

# **A Review on The Odd Woman By George Gissing**

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## **استعراض لرواية المرأة الغريبة للكاتب جورج كيسينغ**

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## **Abstract:-**

George Robert was an English novelist who wrote many short stories. He was a talented student who lived a turbulent life. Kessing chose to write about women and their changing opportunities in late Victorian times. Depicts prostitution, female violence, domestic life and the personality of the spinster. Kessing was influenced by the feminist movement at the end of the 1880s, which left a remarkable influence on his writing, arguing that exotic women deal with the vacuum of Russian concepts of male power. Such critical analysis of patriarchal power opens up space for female heroes who embody those human qualities overlooked or suppressed by tyranny. In this novel Gissing presents the emotions, thoughts, expectations, relationships and the psychology of those women, despite the fact that he is a man, but he is so talented that he could convey the inner side of a woman. What he is trying to say and make the society aware of is stop taking women for granted and start taking them seriously considering their spiritual, social, intellectual side.

**Key words:** English novels, Gissing, Women, the Victorian age, The feminist movement, women position, discrimination, revolutionary ideas, the modern age.

## **المخلص:-**

كان جورج روبرت جيسينج روائياً إنجليزياً كتب العديد من القصص القصيرة. لقد طالباً موهوباً عاش حياة مضطربة. اختار كيسنغ الكتابة عن النساء وفرصهن المتغيرة في أواخر العصر الفيكتوري. يصور الدعارة وعنف الإناث والحياة المنزلية وشخصية العانس. تأثر كيسينغ بالحركة النسوية في نهاية ثمانينيات القرن التاسع عشر والتي تركت تأثيراً ملحوظاً على كتاباته، حيث يجادل بأن المرأة الغربية تتعامل مع فراغ المفاهيم الروسية للسلطة الذكورية إن مثل هذا التحليل النقدي للسلطة الأبوية يفتح مساحة للأبطال الإناث اللواتي يجسدن تلك الصفات الإنسانية التي أغفلها الطغيان أو قمعها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الروايات الانكليزية، كيسينغ، نساء، العصر الفكتوري، الحركة النسوية، مكانة المرأة، التمييز، الأفكار الثورية، العصر الحديث.

George Robert Gissing was an English novelist who also wrote short stories. He was a gifted student who had a troubled life. He was caught stealing from other students to help a prostitute, whom he married eventually, therefore he was expelled from the school (Harman,181). He was recognized as one of the leading figures in English novel, along with Thomas Hardy and George Meredith, late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gissing was described as "one of the most original, daring and conscientious workers in fiction."(Nicoll,480). G K Chesterton also comments on Gissing by saying: "soundest of the [Dickens](#) critics, a man of genius."(Chesterton,5). Obviously Gissing was talented enough to deserve all these good reviews and evaluation. George Orwell also appreciated Gissing when he wrote an essay for a magazine in 1948, saying that Gissing is "perhaps the best novelist England has produced", and he considers The Odd Women, Demos, and New Grub Street as Gissing's masterpieces. Many critics believe that [Émile Zola](#) , who was a French novelist and the best-known for [naturalism](#), influenced Gissing a great deal (Keary,82), while other critics suggest that Mary Ann Evans, who is a leading English novelist of the Victorian age, and is known by her [pen name](#) George Eliot, influenced Gissing greater than Zola (Bader,392-400).

Gissing chooses to write about women and their changing opportunities in the late Victorian age. He depicts prostitution, female violence, domesticity and the spinster figure. Gissing was influenced by the Feminist movement at the end of the 1880s which left a remarkable impact on his writings, as Harsh argues The Odd Woman deals with the "emptiness of Ruskinian notions of masculine authority in the hands of ... a clumsy patriarch, commenting that such a critical analysis of patriarchal power opens up a space for female protagonists who exemplify those human qualities overlooked or suppressed by tyranny" (Huguet,215).

