

Bartłomiej Nowak

## Postcolonial adaptations of classic British literature

### Abstract:

The article is an attempt of re-reading selected film adaptations of the classic British literature. The author confronts them with the images of history, British culture and 'Others' that are present in the literary works on which they are based. Is the gaze of the 'center' looking at the 'margins' present in the books transgressed in the movies or do the movies repeat the historical views of the authors and works unchanged despite different social and political context of the contemporary times?

For example, does *Bride & Prejudice* (2004), directed by Gurinder Chadha, combining the plot of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* with the form of the Bollywood cinema, reinterpret the text of the novel and let the viewer „read” it through the eyes of the postcolonial subject? How are the themes of slavery and postcolonialism treated in Derek Jarman's and Julie Taymor's movie adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*? Is David Lean's *A Passage to India* progressive or conservative in its portrayal of the Raj?

The author points to the works of postcolonial theoreticians (such as Frantz Fanon, Edward W. Said), interpretations of the movies and analysis of the literary works on which they are based. He tries to answer the question: is the spirit of the British colonial and imperial history still present in the film culture that is product of the changing (but neocolonial) world? Can this question be answered unambiguously?

**Key words:** postcolonialism, adaptations, British literature, rewriting history, interpretation

In this short article, I try to analyse a few film adaptations of classic British literature and compare the images of 'Others' they contain with those present in the texts on which they are based. I focus on four films: *A Passage to India* (1984, dir. David Lean), *Bride & Prejudice* (2004, dir. Gurinder Chadha), and two adaptations of *The Tempest* (1979, dir. Derek Jarman and 2010, dir. Julie Taymor). I try to answer the question: is the spirit of British colonial and imperial history still present in film culture that is a product of the changing (but neo-colonial) world?

Let me begin with *Bride & Prejudice* (2004), directed by Gurinder Chadha, which combines the plot of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* with the form of Bollywood cinema. Does this movie reinterpret the text of the novel and let the viewer "read" it through the eyes of the postcolonial subject?

*Bride & Prejudice* was made more than two decades after the beginning of British cinema's 'heritage cinema' movement (which started with *Chariots of Fire*, 1981, dir. Hugh Hudson). It depicted the British Empire and the class society of the nineteenth or twentieth century and was frequently accused of being morally and socially conservative and the product of Thatcherism and its politics. Sometimes considered as a smaller part of the movement (and sometimes as a parallel phenomenon), the so-called *Raj Revival* cinema, which depicted the times of the British rule in India, was described by the British scholar, Andrew Higson, in the appropriately titled text *Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film*, in the following manner:

the imperialist fantasies of national identity found in the cycle of films and television programmes about the Raj, such as *A Passage to India* and *The Jewel in the Crown*, [...] can be seen as conservative responses to a collective, post-imperialist anxiety. Retreating from the social, political, and economic crises of the present, they strive to recapture an image of national identity as pure, untainted, complete and in place. Yet like so many nostalgic narratives, they return to a moment of stability and tranquillity in the social order as they themselves chart the process of decay, the fall from this utopian national ideal [...]<sup>1</sup>.

In contrast to this nostalgic cinema of the past, the socially aware movies of the decade, such as Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), depicted the times of Margaret Thatcher and a society of the mixed ethnic groups and sexual orientations. Heritage cinema did not avoid topics such as homosexual orientation (*Maurice*, 1987, dir. James Ivory; *Another Country*, 1984, dir. Marek Kaniévski), or the situation of women in patriarchal society (*A Room with a View*, 1985, dir. James Ivory); however, it treated them (at least in the eyes of some scholars) in a conservative manner.

