

Keats and the Elgin Marbles—Message from Parthenon

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The classic collection of marble sculptures from Parthenon at the British Museum, commonly known as the Elgin Marbles, has been a vexed source of doubt, appreciation, enthusiasm, disapproval, and envy ever since they were brought to England during 1802-1812. Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin, a British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, with permission from the Turkish Sultan, removed the stones from Acropolis at personal expense, and

with the Marbles. In his poem “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” Keats tells us that he first came to know about the Greek mythical world through Chapman’s translations as he did not have the opportunity to learn Greek like most of his peers. So, by the time he came across the sculptures, he had already entered the Greek classical world through Chapman’s translation of Homer. The antique stones rekindled his imagination to produce some of

of the Romantic Era. Haydon and Keats met in late 1816, and Haydon was by then the well-known champion of the infamous Marbles having battled against many of his contemporary art connoisseurs, most notable being Richard Payne Knight, who had railed against the authenticity of Lord Elgin’s treasure even before seeing them. For Haydon, the Marbles represented greatness echoing out from a lost time, as he wrote in his *Autobiography*: “The combination of nature and idea, which I felt was so much wanting for high art, was here displayed. . . .” Hazlitt joined Haydon in early 1816 in his attack on the connoisseurs that derided the Phidian Marbles in favor of Greco-Roman sculptures. Hazlitt found four particular merits in them, and today they stand as the key elements in understanding Greek art in Romantic poetry. Unlike Lord Byron, who refused to see any beauty in the stones calling them “maim’d antiques,” Hazlitt saw “vitality,” “pathos,” and “nature” in them (Larrabee, 80). These sculptures virtually caused the younger Romantics to respond in various ways, which in turn greatly influenced the Nineteenth Century British understanding of art and antiquity.

It is interesting to note that the opposing critical perspectives of the Elgin Marbles focused on two vastly different aspects of the sculptures. The one headed by Haydon and Hazlitt saw only genius and the “finest statuary in existence,” while the other by Knight & Farrington could detect only ruins, at best, of mediocre workmanship (Larrabee, 80). Keats looked at the marbles from the perspective of his time— borrowing the classical materials, and reconstructing them with early nineteenth century sensibilities. For example, the original story of Endymion, an extremely handsome shepherd, abducted by the moon goddess is transformed by Keats into a tale where the mortal youth pursues immortal beauty. Keats’s philosophy is rooted in the nineteenth century value system. This practice itself is very unlike the Greek tragedians whose artistic liberties would never impel them to change the basic facts of mythical stories, such as, Oedipus committing parricide and incest, or, Clytemnestra killing her husband.

In some vital ways, Keats’s reactions in reading Chapman’s translation and seeing the Elgin Marbles are similar. His two sonnets on these topics portray his awe at the richness and grandeur revealed before his eyes—in Chapman’s Homer he feels like an adventurer discovering new lands, while in the other he is staggered by the unexpected richness of the Phidian Sculptures. Keats

is indeed mesmerized by the literary and artistic beauty of the archaic Greece.

It is also interesting to note that he did not entitle either of his poems, “Ode on/ to Elgin Marbles.” Standing in between the two camps of approbation and deprecation of the Phidian Sculptures, Keats’s position is that of a modifier. He only tried to reconcile the two positions by “offering a specific experience of ambivalence rarely noted in the literature of response” (Scott). Keats wrote his poem on Chapman’s Homer in 1816, and the Elgin Marble sonnets came the next year in March. By the time he starts writing *Endymion* in April, he is already taken up with the philosophy of the permanence of artistic beauty, but the idea is still just forming in his mind. He is not so much impressed with the glorious but frozen beauty of Greek mythopoeic creation, but is keen on reshaping them with his own ideas and Romantic aestheticism. Just as Chapman took the liberty to use Elizabethan diction and phrases in his translation of Homer, Keats employs the individualistic romantic ideology of his time which saw the aspiration and achievement of the individual in figuring out the mysterious human soul and a poetic way to transcend the earthly realm.

