

Riya Das, *Women at Odds: Indifference, Antagonism, and Progress in Late Victorian Literature*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2024. 210pp. ISBN 9780814215722

In *Women at Odds*, Riya Das offers a provocative intervention in Victorian feminist literary studies, challenging the long-standing critical emphasis on female solidarity as the dominant mode of feminist progress. Das asserts that this focus on the generative role of female bonds has limited feminist analyses of Victorian literature, obscuring the reality that not all women could achieve domestic stability through female friendships, nor were all dynamics between women inherently friendly. Through a historicist and formalist lens, Das foregrounds female indifference and antagonism as more politically potent forces that enabled New Woman figures – white, British, educated, middle-class, sexually moral, and urban – to carve out professional and financial independence in the Victorian fin de siècle. This deliberate rejection of solidarity, which Das describes as the “New Woman’s exclusionary feminist enterprise” (24) is markedly “retro-progressive” (29) in the sense that it reinforces imperialist and classist structures while simultaneously disrupting patriarchal expectations of marriage, domesticity, and feminine self-sacrifice. By reframing the discourse on Victorian female relationships, Das’s work reimagines the British New Woman’s feminism, her quest for social and economic agency, as a paradoxical pursuit that prioritized individual ambition over collective feminist progress.

This is not to say that Das dismisses the political value of solidarity. Rather, her most compelling claim is that indifference and antagonism are more disruptively feminist. Das defines female indifference as a “politically conscious decision to not intervene in the plight of other women” (5), thus distinguishing it from passive disinterest. In this vein, indifference represents a form of self-preservation, particularly when expressed across lines of class and race. Meanwhile, female antagonism involves actively undermining other women’s prospects to enhance one’s own. Das notes there is a fluidity between these two positions, since women may shift from indifference to antagonism as a strategic response to the direness of their circumstances. Her study engages with a range of late nineteenth-century novels to illustrate how indifference and antagonism enable the New Woman’s resistance to conventional feminine roles.

In the first chapter, Das demonstrates how female antagonism drives the plot of George Eliot’s proto-feminist novel *Daniel Deronda*, shifting the narrative from passive domesticity to active rebellion: “In the absence of economic or social power, women resort to unapologetic defiance as their ultimate weapon against oppressive social norms” (40). Although these women’s actions are initially self-serving, Das argues that they become linked in an “*unsympathetic network*” (40) that disrupts the established social order and shows the collective power of female autonomy. Each woman’s defiant individualism builds upon the others, forming a cumulative resistance, which Das envisions as capable of reshaping gender norms and transforming women’s futures.

In Chapter 2, Das explores the liberatory potential of the fin-de-siècle New Woman’s retro-progressive agenda as depicted in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*. Notably, the only female characters to attain professional freedom are Rhoda and Mary, New Women who practice a form of exclusionary feminism. This involves rejecting traditional female solidarity in favor of indifference or antagonism toward working-class or sexually immoral women. Through their calculated distancing from these women, Rhoda and Mary not only challenge the conventional notion of unity among women, but they also expose how their personal advancement is tied to

the exclusion of women they deem poor and morally degenerate. This, according to Das, is the retro-progressive aspect of British New Woman feminism: while it seeks liberation and professional success for educated, middle-class women adhering to conventional feminine morality, it simultaneously reinforces a hierarchy that renders other women unworthy or undesirable. In highlighting this tension, Das acknowledges the dual nature – the effectiveness and the inherent contradictions – of antagonistic and indifferent feminism, echoing Audre Lorde’s critique of white liberal feminism using “*the master’s tools*” to “*dismantle the master’s house*” (112).

Building on this in Chapter 3, Das’s reading of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* explores how the New Woman’s retro-progressive feminism fails to accommodate white colonial women, positioning them as peripheral to its emancipatory promises. Lyndall, the novel’s white colonial female protagonist, occupies a liminal position – neither fully embraced by the feminist progress that seeks to redefine womanhood in the mainland nor aligned with indigenous struggles against colonial oppression. Through Lyndall’s story, Das underscores the racial and geopolitical boundaries of the New Woman’s feminism, revealing how its vision of liberation remains entangled within the structures of empire.

In Chapter 4, Das presents a different iteration of the New Woman in Mina from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Unlike Lyndall, Mina secures her place within the imperial order by asserting her superiority over foreign and sexualized women. Here, the New Woman figure aligns herself with British imperialism to secure social legitimacy and professional success, demonstrating how feminist aspirations are achieved only by reinforcing, rather than dismantling, racial and colonial hierarchies.

While Das makes a compelling case for indifference and antagonism as crucial yet overlooked forces in women’s struggles for autonomy, her argument is not without its limitations. Some readers may find her focus on educated, middle-class white women too narrow, as it largely excludes working-class, sexually transgressive, and racially marginalized women who also sought agency outside of domesticity. Consequently, Das provides yet another analysis of white women practicing feminism by subordinating women whose class, sexuality, or race placed them outside the dominant feminist framework. Additionally, while Das’s critique of imperialist feminism in Chapter 3 is sharp, the book could benefit from a more direct engagement with the perspectives or resistances of marginalized women, particularly how they challenged these exclusions or redefined Western feminist goals. Nonetheless, these critiques do not undermine the book’s impact; rather, they open avenues for future scholarship to build upon Das’s insights. *Women at Odds* will be of particular interest to scholars of Victorian literature, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies, as it challenges readers to reconsider the politics of women’s alliances and the costs of feminist advancement. In prompting broader discussions about the strategic, and sometimes exclusionary, mechanisms through which women have historically navigated patriarchal structures, Das makes an essential contribution to Victorian studies and beyond.

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Work Cited

Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 110–14.