However, contemporary movies did not forget about the changes in the national structure of modern society and this was probably the biggest difference between them and heritage cinema, which usually showed the British nation as homogenous, white, and divided only by class and gender (despite the fact that black people were part of British society as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>). The movies and TV

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film" in *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (London, New York: Wallflower Press 2006), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with: Stephen Bourne, "Secrets and lies. Black histories and British historical films" in *British Historical Cinema*, ed. Claire Monk, Amy Sargeant (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 58.

series of the *Raj Revival* movement obviously showed people of colour, but not usually as the main protagonists of their own history. Salman Rushdie in the essay *Outside the Whale* cites the words of David Lean, director of the movie *A Passage to India* (1984), which was adapted from the novel written by E. M. Forster in 1924 (some twenty-three years before India gained independence from the British Empire):

Forster was a bit anti-English, anti-Raj and so on. I suppose it's a tricky thing to say, but I'm not so much. I intend to keep the balance more. I don't believe all the English were a lot of idiots. Forster rather made them so. He came down hard against them. [...] As for Aziz [the Muslim protagonist of the novel], there's a hell of a lot of Indian in him. They're marvellous people but maddening sometimes, you know.... He's a goose.<sup>3</sup>

Such a statement shows that the *Raj Revival* movement might be seen as “a revisionist enterprise”<sup>4</sup>: an attempt to change history, conceal its atrocities, and show the empire as a still valuable model for the national and social future of Great Britain.

Gurinder Chadha's movie was made more than a decade after the end of Margaret Thatcher's rule as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Jane Austen was not popular with directors in the 1980s, but was rediscovered in the next decade when at least few movies based on her works were made. Her popularity did not end with the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century but Chadha's movie differed in more than one way from most of Austen's adaptations. She changed the setting from 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain to modern Britain, India, and the United States. Elizabeth Bennet, the main protagonist of the novel, is now Lalita Bakshi and Mr. Darcy's citizenship was changed to American. If the change of the name of the main heroine is justified mainly by the new setting of the story (India), the fact that Darcy is now a citizen of the United States is the result of the new world order in which the United Kingdom was replaced by the USA in the role of the main world power. It is even said in the movie when Lalita complains about Darcy's plans to build a new hotel in India for tourists from the West: “I thought we got rid of imperialists like you!” To his words “I'm not British. I'm American” she responds “Exactly”.

It might be said that Chadha clashes here with the nostalgic atmosphere of heritage cinema. By recontextualization of Austen's text, changing of its time and place, it no longer has the power to evoke the past. At the same time, by using British text as a background for the modern story of cultural clashes, Chadha asks questions about the meaning of nation and cultural identity, about belonging to the national whole. Two of the main characters in the movie are British Asians. Their cultural identity is compared (rather unfavourably) with the identity of Indian people (Lalita and her family), still immersed in Indian tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> Cited by: Salman Rushdie, *Outside the Whale*, <https://granta.com/outside-the-whale/>, date accessed 4 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie.

Lalita accuses Darcy and other rich people of the West of trying to turn India into a ‘theme park’, and Chadha’s movie can be seen as a response to this type of thinking about the Orient and Eastern cultures. There are scenes in the movie that show the colourful world of Indian culture that might appeal (by its ‘otherness’) to Western audiences; for example, scenes of singing and dancing reproducing the style of the Bollywood musical movies (or ‘masala’ movies as they are called), local garba dances and mujra, etc. However, these scenes do not function in the diegesis of the movie as the Oriental attraction, but are the proof that Indian culture still pulsates with life and is much more than a picturesque place from tourist guides of neo-colonial businessmen. The final scene shows Darcy riding on an elephant, clearly being taken by the beauty of India. This might be seen as a symbolic triumph of a postcolonial culture over a neo-colonial power, even if for Western audiences this could also be a phantasmatic neo-colonial dream of wild adventures in the Eastern milieu becoming reality.

When the movie protagonists travel to London, the capital city of the United Kingdom is shown in a sequence of short cuts of landmarks such as Big Ben, Tower Bridge, or the London Eye. Among them is one that is not as known abroad, but here it is treated as just another landmark building: the gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, the Sikh temple situated in Southall. Such editing punctuates the multiculturalism of British society and the British capital city.