For him, or for his Endymion, it is not a simple choice between the real world and the ideal one. Before Keats, Michael Drayton and Thomas Lyly had dealt with the Endimion myth. In Drayton’s version Endimion rejected Phoebe when she approached him as an earthly nymph, but eagerly accepted her when she revealed her immortal self. With Lyly, the earth played the role of a villain casting an evil spell on Endimion, and Cynthia herself had to intervene to save him from her clutches. But with the Romantic ideologies at the back of his mind Keats does not see Cynthia just as an embodiment of immortality. For him, the goddess of the moon also represents the ideal, or “essential beauty,” and therefore spiritual maturity is required before a genuine union can take place. Keats’s Endymion is united with his ideal love only after he has appreciated human love and compassion. What Keats does with *Endymion* and the Elgin Marbles is creating an ekphrastic world—where he is not so much concerned about ownership, or the authenticity of the materials; ekphrasis is never about copying, but “recreation as re-creation.” In a very similar way, the Parthenon sculptures being removed from their original setting, reestablished in the British Museum was for Keats indeed ekphrastic because now he would have to find other meanings for their existence as they have found new abode. Thus, Keats’s sonnet on Elgin Marbles reveals an awareness of neither the form

of the Marbles, nor their subject-matter. The poet’s eye seems to turn completely inward here—not the Marbles, but the essence of spirit.

This ekphrastic imagination is carried on into his creation of his greatest poems as well. The biographers of John Keats call the year 1819 *Annus Mirabilis*, as that is the most fruitful year in his short poetic career. All his famous odes were written in that year along with “Lamia,” and the fragment “Hyperion,” which he had started the year before. In August of the same year, he starts composing “Fall of Hyperion.” Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is probably most associated with the Elgin Marbles simply because of Benjamin Haydon’s battle cry against Payne-Knight concerning the Marbles. As Haydon records in his *Autobiography*, he observed in them “... the union of the ‘truth of nature’ and ‘ideal beauty,’ a view repeated with variations” (67). Keats, by that time having already explored ideal beauty in Endymion, and also to some extent in “Ode to Psyche,” turns to take it to a step further. Critics have come up with various meanings of the last two lines of “Grecian Urn” concerning truth and beauty. Nevertheless, examined from the perspective of the poet’s handling of the theme of ideal beauty, it would only seem fair to suggest that for Keats the urn is a message from the past, and the poem itself is an attempt to decipher that message. When he sat before the Elgin marbles for hours, he could have tried to unravel the same mystery, “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?” For him, the Sculptures and the Urn indeed bear a message from a glorious past, but that glory at present lying in ruins. For a poet with romantic sensibilities, Keats can only attempt to find a meaning for the relics of that past in the present world, and that meaning might be very different from what it meant in the past.

In spite of all its beauty and possible interpretations the urn becomes in the end “cold pastoral,” calling from the dark shores of oblivion, a reminder of the ephemeral human existence. The speaker might be curious about the empty, imagined town, but at the end he realizes that it is a condition that is inevitable for his own civilization as well. Same goes for the famous Elgin Marbles—removed from their original place, transplanted to England, purchased by the British government, finally to be interpreted by young poets and artists.

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John Keats, 1795 - 1821

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet ’tis a gentle luxury to weep,
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep,
Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an indescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time—with a billowy main—
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

To Haydon with a Sonnet Written on Seeing the Elgin Marbles

Haydon! forgive me that I cannot speak
Definitively of these mighty things;
Forgive me, that I have not eagle’s wings,
That what I want I know not where to seek,
And think that I would not be over-meek,
In rolling out upfollowed thunderings,
Even to the steep of Heliconian springs,
Were I of ample strength for such a freak.

