Post-Victorian Adaptive Maps and the Politics of Identity: Review of Andrea Kirchknopf, *Rewriting the Victorians: Modes of Literary Engagement with the 19th Century*

Sneha Kar Chaudhuri
(West Bengal State University, Kolkata, India)

Andrea Kirchknopf, *Rewriting the Victorians: Modes of Literary Engagement with the 19th Century*
Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland Press, 2013
ISBN 978-0-7864-7134-8 £35.00/$55.00

*****

Rewriting the Victorians challenges the very nomenclature of Neo-Victorian Studies and offers a clever mix of existing and new scholarly insights into the debates over British national identity dominating this sub-genre since its very inception. As I will discuss below, the key to post-Victorianism, according to Kirchknopf, lies in unearthing and demystifying the myths of post-imperial and postcolonial island identity politics recurring as a chain of novelistic adaptations about the Victorians. Coupled with this is the theme of authorship and authenticity that she finds equally relevant to her understanding of post-Victorian textualisations of the historical past.

At the very outset, one wonders why the title is so pedestrian and does not adequately reflect the nuances of Kirchknopf's scholarly understanding of post-Victorian politics of identity. There is nothing particularly new implied in saying that this critical work discusses "[r]ewriting the Victorians", since this same re-writing has been the focus of all the published monographs and edited volumes on contemporary re-inventions of the Victorians, albeit from a huge spectrum of critical perspectives, variously endorsed or denied by this book. The choice of title fails to indicate the unique selling point of Kirchknopf's study in analysing these re-writings, except that it indicates that she is mostly concerned with novelistic re-writings of the Victorian age. Even the sub-title, "Modes of Literary Engagement with the 19th Century" is rather flat and does not

clearly signal the work's core issues. An alternative title employing keywords central to the understanding of her arguments, such as 'post-Victorian' and 'adaptive maps', would have been much preferable.

In the 'Introduction to Post-Victorian Fiction: State of the Art', the author particularly notes that "there is a shortage of books comprehensively discussing the dimensions of current refashionings of Victorian narratives and the critical apparatus for reviewing them" (p. 9). The monograph aims to fill this lacuna by "simultaneously providing a theoretical, chronological, and case study-oriented analysis of post-Victorian fiction" (p. 10). The outline is quite broad, seeking to justify the interconnected nature of post-Victorianism with Britain's socio-political shifts and anxieties in a climate of post-imperial decline, the re-surfacing of the importance of the author figure as a popular and influential celebrity, and the continuous re-creation of Victorian literary myths and narratives in various series of adaptive texts that form a discursive chain-reaction to the long nineteenth century and its haunting legacies.

The first chapter entitled 'From Victorian to Post-Victorian: Definitions, Terminology and Contexts' is the most comprehensive of the individual chapters but cluttered in the sense that it ends up saying too many things one after the other, when all this could have been more well-paced. The author condenses the entire complex history of the emergence of the sub-genre of neo-Victorianism, which she persuasively re-christens as 'post-Victorianism', and classifies and interlinks the various kinds of historical novels via their structural and thematic features. The author rightly points out that currently there are too many terms that compete for providing the 'right' description of these postmodern re-reading of the Victorians, such as 'Victoriana', 'Victoriographies', 'retro-Victorian', 'neo-Victorian' or 'post-Victorian' and even 'pseudo-Victorian' novels. She dismisses all these terms in favour of the term 'post-Victorian', a word that for her is the most representative and inclusive of the residual and emergent trends of these revisions of the Victorian age that are both high-brow and popular, multinational and interdisciplinary. Here are the four main arguments that she puts forward to endorse her choice of the term:

> Firstly, just like *Victorian*, it displays nuances in both the historical and the aesthetic realms. Secondly, *post-Victorian* comprises historical settings without immediately taking a stance on the hierarchy of the eras. Thirdly, similarly to the