Combining the new vision of postcolonial and multicultural Great Britain with one of India—still honouring its traditions and withstanding neo-colonial attempts of new imperial powers to constrain its freedom by global economic forces—Chadha shows a totally different reality than the one seen in heritage cinema and the movies of the *Raj Revival* movement, and the fact that her movie is set in contemporary times is not the only reason for this difference. As previously mentioned, heritage cinema avoided difficult topic of ethnic diversity and—in the movies of *Raj Revival*—recreated the image of empire and British rule in India, but turned away from the necessity of dealing with the racist and violent atrocities of the past. When historical movies of the 1980s did touch on the topic of the violent British rule—as was the case with *Gandhi*, 1982, dir. Richard Attenborough, which shows the massacre of 1919 in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, when many innocent people were killed after orders of the British general Reginald E. H. Dyer to shoot at a peaceful demonstration—this tragedy is shown as an aberration, as an error of one man, not the whole imperialistic system. “The moral mission of imperialism, while certainly discredited in some respects [...], is also partly recuperated through an insistence on the essential rectitude of the British national character [...]”, notices Bart Moore-Gilbert, author of a book analysing the works of Hanif Kureishi, a British writer, screenwriter and director who wrote screenplays for the aforementioned movies of Stephen Frears. “Whereas Attenborough clearly sentimentalises Gandhi, the more obviously ‘political’ Jinnah is an antipathetic figure, cold, rigid, aloof, and cunning,

who compares badly not just with his rival but with many of the British officials.”<sup>5</sup> Such differences tend to show (by contrast) that the British nation did bring civilisation and gentlemanship to the allegedly uncivilised world of precolonial India.

Chadha’s movie contrasts such a presentation of history and India. It is worth noting that it is set in Amritsar, the city of the Amritsar massacre, and this tragedy had an impact on Chadha’s previous work: in her debut short movie *I’m British but...*, in which she presented the phenomenon of bhangra music and talked with young British Asian people about their national identity, this crime of the British empire is remembered. One of the female protagonists of this document says, “I don’t think that one should forget one’s history. [...] You can’t forget about events like the Amritsar massacre”. We also hear a song with the words: “Recall that it was these same foreigners | That took their rifles to us - | [...] And every corner lies in witness. | O Jallianwala Bagh”. Maybe it is not a coincidence that a city that became a symbol of colonial criminality was chosen by Chadha as the setting for *Bride and Prejudice*, with all its critique of neo-colonialism.

Not all modern readings of British classic literature are as apparently postcolonial in their interpretations. A lot has been said and written about Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and its antagonist Caliban. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan in the book *Shakespeare’s Caliban. A Cultural History* notice:

In any event, scholars have wrangled over Caliban’s genesis since at least the middle of the eighteenth century. What did Shakespeare intend when he fashioned his puppy-headed monster? Was his paradigm the American Indian, for example, or an African perhaps, or Europe’s mythical wodevose? And if he had American Indians in mind, were they Montaigne’s noble savages or their ignoble opposites or a combination of both? Or, on the other hand, did the playwright shun obvious exemplars and contrive instead a creature unrelated to existing figures or types? The answer, of course, is elusive and endlessly debatable.<sup>6</sup>

This debate is caused by the constantly valid question of presentation: is Caliban a racist creation, based on all Western presuppositions about the alleged savageness of primitive cultures, or maybe we can say that his “rebellion against Prospero’s control—in whatever form it is represented—embodies issues fundamental to a culture’s ideology”<sup>7</sup>. In our context, “ideology” might mean Western faith in its superiority and supremacy over lands and people colonised through the ages.

There have been more adaptations of *The Tempest*, but I would like to centre on two of them: the one made in 1979 by Derek Jarman, and the other directed by Julie Taymor in 2010. Taymor did not give up the colonial and racial connotations

<sup>5</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press) (2010), p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Alden T. Vaughan, Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare’s Caliban. A Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) (1999), p. xx.

