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## Buried Histories: Indian Archaeology And Colonial Looting In Literary Narratives

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### Abstract

This research paper examines Indian archaeology, its temples, monuments, sacred bronzes, inscriptions, manuscripts, and jewels and the systematic extraction of such objects during British colonial rule. It studies how colonial conquest and administrative structures enabled the removal of temple idols, royal treasures, and ritual artifacts from India. Further, it analyzes how novels across the world represent sacred desecration, imperial possession, archaeological displacement, and cultural trauma. Through expanded close readings of selected literary texts and engagement with historical scholarship, the paper argues that fiction mirrors archival truth while adding ethical and emotional dimensions absent from official records. Literary representation functions as an alternative archive, contributing meaningfully to archaeological discourse and contemporary restitution debates.

### Keywords

Indian archaeology, colonial plunder, postcolonial memory, Wilkie Collins, E. M. Forster.

Indian archaeology is not merely a field of excavation; it is a civilizational record embedded within living religious and cultural practice. Temples, sculptures, bronzes, jewels, and inscriptions are not static remnants of a dead past but active participants in ritual continuity. Sacred spaces such as the Brihadeeswarar Temple, the Konark Sun Temple, and the Meenakshi Amman Temple demonstrate architectural sophistication alongside devotional vitality. These monuments were not archaeological “sites” awaiting European discovery; they were centers of theology, music, dance, economy, and community life.

With the expansion of British power in India from the eighteenth century onward, archaeological engagement became intertwined with imperial administration. Officers, collectors, missionaries, and scholars removed temple bronzes, sculptures, manuscripts, and jewels. The most emblematic instance remains the Koh-i-Noor, transferred to the British Crown after the annexation of Punjab in 1849. Though justified through treaty language, the diamond’s relocation continues to provoke debate regarding legitimacy and restitution. This paper argues that Indian archaeology cannot be separated from colonial power. Furthermore, it contends that world novels have documented, critiqued, and symbolically reinterpreted this history. Fiction does not fabricate archaeological truth; it mirrors and morally interrogates it.

Indian temples functioned as cosmological centers. The sanctum (garbhagriha) housed divine presence, not symbolic representation. Processional bronzes were carried during festivals, adorned with jewels offered by devotees. Inscriptions carved on temple walls recorded donations, land grants, and social contracts, forming legal and cultural archives. For example, the Brihadeeswarar Temple's inscriptions detail Chola administrative systems and artistic patronage. Temple jewels were integrated into ritual economy. Removing such objects disrupted theological continuity. The colonial reclassification of these objects as "art" or "antiquities" detached them from ritual ecosystems. Archaeology in India thus involves ethical dimensions absent in purely classical excavation contexts.

The founding of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 formalized study of monuments. However, colonial collecting preceded and accompanied official surveys. Military conquest facilitated access to royal treasuries and temple wealth. Artifacts entered British museums, private collections, and royal holdings. Temple bronzes from Tamil Nadu and sculptures from Odisha appeared in European galleries, stripped of sacred context. The imperial museum became a display case of conquest, arranging colonized cultures as curated specimens. The transfer of the Koh-i-Noor illustrates this transformation. Once embedded within South Asian political and sacred symbolism, it became an emblem of imperial triumph in Britain. Its display within regalia re-signified sovereignty. Archaeology, therefore, operated within an imperial epistemology: studying the past legitimized control over the present.

Novels reflect colonial plundering in both implicit and explicit ways. The three novels discussed in this paper are *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster and *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh. Collins's novel dramatizes the removal of a diamond from an Indian temple during British military conflict. The sacred setting is depicted in the following lines: "One of the wildest of these stories related to a Yellow Diamond—a famous gem in the native annals of India. . . . Partly from its peculiar color, partly from a superstition which represented it as partaking of the nature of the deity whom it adorned, and growing and lessening in lustre with the waxing and waning of the moon, it first gained the name by which it continues to be known in India to this day—the name of THE MOONSTONE" (Collins, pp. 3-4). These lines situate the jewel within divine embodiment. Its extraction marks desecration. Transported to an English estate, the diamond becomes a symbol of imperial entitlement. The narrative anxiety surrounding the gem frequently described as cursed functions as moral allegory. The restless movement of the stone suggests unresolved historical guilt. Collins anticipates debates about ownership and restitution by dramatizing sacred theft within domestic fiction.