> terms *postcolonial* or *postimperial*, it expresses an intention of revision rather than repetition of earlier narratives. Fourthly, *post-Victorian* implies overlaps with numerous postmodernist theoretical concerns and literary tools. (p. 35)

She particularly takes issue with the term 'neo-Victorian' (the most popular of all the competing terms) as it is synchronically not able to distinguish between postmodern pastiches and repetitions of the Victorian works, on the one hand, and the more revisionary and self-conscious critical narratives about the nineteenth century, on the other. Moreover neo-Victorianism does not explicitly allude to the obvious postmodern devices used by these retro-texts, being content merely to uphold and celebrate any new and fresh perspectives on the nineteenth-century. By contrast, Kirchknopf emphasises the efficacy of the term 'post-Victorian' – she prefers it for its ability to integrate the Victorian, the modernist and the postmodernist eras and their aesthetic legacies, both synchronically and diachronically, and the useful interdisciplinary dimensions that it lends to the multivalent contemporary representations of the Victorian age. Her arguments in favour of the term 'post-Victorian' address the similarities of modernism and postmodernism but precludes an understanding of the radical ways in which postmodernism deviates and distinguishes itself from Modernism. For example, A. S. Byatt's re-calling of the Victorians is much more 'neo' than, say, a High Modernist avant-garde writer like Virginia Woolf's rejection of the Victorian aesthetic ideologies or the anti-Victorian attitudes preferred by the several minor novels from the 1920s to the 1950s that Kirchknopf discusses.

Neo-Victorianism as a periodic and aesthetic concept has always been careful to distinguish itself from the so-called Modernist *anti-Victorianism* of the avant-garde writers of the period. In her introductory essay 'Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter' in the inaugural issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, published in autumn 2008, Marie-Luise Kohlke addresses this problem of distinguishing between the Modernist and contemporary textual engagements with the Victorians and notes that there will always be "a perceptible disjunction" between the two varieties of rewritings (Kohlke 2008: 4). Hence, if the term 'post-Victorian' is accepted, then ideological distinctions between the Modernist and postmodernist texts about the Victorians risk getting blurred: both these kinds of texts are post-

Victorian only in the chronological sense, but convey essentially incompatible attitudes and perceptions about the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, 'neo-Victorianism', according to Kirchknopf, implies a hierarchy of ages; in other words, it sees the Victorian as 'old' and the postmodern as 'new', whereas 'post-Victorian' is a chronologically more accurate term. Here, I think, the author fails to see the point that the hierarchy of eras overtly reflected in the term 'neo-Victorian' is neither essentialising historical experiences nor relegating the past to a mere historical backdrop. In my view, any historical fiction, regardless of the particular past it revisits, has to distance itself temporally and spatially, if not culturally, from both the period being recalled and the present age in which it is written. 'Neo-Victorian', as a term, captures and reflects this binarism of historical distance and proximity by using this juxtaposition of eras in a much more complex fashion than the term 'post-Victorian' does, as the latter fails to bring out the interplay of the past and the present or the old and the new inherent in such trans-historical enterprises. Finally, the term 'neo-Victorian', despite not incorporating the word 'post', is not at all removed from the theoretical tools of postmodernism, post-colonialism or post-imperialism as all these discourses are as much 'neo' as the former and not only often occupy the same historical plane and context, but also share multiple ideological similarities. One can also argue that following the prevalent use of the terms 'neo-colonialism' and 'neo-imperialism', the prefix 'neo' can be used in relation to Victorianism as well. The former terms might have overt economic implications, but there is no denying the fact that this financial context across the globe decidedly shapes and defines neo-Victorian aesthetics as well. For example, there are many Dickens adaptations to suit different cultural contexts for profit as well as artistic motives and there are also better selling chances for an Indian or South African movie in the Western context.