<sup>7</sup> Alden T. Vaughan, Virginia Mason Vaughan, p. xvi.

of presenting Caliban as a black character. In the role she cast Djimon Hounsou, an actor born in Benin, Africa. It might be said that Taymor is not

bound by the post-colonial context of *Tempest* interpretation. She cast a black actor [...] but then coated him with mud and fish scales, his own skin showing through only in a moon-like circle around his left eye. [...] Whether improvised by the actor or at Taymor's behest, her Caliban does a shockingly real impersonation of a gorilla. Taymor returned him to the status of the alien other, a primitive beast, not a human being. His only moment of human dignity is a silent face off with Prospera toward the end of the play in a scene invented by Taymor.<sup>8</sup>

Such moments of human dignity are completely absent from Jarman's adaptation, but he decided to cast white blind actor Jack Birkett in the role and thus abandoned the more obvious colonial and postcolonial meanings that were important for Taymor more than three decades later. In the Polish monograph of Jarman, Malgorzata Radkiewicz claims that the way in which he is presented in Jarman's version (of Birkett's acting is grotesque and full of caricature) makes Prospero more delicate and subtle in comparison (despite his tyranny over Caliban and Ariel)<sup>9</sup>. For both Jarman and Taymor, gender issues are more important than racial ones; however, the subject of slavery, which could not disappear even from Jarman's version, exists there behind themes of queerness and physicality. Taymor even changed the sex of Prospero and made him Prospera and Jarman spent a lot of time sexualising the sculptural body of David Meyer, who played Ferdinand. However, the theme of disobedience of the enslaved Caliban is still present in both versions and its meanings cannot be ignored despite the stereotypical savagery of both Calibans (and the whiteness of one from the earlier movie).

Frantz Fanon in his famous book *Black Skin, White Masks*, when writing about the image of blackness or otherness, notices:

The Tarzan stories, the sagas of twelve-year-old explorers, the adventures of Mickey Mouse, and all those "comic books" serve actually as a release for collective aggression. The magazines are put together by white men for little white men. This is the heart of the problem. In the Antilles – and there is every reason to think that the situation is the same in the other colonies – these same magazines are devoured by the local children. In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little

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<sup>8</sup> Alan A. Stone, *Drowned Out. Julie Taymor's The Tempest*, [http://new.bostonreview.net/BR36.2/alan\\_a\\_stone\\_julie\\_taymor\\_tempest.php](http://new.bostonreview.net/BR36.2/alan_a_stone_julie_taymor_tempest.php), date accessed 4 September 2016

<sup>9</sup> See: Malgorzata Radkiewicz, *derek jarman: portret indywidualny*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo RABID) (2003), p.27.

white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary “who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes”.<sup>10</sup>

Even if these sentences are not as true nowadays as they were when these words were written (there are black comic book writers these days etc.), they show how the proper representation of otherness (or lack thereof) can affect human identity and self-respect. So how is the history of slavery treated in the adaptations of Shakespeare that are being discussed here? In addition, does this correspond with postcolonial thinking about the past or sustain the colonial ideology of race and the superiority of the Western civilisation?

