

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 21.1 (Summer 2025)

Reanalyzing the New Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature

Women at Odds: Indifference, Antagonism, and Progress in Late Victorian Literature. Riya Das. Columbus: The Ohio State Press University, 2024. 199 pp.

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<1>Historically, the New Woman has been an intriguing figure for Victorian and Women's Studies scholars, especially first-wave and second-wave feminist scholars. Most scholars view the New Woman as a sexually liberated woman who defies patriarchal ideology and promotes equality for all women. However, as Riya Das's *Women at Odds* shows, this is not the case. Das's monograph, published by The Ohio State University Press, offers a much-needed re-examination of the New Woman in late Victorian literature. In particular, *Women at Odds* provides an antiracist, feminist, postcolonial critique of the role of the New Woman in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). While scholars such as Sharon Marcus in her work *Between Women* (2007) assume that most women in Victorian literature – especially the New Woman – are eager to cultivate female friendships, this is not always the case, according to Das's book. Instead, *Women at Odds* convincingly demonstrates how female antagonism and indifference are often used strategically to serve the New Woman's individual interests; in other words, the New Woman's antagonistic and indifferent behavior (or what Das calls “retro-progress”) helps her achieve her own personal desires at the expense of “Other” women such as working-class women, fallen women, and colonized women (77).

<2>Das's *Women At Odds* is divided into four main chapters, which include “Chapter 1: An Unsympathetic Network: Female Defiance as Narrative Force in *Daniel Deronda*,” “Chapter 2: Antagonistic Boundaries: The Woman Professional's Retro-Progress in *The Odd Women*,” “Chapter 3: Settler Colonial

Feminism: Unsustainable Indifference and Antagonism in *The Story of an African Farm*,” and “Chapter 4: In Solidarity with Empire: The Professional Wife and Mother in *Dracula*.” Overall, Das’s text provides a clear trajectory of how the New Woman attempts to navigate societal norms and expectations, such as fulfilling domestic roles of wife and mother, while fulfilling her own desire for professional work and economic freedom. Chapter One examines how *Daniel Deronda* “anticipates the fin de siècle New Woman’s break from convention and from traditional mid-Victorian poetic justice” (31). In particular, Das argues that female characters such as Gwendolen Harleth escape the traditional roles of wife and mother by “refusing solidarity” (30) with other women in Eliot’s novel. Chapter Two investigates how the New Woman in Gissing’s *The Odd Women* engages in retro-progress, which, as Das defines, is “a dialectical feminist vision that recycles mid-Victorian notions of female morality to empower herself” (31-2). Specifically, Das illustrates how Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot are able to achieve professional work by reinforcing sexual regulation and disavowing working-class women’s circumstances. Chapter Three probes the absence of female solidarity through the character of Lyndall in Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*. Essentially, Lyndall’s “singular self-identification as lone white feminist on colonized land renders her neither postcolonial nor British and stymies her feminist vision” (33). Lastly, Chapter Four argues that the New Woman’s use of female antagonism and indifference is used to further patriarchal and British imperialist agendas in Stoker’s *Dracula*. Mina Harker, as Das demonstrates, uses her “progressive” professional skills to protect the British empire from foreign, exotic threats, even at the expense of her friend Lucy’s life.

<3>At its core, Das’s *Women at Odds* dispels assumptions and myths about the New Woman. The New Woman, as the book depicts, did not always seek female friendship; in fact, female antagonism was often pursued if that type of action *benefited* the New Woman in some manner, such as securing professional work or a higher social position. Assuming that the New Woman, or Victorian women in general, inherently seek female friendship (since women are often associated with traits such as care and emotional labor) is quite essentialist, and Das points out that “this pervasive narrative of the feminine penchant to be friendly dovetails with the Victorian ideal of feminine domesticity” (165). Another compelling argument that *Women at Odds* makes about the New Woman is reevaluating her agency. Again, scholars have historically assumed that even the New Woman lacked agency over her actions and life. However, Das’s text portrays that this is not the case. New Women such as *Daniel Deronda*’s Gwendolen and *The Odd Women*’s Rhoda and Mary cunningly employ antagonistic and indifferent behavior toward certain women in order to better their own circumstances. For

example, after being approached by Grandcourt's mistress, Gwendolen ignores her plea to quit her courtship and decides to still marry him in order to avoid financial destitution. Similarly, Rhoda and Mary are openly hostile to fallen women and lower-class women in order to obtain professional freedom. Das's text illustrates how "this exclusionary politics is what paradoxically enables New Women to create new possibilities for themselves beyond matrimonial domesticity and also beyond teaching or governessing" (100).

<4>Das's *Women at Odds* not only re-examines the supposed gendered and essentialist assumptions about the New Woman but also highlights her conscious decision to help further and promote imperialist and patriarchal interests in order to achieve her "own" professional freedom. Both Lyndall from Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and Mina from Stoker's *Dracula* forgo female solidarity due to colonialist interests. For example, Lyndall, who envisions a feminist future where she can achieve personal and economic independence, has the opportunity to support colonized women in South Africa, but she chooses to focus on her own concerns. Embracing sexual freedom, Lyndall becomes pregnant out of wedlock and dies in childbirth, which highlights the repercussions of the New Woman who does not adhere to sexual and moral norms. As Das writes, Lyndall's "replication of this exclusionary feminism in a colonial space is, therefore, purposeless in the context of late nineteenth-century imperialist reform" (130). Mina, on the other hand, successfully performs the role of professional woman, wife, and mother in *Dracula* since she upholds and helps promote British imperialist ideology. In particular, Mina helps a Western homosocial group of men – including Jonathan Harker and Abraham Van Helsing – eliminate foreign threats and stop the invasion of the British empire by phallically staking Lucy and Count Dracula. Ultimately, as Das argues, "Mina's survival is due to her pragmatic participation in empire" (160).

<5>*Women at Odds* provides insightful new scholarship for readers who are interested in analyzing the New Woman through an antiracist, postcolonial, feminist perspective. In the conclusion of *Women at Odds*, Das connects the antagonistic, imperialist New Woman to contemporary examples of "feminists" who engage in similar antagonistic behaviors such as trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). Indeed, Das makes an important connection between the New Woman and certain feminists today to illustrate the rise of liberal feminism in Western culture, which focuses on individualism and the conscious decision to work within the system of patriarchy in order for individual, white women to "climb the ladder of success." Overall, Das's *Women at Odds* offers a refreshing – and very important – take on the New Woman in late Victorian literature.