To be in the atmosphere of the novel, one should take a look at the Victorian age, especially the position of women at that time, since the novel is about women, their relationships and points of view. In the Victorian age women were passive figures with no rights. The only role they had was a domestic one concerning families. They were supposed to follow the male figures in their lives whether a

father, a brother or a husband. Their main concern is to find a proper marriage and be “The angel in the house” where she should take care of her husband, children and house (K,316). A Victorian woman had limited jobs like being a governess, a servant or a factory worker in difficult conditions with little salary. All these circumstances along with the harsh poverty led many women to choose prostitution as an alternative to provide a source for living and to educate their children. These fallen women were the subject for many writers, as Kate Millet says: “a female is born, and a woman is created” which means that the society with all its aspect shapes a women and what she will be. (Yatağan,278-280). Towards the end of the Victorian age, there was a change because of the emergence of many movements like the Feminist or the Suffrage movement, even though they were not completely successful, but they sure left an impact. Some proposed the claim that says” The women have changed, men have not” (Delamont,6).

The solutions for the problems of the Victorian women such as, problems concerning the law and voting, separate spheres, sex and marriage, economy, prostitution, middleclass women and intelligence, the solutions were in the form of events, legislations and the publication of some essays and novels (Nsaidzedze,1-3).

Gissing wrote this novel based on his experience of the society in the 19th century. As a novelist, he was interested in Feminist movement and that is obvious in his The Odd Woman in which he supports women and shows how they were considered as strange or odd because they were without husbands. They had to choose between their desires and their principles in life. In addition, Gissing attempts to portray the nature of women in relation to marriage and sexuality (Alabassy,277).

The novel starts in 1872, when the six Madden sisters lose their father in an accident and they are left with no income or relatives. Later in 1887, three Madden sisters have survived, Virginia, Alice and, the youngest and prettiest, Monica. All three are living in London and working for people who are barely above their social position. The oldest sisters, Virginia and Alice, were able to find jobs as governesses, since they were educated to be ladies. Monica, however, is only five years old when their father dies and she does not get the education that the other sisters enjoyed and ends up

working in a shop for many hours. The Madden sisters meet Rhoda Nunn, whom they knew from the country, and who is a feminist in heart and soul. She works and lives with Miss Barfoot and runs a school where they train women for office work. Rhoda convinces Monica to leave her current job and join her school, so she can find a better job. Rhoda describes Monica to Barfoot as: "Her guardians dealt with her absurdly; they made her half a lady and half a shop-girl. I don't think she'll ever be good for much" (Gissing 121). In Monica's case, she only fits to be a wife as Rhoda states: "She's fit for nothing else, I'm afraid" (Gissing121). Yet there is an alternative option for Monica and that is to become a New Woman, by going to school in order to be financially independent. Because Monica's current state causes her diseases due to the hard condition under which she works in the shop. Monica resembles the Victorian woman who does not get the proper education and she has to work and face a physical decline because of her necessity to earn money (Hendrikx,40).

Rhoda finds education as a way of making use of the abundance of women. As she says to Monica: "But do you know that there are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours?" (Gissing 44). According to Rhoda, the surplus of women could be seen as a "great reserve" (Gissing 44). If a woman "vanishes" in matrimony, the reserve can take her place in the working force. Rhoda wants to help in training the reserve, to make them ready to substitute women who marry. However, it seems like she sees those women as mere numbers instead of actual human lives. Her ideas are very extreme, as are her strategies to reach her goal, which is to reduce the surplus:

'And I wish it were harder. I wish girls fell down and died of hunger in the streets, instead of creeping to their garrets and the hospitals. I should like to see their dead bodies collected together in some open place for the crowd to stare at.' Monica gazed at her with wide eyes. 'You mean, I suppose, that people would try to reform things.' 'Who knows? Perhaps they might only congratulate each other that a few of the superfluous females had been struck off.' (Gissing 42).