Janja Ciglar-Žanić claims that: “Jarman [...] locates the issues of colonization, subordination, and domination on the territory of the human body, and uses *The Tempest* to speak for those repressed Others, whose subordination and repression has been effected through the deployment of the dominant ideological construct of human sexuality.”<sup>11</sup> I suggest that this might be also the case with Taymor’s version. The unnatural cover of Caliban’s body, these “mud and fish scales”, as Alan A. Stone described them in the previously cited analysis, quite literally transfer the issue of subordination onto the surface of the human being: this cover hides the natural blackness of Hounsou’s body and forces viewers to see him through it. Part of Hounsou’s face is covered with white make-up. This might remind us of the title of Fanon’s book, already cited here: “black skin, white masks”. Despite the fact that Shakespeare’s text and previous interpretations of his play very often treat Caliban as a beast-like creature, I suggest that Taymor’s version is only seemingly similar to them. By casting a woman (Helen Mirren) in the role of Prospero and gay actor (Ben Whishaw) as Ariel, she showed that gender, body, and sexual issues are key to her interpretation of Shakespeare’s play (and this was also the case with her previous movie adaptation of the Bard of Avon’s play, *Titus*, 1999). “Mud and fish scales” might be read as a veil, a mask (of the whole body) and the wild, ‘primitive’ behaviour of Taymor’s Caliban as the physical, colonial stereotype that is just the normative cover behind which lies the truth about the Other which is as elusive as it is desired (this desire of knowledge and understanding of the Other is also found on Caliban’s body: Hounsou is strong, perfectly built, and indisputably attractive despite the unnatural skin cover). Obviously, this might be read as the stereotypical sexualisation of the bodies of black men, and the fact that Caliban’s sexual force is tamed now by a woman, Prospera, asks questions about the position of genders in the postmodern world: the real one and the one of Taymor’s adaptation. However, it would be deceptive to read Taymor’s movie through conservative glasses, forgetting about all the body issues that are at the same time stereotypical and transgressive. For example, questions about colonialism have to be asked differently when Prospera is no longer a figure of patriarchal power.

<sup>10</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London: Pluto Press) (2008), p. 112-113.

<sup>11</sup> Janja Ciglar-Žanić, “Anti-colonial *Tempest*: Theory and Practice of Postmodernist Shakespearean Reinscriptions”, *Studia Romanica et Anglicana Zagrabiensia* 42 (1997), pp. 73.

As Edward W. Said says in *Culture and Imperialism* about Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, which re-writes Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

The core of Aimé Césaire's Caribbean *Une Tempête* is not *ressentiment*, but an affectionate contention with Shakespeare for the right to represent the Caribbean. That impulse to contend is part of a grander effort to discover the basis of an integral identity different from the formerly dependent, derivative one. Caliban, according to George Lamming, »is the excluded, that which is eternally below possibility... He is seen as an occasion, a state of existence which can be appropriated and exploited to the purposes of another's own development.« If that is so, then Caliban must be shown to have a history that can be perceived on its own, as the result of Caliban's own effort. One must, according to Lamming, »explode Prospero's old myth« by christening »language afresh«; but this cannot occur »[...] until we make available to all the result of certain enterprises undertaken by men who are still regarded as the unfortunate descendants of languageless and deformed slaves«. <sup>12</sup>

Does a similar attempt to regain Caliban's history for himself show up in Taymor's or Jarman's movie adaptations? I have tried to suggest here that gender and race issues are equivalents in both movies and that by emphasizing the enslaving nature of gender and sexual norms, Taymor and Jarman show the core of Western culture in which the Other (regardless of the reason of his Otherness: his gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion etc.) is tamed by norms that have to be broken, taken off like these "mud and fish scales", to get to the true (but elusive) nature of his identity. Physicality always was one of the main reasons of intolerance and inequality: queerness and womanhood gain power in both movie adaptations of *The Tempest* and therefore it might be said that Jarman and Taymor contest patriarchy: its history and its model of thinking about the Other and its place in the social structure of the past and the present. Non-whiteness is not forgotten, even if it is removed from the diegesis of Jarman's movie. By casting a white actor as Caliban, Jarman forces viewers to ask themselves questions about power, norms, slavery etc. without connecting them directly with themes of race and ethnicity and therefore making them fundamental subjects of Western culture, significant in all kinds of contexts.

As part of this article, I would like to return to Lean's *A Passage to India*. I have cited already Lean's words about his approach to E. M. Forster's novel. After all that has been written here about both adaptations of *The Tempest*, it is worth noting that both E. M. Forster's novel and Lean's movie can be interpreted as conservative or progressive, depending on the analysed aspect of the book or film. T. Muraleedharan in the text *Imperial migrations: Reading the Raj cinema of the 1980s* writes:

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<sup>12</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (London) (1994), p. 256-257. Cited in: Janja Ciglar-Žanić, p. 82-83. Said cites Lamming from: George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, (London: Allison & Busby) (1984), p. 107 and 119.