The next chapter, termed 'Post-Victorian Fiction and the Literary Scene', manages to offer some valuable insights into the role of the author in contemporary times. It shows how the cult of the author, central to Victorian culture, is being revived by late capitalistic marketing and promoting strategies, making the author a powerful public figure and influential celebrity at the same time. The image of the author as a successful entrepreneur is utilised further to show how most of these post-Victorian novels incorporate the perspective of the postmodern author by making him a reader of the past. Even the marketing strategies adopted in

the designing, dissemination and circulation of post-Victorian texts revive traits and tendencies of the Victorian publishing industry like the competitive market strategies, the rising importance of publishing houses and the centrality of the role of the 'author-god'. The popularity and media hype created in Britain and the Commonwealth nations about the Man Booker Prize further intensifies the importance attached to post-Victorian authorship and readership, as many novels responding to post-imperial and post-colonial issues have bagged the prize in the recent past. Here, however, the author simply repeats the arguments about the connection between the Empire and the Booker Prize established by both Richard Todd and Luke Strongman. She only does the work of linking their critical opinions about the British postmodern historical novels in general with post-Victorian fiction in particular. The chapter ends with a useful and relevant discussion of the post-Victorian revivals of Henry James's life and works as a mark of the paradoxically subversive and deconstructionist celebration of the archetype of the omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent Victorian author. The examples of the novels used in this segment are Emma Tennant's *Felony: The Private History of the Aspern Papers* (2002), Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) and Michael Heyns's *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005). Kirchknopf aptly points out here that these biofictions, unlike traditional biographies, do not aim at historical verisimilitude and factual fidelity but self-consciously "manipulate historical data", illustrating how "today's biographilia are more aware of their status as interpretations of a fictional figure or historical personality's life aimed at the contemporary reading public" (p. 75). The overall problem with this segment of the chapter on James, however, is the absence of any issues that are either post-imperial or post-colonial, which seems to be the thrust of most of the rest of the chapter as well as all the other chapters of the book and its core argument. The issues of authorship, the anxiety over plagiarism, the cult status of the postmodern author as an influential public celebrity, and the role of reader-response are ideas occasionally re-used in the following chapters, especially in relation to the study of adaptations of the Brontë sisters' works or those of Charles Dickens, yet these rewritings about James have little relevance to imperial and colonial themes, except in so far as James's suspected homosexual identity could be regarded as an instance of 'internal colonisation'.

The third chapter, 'Post-Victorian Fiction in its Political and Social Context', tries to throw fresh light on the by now obvious reason behind the rise of postmodern neo-Victorianism: the context of Britain's post-imperial decline and the cultural practices adopted to counter it. Sally Shuttleworth's seminal essay 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', published as far back as 1997, offered a similar view regarding the rise of what she called retro-Victorian novels. In 2001 Suzanne Keen's book on postmodern historical novels, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction*, constituted another book-length attempt to link the atmosphere of post-imperial doom in Britain with the literary resurgence of interest in the Victorians, furthered by archival research and the cultural prestige of libraries and famous writers' manuscript collections, as in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance (*1990). Kirchknopf nearly repeats the same strain of thought, with some fresh input, about the British administrative efforts to uplift the image of their country's diminishing national and international eminence through contemporary re-creations of the Victorian Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition of 1851 via the Millennium Dome project. Following Jay Clayton's 2003 study *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture*, she also perceives the entire media enthusiasm behind the showcasing of the Millennium Dome as a kind of post-Victorian cultural throwback to the times of the Victorian hooplah over the grand imperialistic exhibition space, so ably critiqued by post-colonial works such as Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). The other 'island' text that she chooses as an example is Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) that also brings out the typical imperial anxieties accompanying the project of British imperialism in the nineteenth century and interlinks similar symptoms of loss of control and importance with the post-imperial British cultural scenario in which Britain's position as a world power has got much reduced both within and without. Simultaneously, she reads Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) as an 'island fiction' that re-works "the history of empire, inscribing its future in the text together with present-day anxieties similar to those of the Victorians" (p. 95). These narratives, for Kirchknopf, mirror the post-imperial "devolution of power" and economic isolation and insularity of Britain as an "island nation" (p. 95), and project such similar experiences to nineteenth-century historical situations.

