Postcolonial Screen Adaptation and the British Novel,
By Vivian Y. Kao

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Postcolonial Screen Adaptations and the British Novel attempts to use development theory or improvement ideology as the lens through which to re-read nineteenth-century classics of British fiction and their modern adaptations, thereby pointing out how they discover, critique and utilize tropes of anti-improvement inherent in those very texts to tackle the threats of Neo-Capitalism. The title itself of the introduction, "Adapting Improvement: Screen Afterlives of Nineteenth Century Progress", outlines the scope of this book, which contests and questions the premise of development that "being bad at capitalism means being backward, stunted, imperfect and unfree" (3). It is divided into several sub-sections, which collectively seek to address the question how postcolonial film adaptations appropriate British fiction to speak of contemporary global power inequalities and colonial legacies, and to set up aggressive resistance. The works and philosophies of David Crocher, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum are used to disentangle development enmeshed in a discourse that chiefly caters to the interests of a Capitalist global economy. Each chapter ends with a detailed reference section and a list of films, discussed or mentioned, which certainly shows the level of research which has gone into this book.

The book is divided into four chapters apart from the elaborately argued "Introduction". The first chapter, "Improvement, Development, and Consumer Culture in Jane Austen and Popular Indian Cinema", interestingly begins with a rebuttal of Edward Said's claim, made in *Culture and Imperialism*, that nineteenth-century British novels perpetuated the imperial ideology which postcolonial studies must redress through contrapuntal readings. Kao, however, suggests that Jane Austen's novels contain within them their own contrapuntal readings, moments and sub-plots (47). She uses the 1995 adaptation of *Emma* in "Clueless" and the Bollywood adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* ("Bride and Prejudice") and *Emma* ("Aisha"), to argue that both "Clueless" and the Bollywood adaptations are able to "make their source narratives speak to new historical realities" (60). In a very authoritative move, the book chooses to link this choice to the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century liberal ideologies of Macaulay and Mill, and later to that of the Utilitarians, and then from the British Orientalists to even modern-day Governments, which held onto and imposed upon Indians a particular idea of what progress was. Both the Indian popular films for instance, Kao points out, use the metaphor of shopping to reflect the retaliation of middle-class youth against a docile acceptance of a predestined future earmarked for them.

Chapter Two, "Moral Management: Spaces of Domestication in *Jane Eyre* and *I Walked With a Zombie*", focuses on the improvement ethic of the nineteenth century, contained in all Austen novels which, the author argues, originated in the Acts of Enclosure. These reached their peak during the Napoleonic Wars, forcing England to contract and "inwardly withdraw" from its

eighteenth-century spirit of self-aggrandisement. Austen's view of enclosing the countryside was a kind of "virtuous restriction(s)" or necessary management of physical space, which also translates into moral management of psychological space. Kao uses this premise to read the cinematic adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, *I Walked with a Zombie* (1953), where she argues that since the nineteenth-century novel insists that the formation of subjectivity depends on an individual's relationship to her inhabited space, the film adaptation analogises her condition with early-twentieth-century plantation workers in the Caribbean. Much of her chapter goes to point out the challenges that newly independent nations would face: to create revolution they would have to reconceptualize the "plantation space" or "nation space", using the very grounds of the master's power against him. Using the works and theories of Neil Smith, David Harvey and Michel Foucault and Yi-Fu Tuan, the chapter argues how the film translates Jane's spatial disciplining into cinematic form.

Chapter Three, "Conquest and Improvement in 'the Graveyards of Empire': The Men Who Would be Kings in Afghanistan and Vietnam", sets out to probe into the repercussions when domestic improvement ideology gets transmuted to the Empire, by focusing on Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Man who would be King" and John Huston's film adaptation. Kao uses the Victorian story and its screen adaptation to reveal the problematics of nineteenth-century improvement ideology and the conflicting claims of conquest. The author utilizes the critique of this shift in policy by citing the work of the likes of Gauri Vishwanathan, who look upon it as a masked form of conquest. Unlike them, however, the writer refuses to see a diabolic design behind this but puts forward the claim that conquest was looked upon by the colonizers (right from Alexander to the British) as the most effective form of improvement. As in the previous chapters, this one too covers in sections the Kipling story and the Huston film and their separate trajectories, rightly pointing out thereby that for Huston it was Kipling's rerouting of the improvement narrative upon the improvers themselves, which connects nineteenth-century improvement ideology with twentieth-century development discourse; or perhaps what ultimately provided the rationale for America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Chapter Four, "Unaccustomed Modernities in *Tess* and *Trishna*", uses the lens of 'multiple modernities' as an alternative both to nineteenth-century improvement ideology and to its later revisionist discourse of critique. Following critical theorists such as Dipesh Chakraborty and Paul Gilroy, who emphasize the need for finding ways to decentre classical western modernity in order to expose its underbelly (191), this chapter champions the role of *Tess* and *Trishna* as representatives of alternative conceptions of modernity which refute the improvement ideologies of the texts' male characters. While aligning Thomas Hardy and his Wessex novels with multiple modernities is a novel take, the author's reductive claim that "instead of trying to recover and reclaim, Hardy registers the possibilistic by drawing attention to its obsolescence" is open for critical contestation and difficult to admit in the light of exhaustive studies which focus on his improvement ethics and materialist criticism.[1] The analysis of the motivation of Alec and Angel as improvers possesses however depth and clarity, whereby their single-minded desire to turn history to profit is shown as wreaking disastrous effects on the people and environment they

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[1] See Fred Reid, "Art and Ideology in *Far From the Madding Crowd*" in Norman Page (ed.), *Thomas Hardy Annual* No. 4 (1986): 91-126.

come in contact with (198). Kao brilliantly decodes Winterbottom's technique of conflating the film's viewers with the male improvers of Hardy. And though the former is offender, the latter rescuer, the latter does so with the same intention of improving the female protagonist according to their notion of a modern subject, satisfying "the viewer's desire to 'hear' the voice of the globally southern woman speaker speaking the west's own script" (214). The book's silent erasure of narrative is replicated in Trishna's passivity and the tourist-gaze depicted in the film is reminiscent of imperial-gaze. The theorizing of Kaplan, Spivak and Min-ha is utilized to emphasize that un-narrated experiences in the novel and the film circumvent capitalistic and academic agendas of improvement.

The book is indeed an in-depth critique of capitalist modes of modernity and formation of anti-improvement discourse. Its chief contribution is to argue how nineteenth-century British texts contain the seeds of the critique of colonial notions of improvement which are amply and effectively utilized by their twentieth- century screen adaptations. However, the division of the arguments into several sub-sections often runs the risk of taking the reader from the main argument proposed by the chapter. If the author had streamlined and condensed the content of chapters, the book would have greatly appealed to the lay reader as much as it now chiefly caters to the specialized researcher of Nineteenth-Century and Postcolonial Studies.

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