of the challenges of remembering and representing empire. For while it reveals the way that art operated as a form of cultural imperialism, in incorporating a wide range of images and objects produced by both British artists and artists from former colonial contexts – from iconic imperial paintings to maps, photographs, and artefacts – it avoids over-simplifying what exhibition curator Alison Smith terms “the tangled histories embodied by objects”. It makes the bold move, moreover, of expanding the time span of the exhibition to the present. This avoids not only imposing an artificial boundary as to when the Empire ended – if, in fact, we can say that it actually did – but encourages reflection on the legacies of empire in contemporary culture, politics and public debate in both Britain and its former colonies.

As for violence, while the exhibition reveals the provenance of stolen or looted objects and images, it contains few visual representations of violence. There is, undoubtedly, a paucity of images of the violence of empire relative to the scale and endemic nature of imperial and colonial violence, but such images do exist – such as the haunting paintings of renowned Bengali (later Bangladeshi) painter Zainul Abedin of the estimated 1.5 to 4 million victims of the 1943 Bengal famine, or the ostensibly ‘anthropological’ photographs that document the myriad ways, physically, mentally, and emotionally, in which colonized bodies were violated. The exhibition does contain some anthropological images of caste in colonial India, but for Britain to truly reckon with its imperial past we need to understand much more about the violent nature of that past.