Mary, on the other hand, is portrayed as a more moderate feminist, as she is not necessarily anti-marriage and also chooses

not be part of a movement: “She did not seek to become known as the leader of a movement, yet her quiet work was probably more effectual than the public career of women who propagandize for female emancipation” (Gissing 63). Gissing suggests that Mary is a more agreeable feminist than Rhoda. Mary’s actions are more effective, but she is still able to keep her strong feminine character traits, for it is stated “that people who knew her best thought of her with as much tenderness as admiration” (Gissing 63). Additionally, Mary is a feminist because she believed that women are equal to men (Ibid, 41): “She held the conviction that whatever man could do, woman could do equally well—those tasks only excepted which demand great physical strength” (Gissing 63).

Besides the image of women and the perspective of education, there is another important matter of which both society and women have their own perspective. Marriage is seen from different angles as for Rhoda, she believes that once a woman is celibate and sees love and sex as weaknesses, only then the equality between man and woman would be achieved (Hendrikx,42): “I am seriously convinced that before the female sex can be raised from its low level there will have to be a widespread revolt against sexual instinct. Christianity couldn’t spread over the world without help of the ascetic ideal, and this great movement for woman’s emancipation must also have its ascetics.” (Gissing 70). Her surname” Nunn” fits her ideas of anti-sexual instinct and anti-marriage. She would like to pass on the “anti-marriage” idea to her pupils: “I would have girls taught that marriage is a thing to be avoided rather than hoped for. I would teach them that for the majority of women marriage means disgrace.” (Gissing 112). These beliefs, however, are put to the test when she meets Everard Barfoot, Mary Barfoot’s cousin. After their first meeting he is very surprised by her appearance and opinions: “Everard examined Miss Nunn’s figure, which in its way was strong and shapely as his own” (Gissing 90). He describes her as having a mannish appearance, and he also sees her as a New Woman: “A strong character, of course. More decidedly one of the new women than you yourself-- isn’t she?” (Gissing 95), Everard is infatuated by her and expresses to Mary “I must get to understand her line of thought” (Gissing 95). He sees Rhoda as a “challenge to his manhood” (Gissing 161) and despite the fact that he knows how she feels about marriage he confesses his love for her: “now you are the one woman

in the world” (Gissing 202-203). Yet, she denies and even mocks him for asking her: “You are resolved never to marry?’ ‘I never shall,’ Rhoda replied firmly” (Gissing 204). However, after she turns him down, he arouses in her feelings for him. Later he proposes to enter a free union with her instead of a legal union: “If we cannot trust each other without legal bonds, any union between us would be unjustified.” (Gissing 293). By this time, she has an inner conflict because she does have feelings for him: “The temptation to yield was very strong, for it seemed to her an easier and a nobler thing to proclaim her emancipation from social statutes than to announce before her friends the simple news that she was about to marry.” (Gissing 293). She accepts his offer on one condition if it was made official by law. Showing that even the hardcore feminist is able to love and abandon her beliefs for a man, is very anti-feminist, but it also an indication that this is a realistic image of a woman. She might be the typical New Woman of the story, but she still has a weak moment in her life that only makes her more human which is totally natural and normal. Meanwhile, Monica, who is married to Edmund, meets handsome single Bevis and they fall in love. She tries to elope with him, but her extremely jealous husband hired a detective to follow her. She misguides the detective, letting him believe she is having an affair with Everard Barfoot. When Rhoda finds out through Mary about the alleged affair between Everard and Monica, Rhoda breaks off the engagement, and Everard is too stubborn to defend himself when Rhoda asks him to explain the situation: “No, I shan’t consent to be crossexamined,’ replied Everard, with a disdainful smile. ‘As soon as you refuse to accept my word it’s folly to ask further questions. You don’t believe me. Say it honestly and let us understand each other” (Gissing 304). He sees them as equals but in the end is not willing to provide a proof of his innocence: “I neither know nor care.’ ‘You must prove to me that you are not the cause of it.’ ‘I shall not make the slightest effort to do so” (Gissing 307). She realizes that his love for her is not genuine and go on separate ways (Hendrikx,43).