Think, too, that all these numbers should be thine;
Whose else? In this who touch thy vesture’s hem?
For, when men stared at what was most divine
With brainless idiotism and o’erwise phlegm,
Thou hadst beheld the full Hesperian shine
Of their star in the east, and gone to worship them!

years later after much controversy was able to sell them to the British Museum. Even though the sculptures failed to ignite the expected revolution among the British artists, they did encourage a group of young poets and critics to write about classical antiquity, among whom John Keats is named as one of the foremost.

My interest in the Elgin Marbles rose from my reading of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and when I stumbled upon the information that the young poet actually had a close connection

the finest poetry in English literature. However, the immediate reaction of the young poet after seeing them was to write two sonnets, entitled, “To Haydon,” and “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” demonstrating his dazed and dazzled pleasure.

In order to understand the relationship between Keats and the Elgin Marbles, it is important to assess the friendship between the historical painter Haydon and the aspiring young poet Keats, and to some extent, the role of William Hazlitt, the famous art-critic

New Books

INTRODUCED BY MUHAMMAD MEHEDI HASAN

Dakkhin Asiar Diaspora Shahitya: Itihash, Tatta o Shongkot: A Book on South Asian Diaspora by Mojaffor Hossain

Cover design by Dhrubo Esh. Price TK 325. Panjeri Publishers, 2020

Diaspora literature is an integral part of the literary scenario today. When people migrate from their own country and settle abroad for whatever reason and employ in writing creatively featuring their lives and struggles, it enters the category of diaspora literature. The significant themes of diaspora literature include leaving home, nostalgia for one’s homeland, the loneliness one faces in a new country, adjusting with the culture of the foreign land, and often creating a new identity for oneself. In the twenty-first century, the number of moving people has increased to such an extent that the time is being identified as the “Age of Diaspora.” A large number of diasporic writers originally are from Asia. Many such names as Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje, Hanif Kureishi, Khaled Hosseini, Anita Desai, Amy Tan, Bharati Mukherjee among others have risen prominently in the last few decades. It might be noted that these writers are more popular in their

diasporic abodes than the countries they left behind.

Through the last one decade, diaspora literature has grown to be widely included in various syllabi across the world. Unfortunately, there has not been much discussion and writing in Bengali language. True that we have seen some scattered articles by some writers on the topic, but the need to see a complete volume has been felt. Mojaffor Hossain, just did that. Hossain is more known as a short-story writer, but he has also written on the world literature. His fluent prose has turned the difficult topic of diaspora literature into an easy read. The title of his book is *Dakkhin Asiar Diaspora Shahitya: Itihash, Tatta o Shongkot* (Diaspora literature of South Asia: History, Theory and Problem). In the first part of his book, he has talked about the history of the people of South Asia. Then he moves on to cover the theoretical aspects. In the second part, he discusses the authors from different South Asian countries, especially those from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. An important segment of the book covers Bangladeshi diaspora writing. He looks at the diaspora literature written in both Bengali and English. He also brings in the Bangladeshi-Bihari and

Rohingya literature. He has attempted to understand the cultural and socio-political standing of the Biharis in Bangladesh. In this section, he has also addressed the diasporic tension caused by the partition of 1947. This is an aspect that has not been too widely discussed in the outer world.

The third section of the book showcases some very interesting articles on diaspora literature. There are some detailed discussions on Naipaul, Rushdie, Ishiguro, Jhumpa Lahiri and Rohinton Mistry. The problems of reading the diaspora writers have been addressed; e.g. why they are not so much accepted in their home-countries. At the end of the volume, the author has added a section interviewing a few of the diaspora authors from Bangladesh. There is a section where a lively adda takes place among five young diaspora writers.

This book marks a significant point because this is the first of its kind published in Bangladesh. Various aspects of diaspora have been covered in Bengali too. Second, some unaddressed issues of Bangladeshi literature have come up here.

Muhammad Mehedi Hasan is a mystery and thriller writer.