The next two chapters, respectively entitled '*Jane Eyre* Tailor-Made: A Case-Study of the *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Charlotte* Adaptive

Chain of Novels' and 'The Way We Adapt Now: Endings, Novel Series and Adaptive Maps', provide complex readings of the ways in which critical and fictional responses to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) have created an alternative quasi-mythic pattern of adaptation. These two chapters have originality in the sense that they critically interrogate the extent to which Jean Rhys uses Brontë in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and D. M. Thomas later uses both Brontë's and Jean Rhys' works in *Charlotte*: *The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000), and finally, how Jasper Fforde in *The Eyre Affair* (2001) uses the Jane Eyre narrative in the format of the detective-cum-island narrative focused on the Victorian author's secrets and the contemporary reader's discovery of them through fiction. The section on Charles Dickens leads the author to analyse Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006) as another set of adaptive texts that deploy a network of postmodern, post-colonial and post-Victorian discourses to resist and reinforce Dickens's master text *Great Expectations* (1861). In this section there is, however, no mention of the fact that Dickens's last and unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) has likewise been revived as a post-Victorian adaptive biofiction in novels like Dan Simmon's *Drood* and Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens*, both published in 2009. These two novels are also biofictions in the sense that they re-work the writer's biography and adapt and appropriate his work, like the other post-Victorian re-writings of James, Brontë and Dickens aim to do. While Kirchknopf is correct in pointing out that the canonical Victorian works of Brontë, Dickens and James are those most often chosen for adaptation by post-Victorian authors, she does not throw adequate light on the reasons why these authors have been used more than other major writers or sages of the period. Besides, she never even mentions Alfred, Lord Tennyson's post-Victorian re-incarnations in A. S. Byatt's 'The Conjugial Angel' in *Angels and Insects* (1992) and Lynn Truss's *Tennyson's Gift* (1996) while only furtively mentioning the post-Victorian re-surfacing of Thomas Hardy (see p. 65). Hence overall the chapter is too selective in its discussion of the range of 'adaptive maps' in neo-Victorian literature, as well as of their frequent incorporation of biofictional elements.

Kirchknopf's 'Conclusion: Ways Forward in Researching Post-Victorian Fiction' attempts to cover the gaps and fissures in the earlier chapters adroitly, but it still leaves a whole series of questions unanswered. Is post-Victorianism confined to the writing of the narratives of identity

bordering on post-imperial and post-colonial issues, centralising only aspects of race and nation, but marginalising those more concerned with class, crime, science and superstition, gender and sexuality? Does the issue of nation and Empire get specialised focus in the majority of post-Victorian novels; in other words, does the larger canvas of neo-Victorian literature adopt a hegemonic or a minority perspective? The author does not include a discussion of Elizabeth Ho's very relevant 2012 treatment of post-colonial neo-Victorianisms in *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*, (perhaps published too close to the completion of her own work), which might have led to a clearer differentiation of her own critical paradigms from those of Ho. If she can discuss Kneale's and Phillips's island fictions, then what about texts like Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy (2008-11) or Kunal Basu's *The Opium Clerk* (2008)? These too are post-Victorian post-colonial 'island' texts, in this case related to the Indian sub-continent, that engage forcefully with the issues of imperial trade, multiculturalism and race outlined as significant to the understanding of the post-Victorians re-narrativisation of the nineteenth-century metanarrative of nation and identity.

Rewriting the Victorians takes up issues that are very essential to the understanding of neo-Victorianism and lives up to the challenge of voicing some distinct and original perspectives, but how far it will survive the critical rat-race remains to be seen. Finally, one lacuna that most critical books like these on neo-Victorianism usually contain is repeated here by a conspicuous absence of any substantial discussion of neo-Victorian poetry, drama, graphic novels, musicals and opera.