There is another dimension to Rhoda’s character, and this dimension is seen when Monica dies after giving birth to a baby girl, the novel’s last scene shows Rhoda visiting Alice and holding the baby. Rhoda shows her maternal feelings by trying to calm the baby down using a motherly tone: “Rhoda, still nursing, sat down on a

garden bench. [...] Rhoda's vision grew dim; a sigh made her lips quiver, and once more she murmured, 'Poor little child!'" (Gissing 371). This, of course, clashes with her initial idea that women ought not to marry or reproduce. Alice and Virginia end up raising the child and they intend to open a school to train other women. Rhoda urges Alice to "make a brave woman of" Monica's child, just like Alice and Virginia intend to accomplish with their future students (Gissing 370). Gissing shows that Rhoda has turned from a cold "proto-feminist" into a feminist with maternal feelings. His portrayal of the New Woman is that one, who is a firm supporter of women's cause but also capable of showing emotion rather than seeing people as mere numbers. At the beginning Mary Barfoot seems to be the more agreeable feminist, but in the end, Rhoda takes on feminine traits as well. Gissing reaches a compromise and shows that Rhoda, in combining feminine and feminist traits, is the ideal New Woman in the end of the novel (Hendrikx,43-44).

On the other hand, there is Monica chooses marriage over training as a typist. Mr. Bullivant first proposes to her, yet she used rational arguments to argue her way out of this proposal: "Then will you let me ask you a rude question?' 'Ask me any question, Miss Madden.' 'How would it be possible for you to support a wife?' She flushed and smiled. Bullivant, dreadfully discomposed, did not move his eyes from her. 'It wouldn't be possible for some time,' he answered in a thick voice. 'I have nothing but my wretched salary. But every one hopes.'" (Gissing 34) She does not marry Mr Bullivant because he could not guarantee her the financial support she is looking for, so she gets married to Edmund Widdowson whom she met in the park. Monica chooses Widdowson not because of love but because of his financial means. She thinks that if Widdowson really loved her as much as he has indicated in his letter, he would certainly be a good husband. She would rather marry than stay single, even if she could not return his love: "She felt no love in return; but between the prospect of a marriage of esteem and that of no marriage at all there was little room for hesitation" (Gissing,79). Edmund turns out to be extremely jealous and controlling. Gissing shows a good example of how a marriage could be corrupt and how their relationship is unnatural and forced through this couple. Widdowson forces Monica to hug him and asks her to express her love for him: "Say you love me! Put your arms round my neck—press

closer to me” (Gissing 188). The “duties of wedlock” (Gissing 188) are not what Monica had expected. Widdowson appears to be very traditional and therefore is very dominant and controlling just like any typical Victorian male. Later Monica finds herself trapped again, like when she was when working in the shop. Widdowson argues that women ought to live in the domestic sphere and to be “the angel in the house”, like any traditional man would think (Hendrikx, 45):

‘Woman’s sphere is the home, Monica. Unfortunately, girls are often obliged to go out and earn their living, but this is unnatural, a necessity which advanced civilization will altogether abolish. You shall read John Ruskin; every word he says about women is good and precious. If a woman can neither have a home of her own, nor find occupation in anyone else’s she is deeply to be pitied; her life is bound to be unhappy. I sincerely believe that an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man.’ (Gissing171).

John Ruskin, saw women’s education only as an advantage to men, so they could have an intellectual conversation with their wives. Therefore, Edmund forces Monica to read Ruskin’s work, for he also believes that women should take on their natural roles as a domestic servant. Edmund’s extreme jealousy also causes problems, especially when Monica is tempted to elope with Bevis. However, she manages to fool the detective into thinking she has an affair with Everard Barfoot instead. When confronted by Edmund, she leaves him and moves in with her sisters, while still living on his expenses. Monica turns out to be pregnant by her husband but she does not want to reunite with Edmund. She tells Rhoda the truth about the alleged affair to ease her conscience. Gissing shows by her storyline that if given the choice between education or a loveless marriage, education has more upsides than Monica’s marriage has. It would have given her the financial freedom instead of choosing between two evils, working in a shop under terrible circumstances or entering a loveless marriage. The option to stay single and work like Alice and Virginia, is obviously not easy (Hendrikx,45).