The most significant feature of the rewriting of history attempted by *A Passage to India* and *Heat and Dust* [another movie of the *Raj Revival* movement, 1983, dir. James Ivory] is the films' neat reversal of the oppressor/victim dichotomy. Colonised India—a victim of political and economic oppression and exploitation—ends up appearing in these films as a mysterious and evil force that disrupts the middle-class domesticity of England.<sup>13</sup>

The most recognizable example of such a 'reversal' in *A Passage to India* is the scene in which one of the female protagonists of the movie, Mrs. Moore, during her journey to the fictitious Marabar Caves, loses breath when she becomes surrounded by a group of Indian inhabitants in one of the caves. Such an image suggests that she is a victim of the 'aggressive, sensual [...] physicality'<sup>14</sup> of the Indian people, while she actually is (as a British citizen) one of the imperialistic oppressors.

On the other hand, the gender politics of E. M. Forster's text (and Lean's movie) help to transgress the boundaries of the conservative colonial (or postcolonial) content of the book and film. Thus, once again gender politics might be key to a progressive re-reading and reinterpretation of the classic text. Leela Gandhi claims in her book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* that no one understood the colonial 'hostility' between British women and Indian men better than E. M. Forster<sup>15</sup>. This hostility was related to the national identity of Indian men and the stereotypical model of Indian womanhood that was allegedly endangered by European women and their style of living. At the same time, British women were jealous that the bond between their partners and Indian men might be homoerotic<sup>16</sup>. Such suspicions were the results of the Western perception of Oriental sexuality and the stereotypes of the alleged effeminacy of Indian men. Such a bond also found a place in Forster's novel. Forster was gay and the main protagonist of his novel, Fielding, befriends a local Muslim man, Aziz, and even if their friendship does not have a clear homosexual subtext, Fielding supports Aziz when he is accused of a rape attempt by an English girl, Adela Quested. Fielding does so despite the resistance of his compatriots.

This subtext (regardless of its meaning: whether it is clearly homosexual or not) allows criticism of the colonial discourse that simplifies sexual and gender differences between the East and the West. The mythical superiority of the colonizer (who allegedly should be heterosexual because his homosexuality would ruin the

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<sup>13</sup> T. Muraleedharan, "Imperial migrations. Reading the Raj cinema of the 1980s" in *British Historical Cinema*, ed. Claire Monk, Amy Sargeant (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> T. Muraleedharan, p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, (New York: Columbia University Press) (1998), p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of the Self Under Colonialism*, (Delhi: Oxford UP) (1983), p. 9-10. Cited in: Hema Chari, "Colonial Fantasies and Postcolonial Identities: Elaboration of Postcolonial Masculinity and Homoerotic Desire" in *Postcolonial, Queer*, ed. John C. Hawley (Albany: State University of New York Press) (2001), s. 281.

cultural construct of manhood) is questioned because it is revealed that the sexual and gender discourse models of the masculine West and the effeminate East are only constructs that can be (and very often are) transgressed.

This content of Forster's novel stays intact in Lean's movie and therefore it might be interesting to watch his film through pink glasses of queerness. I wanted to show that even texts that are usually read as conservative might contain content that can be seen as progressive and anticolonial and that one-sided reading of cultural texts is very often problematic.

To finish this article, let me rephrase the question from the first paragraph: do postcolonial movies reinterpret classic texts of the British literature? Unfortunately, as we have seen, this question cannot be answered in a simple way. However, I have tried to show in this article that modern attempts to read the classics differently, by theory or reinterpretation, let modern cinema cope with the colonial past in a way that contests the old thinking about norms, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

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