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*British Museum* by Daljit Nagra [Review]

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# TASTE AND TASTELESSNESS

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*British Museum.*

Daljit Nagra. 2017. 53p. £14.99.  
Faber & Faber; ISBN 978-0571333738.

Part memoir, part reflection on the diasporic experience, part call to arms, Daljit Nagra's fourth book, *British Museum*, tears apart the already crumbling architecture of British culture. The collection offers twenty-seven original and reprinted poems that sit unhindered by strict thematic breakdowns. As the most recent instalment in Nagra's decolonial, diaspora-affirming series, it continues in the same vein as his first three collections: poems are spun out of a "jazzed lexicon," which many (not including Nagra) have termed "Punglish" and "bollyverse."<sup>1</sup> While this linguistic hybridity remains at the heart of *British Museum*, producing such phrases as "chutnified" and "sitarised," Nagra only half-heartedly picks at topics of immigration, British colonization in India, and diasporic modes of re-writing; instead, giving his full attention to an impassioned disarticulation of British culture, one that he stands both inside and outside of.<sup>2</sup> Concocting as background an orientalist soup of characters from Lakshmi to Allah, Nagra deliberates on the construction of British national identity through the lens of material heritage and concepts of taste and tastelessness.

The eponymous poem "Meditations on the British Museum," comes later in the collection but is by far the most indicative of this timely decolonial venture. Nagra begins by locating his own body at the "dead centre" of the Great Court of the British Museum, or what he refers to as the "noble casket." In contrast to other poems that are similarly engaged with disarticulating Britain's hegemonic taste system, such as "Get Off My Poem Whitey" or even "He Do the Foreign Voices," the poet's voice is framed by an embodied presence that is all but difficult to ignore.<sup>3</sup> Nagra performs as an ersatz museum guide, taking his readers through the grand halls of the British Museum,

<sup>1</sup> Ben East, "With Eliot Nod, Daljit Nagra Reclaims Indian Accent from Mockers," *The National*, (2011), <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/with-eliot-nod-daljit-nagra-reclaims-indian-accent-from-mockers-1.436861> [accessed March 4, 2018]

<sup>2</sup> Daljit Nagra, *British Museum* (London: Faber & Faber), p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> I use the concept of taste, rather, intentionally in this review to point to its nagging presence within the collection as a method of establishing difference between what is desirable (read: British) and what is undesirable (read: *other*).

unveiling colonial histories of the collection and questions of taste that over the years have grown bitter between the objects of art and its viewers.

The particular setting of museum as a site for decolonisation is a significant one. Invoking the “museum as nation,” where to “bring out the kids from the segregated schools,” Nagra reminds us of the position of the museum within the scope of national culture.<sup>4</sup> Although, they appear to carry objective histories of the past and/or the foreign *other*, museums are not mere repositories of dead or neutral histories, but are, in fact, the sites upon which knowledge and culture is produced and regulated. A model that is helpful in thinking through the problematics of the museum is that of the universal museum, one that exhibits a range of cultures for its local and global audiences.

According to the Declaration on the Importance and Value of the Universal Museum (DIVUM), universal museums such as the British Museum, Musée du Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are granted special rights to collect objects from *other* cultures as a way to build their own cohesive national identity.<sup>5</sup> Once the objects enter the museum’s collection, they are set to permeate the spirit of the nations that host them. When visitors walk through the halls of the British Museum, as Nagra does, they are both enjoying the objects diasporized here from the shores of the colonial past and being colonized into becoming proper British subjects. Walking through this museal haze of double-colonization and commenting on his own discomfort at being “at home, albeit lost,” the poet destabilizes the smooth façade of British culture, which in the end is more smoke than grit.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, despite his ambition to decolonize the inherited and enforced taxonomies of British taste, Daljit Nagra disappoints in his failure to acknowledge his own complicity within its structures, especially in the ways it circulates within the diasporic home space. In “Cane,” Nagra makes himself distant to his mother and her love of *tasteless* Bollywood movies, with their animated cast of characters singing and dancing around lush sugarcane fields.<sup>7</sup> Throughout his work, Nagra positions himself as the dark, multi-headed *Ravana* of British taste but, as readers, we are never quite sure where

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<sup>4</sup> Nagra, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico. "Introduction: (De)constructing Arabian Heritage Debates." In *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula*, ed. by Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 1-18 (p.5).

<sup>6</sup> Nagra, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Bollywood refers to Punjabi language films, predominantly produced in the Indian state of Punjab.

he is located along its spectrum at any particular moment.<sup>8</sup> Is he the Britishman or the diasporic outsider, who “do the foreign voices?”<sup>9</sup> In his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois aptly coined the term “double consciousness,” as a way of thinking through internalized colonialism, racism, and trauma of cultural dislocation. He articulated that the “American Negro,” (or, in Nagra’s case, the child of Asian immigrants) was an embodiment of “warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn usunder.”<sup>10</sup> Such strength fails Nagra. What results, instead, is a body drowning in the tides of oppositional tastes and cultures, whose double-consciousness is more suited for criticizing what is outside of one’s self than what is inside.

Taste becomes implicated again in the poem that follows “Cane,” entitled “Naugaja,” where the mother’s longing for the sugarcane dreams of Punjab are replaced, momentarily, by the deliberate nostalgia of her first-generation son. Writing as if he was explaining himself to both his mother and the suspicious citizenry of Britain, Nagra affirms that though he speaks in a “foreign tongue” he can retrace himself to his ancestors in the village of Naugaja. The incongruity of taste between the mother’s dreams and her son’s reclamation of his lineage leads us to, what is probably, the same blend of sugarcane fields and ancestral village.

Reading *British Museum*, I am reminded again of the amount of self-reflectivity required of diasporic subjects. Whether we like it or not, incongruities and blind-spots do slip in. Although Nagra falls short of understanding his own implication in the problematic formations of national identity – ones that continue to leave individuals like his own mother out – he is effective in collecting his efforts around a masterfully-hallowed, floating sense of Britishness. What better distinction for such an in-between poet, after all, than “immigrant’s son?” Fashioning himself in the symbolic auspices of the uninvited guest, the ersatz museum guide, Daljit Nagra charges from the periphery to the centre, from the courtyard to the collection, setting out to dismantle the system from within.

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<sup>8</sup> This position is articulated most powerfully in poems, “He Do the Foreign Voices,” “The Look of Love,” “The Dream of Mr Bulram’s English,” “Get Off My Poem Whitey,” and “Oliver’s Othello.”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group), p. 14.