Similar to Collins, Forster's narrative embeds colonial tension within sacred geography. Indian archaeology is symbolically represented through the sub-chapters "Mosque," "Caves," and "Temple," which correspond to the novel's three-part structure and embody distinct cultural and spiritual dimensions of India (Forster, p. ix). The "Mosque" section presents Islamic architecture as serene, ordered, and spiritually intimate; the mosque courtyard, described as entered through a "ruined gate," reflects both historical continuity and colonial fracture, suggesting how sacred spaces endure despite imperial presence. The "Caves" section, centered on the Marabar Caves, transforms archaeological space into existential metaphor: the caves' ancient, pre-historic quality and echo reduce meaning to a hollow "boom," symbolizing the incomprehensibility of India to colonial rationalism and the psychological disintegration of imperial authority. In contrast, the "Temple" section, associated with Hindu ritual during the festival of Krishna, represents chaotic vitality and spiritual inclusiveness, where multiplicity replaces colonial order. Together, mosque, cave, and temple function as layered archaeological and civilizational symbols through which Forster portrays India not as a single decipherable entity but as a palimpsest of histories beyond colonial control. The "ruined gate" signals historical fracture. Colonial presence overlays sacred architecture with suspicion and incomprehension. The Marabar Caves episode intensifies this theme: echo replaces meaning, suggesting imperial inability to interpret India's depth. Although not depicting explicit artifact removal, Forster represents epistemic colonization the attempt to define and control sacred landscapes. Archaeological imagery becomes metaphor for fractured relationships.

Ghosh's novel recounts the British annexation of Burma, paralleling Indian experiences. Royal treasures are catalogued and removed. Palaces are emptied. Though set outside India, the narrative mirrors Indian temple and palace plunder. Imperial conquest reduces sacred space to inventory. Ghosh foregrounds the material violence of empire the stripping of sovereignty through object removal. Sumit K. Mandal in his review of this novel, aptly marks the following words: "This novel tells the story of the British empire in Asia, but it embraces this expansive world differently than most. It is a rare and imaginative telling in

which the colonized – their life experiences, voices, and formative moments – figure prominently, where so many other tellings put the colonial rulers at the center” (Mandal, 2014).

Contemporary debates surrounding repatriation challenge colonial narratives of preservation. India has sought return of temple idols and antiquities from international museums. Provenance research increasingly exposes illicit transfers. Museums now confront ethical questions: Does display justify displacement? Can sacred objects be neutralized as art? The Koh-i-Noor debate exemplifies unresolved colonial legacies. Archaeology must evolve beyond documentation toward restorative justice. Literary narratives strengthen restitution discourse by humanizing loss. Official archives record measurements and dates; novels record anguish and sacred rupture. Fiction supplies ethical depth to material history. When Collins depicts a temple jewel torn from a deity, he transforms artifact into moral symbol. When Forster evokes ruined gates, he registers cultural fracture. Thus, literature contributes to archaeology by preserving experiential truth. Excavation must include narrative excavation and recovering voices silenced by imperial catalogues.

Indian archaeology reflects living sacred civilization. British colonial rule facilitated removal of numerous artifacts, reclassifying sacred objects as imperial trophies. Although framed as preservation, such extraction fractured cultural ecosystems. World novels mirror and critique these processes. From the temple diamond in *The Moonstone* to the sacred landscapes of *A Passage to India* and the annexed palaces of *The Glass Palace*, fiction documents moral cost. Interdisciplinary engagement between archaeology and literary studies deepens understanding of cultural restitution. Excavation must not end with discovery; it must move toward justice.

## REFERENCES

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