Virginia Madden, who is in between jobs, is physically suffering as she becomes an alcoholic. Besides that, at the beginning of the novel, one of the other sisters, who was working as a governess, commits suicide out of despair. Even though they were all born in a

middle-class family, it was because of their father's death that they seemed doomed to suffer. This resembles the idea of literary naturalism which entails that "human beings exist entirely in the order of nature, [...] determined by two kinds of forces, hereditary and environment". The circumstances of the Madden sisters, and especially the fact that they were merely raised for marriage, had caused them to be in this hardship. As the novel implies, it was the environment or the society, that pushes women to conform to Victorian conventions, that fails to fit women out for their future destinies (Hendrikx,46).

In the novel, there are female characters who represent the revolutionary female ideas concerning sex and the economic independence in this novel. Like Virginia who lives through the changes of sex roles during 1880s in Britain. She gets confused when she meets a pair of feminists, the heroines of the novel, who are training women to earn their own living and exist without male breadwinners. As it is seen the concept of the "New-Woman" is portrayed by Gissing in *The Odd Woman* (1893) in which he represents a new type of woman which is the modern woman. The *Odd Women* means women without husbands and there are five of them in this novel (Nsaidzedze,9).

"So many odd women—no making a pair with them. The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives" (p.44), here Rhoda talks about one of the most important problems women face which is the abundance of unmarried women (spinsterhood), which was a main issue for the Victorian age and the novel revolves around those women's issues. *Pall Mall Gazette's* review is that: "His book represents the Woman question made flesh; his people live it instead of talking it; the most interesting novel of the year". Gissing's characters are realistic and true, due to his personal experience (Hendrikx,37)

Gissing traces the fortunes those five *Odd Women* who must make their own living representing Mary Barfoot uses her modest inheritance to train women for works in offices and persuades them of the importance of a women's revolution. She also tries to teach young women how to lead useful and independent lives, which is the subject of her "Four O'clock Address". In her "Four O'clock Address", she reveals to us that she had training in clerkship. She has capacity

for such employment and is looking for girls of like mind to do her best to train them. She is glad that she can show girls the way to a career which her opponents call unwomanly. She knows that she is an annoying, aggressive and a revolutionary person. What she wants to get rid of the common confusion of the words, womanly and womanish. She knows very well that this can only be effected by an armed movement, an invasion by women of the spheres which men have always forbidden women to enter. Barfoot believes that women should be made strong, self-reliant and nobly independent no matter what the results are, because the old types of womanly perfection are no longer helpful. She neither cares nor knows whether a woman is the equal of man, but what she knows for sure that women are not equal to men in weight, size and in muscle and “may have less power of brain (Ibid).

Dr. Madden is a model of a typical Victorian male who never thinks that his daughters would do well to study with a professional object. He has a good intention for his six daughters, Virginia, Alice, Isabel, Monica, and Getrude; but his sudden death with no insurance leaving the daughters to face the fierce world for which they are hardly prepared (Alabassy,279).

Marriage is tackled in this novel from the women’s perspective, Rhoda, Nunn and Mary Barfoot. Rhoda believes that most women live in misery because of marriage, and this makes her avoid marriage. However, Mary is convinced that marriage still is ideal for a woman. Rhoda harshly denies this, saying that “women imagine women resulted in the relegation of women’s roles to the household and domestic spheres”. Those girls are taught from their early nature lives that the nature of women bars them from engaging in activities linked to social roles for men (Ibid, 280,285), as Mr. Madden says: “I don’t think girls ought to be troubled about this kind of thing. Let men grapple with the world; for, as the old hymn says, ‘tis their nature to” (Gissing 67).

“Remember that when a man chooses his calling he chooses it for life. A girl cannot but remember that if she marries her calling at once changes. The old business is thrown aside—henceforth profitless” (Gissing,147). These line are said by one of the male characters in the novel, Everard Barfoot, who is Mary’s cousin and has a short-lasting affair with Rhoda. He conveys the predominant

thought of the Victorians that marriage should be the only standard for women's ambitions, identity, and desires. Life would be wasted if she never got married (Alabassy,287).

There are strong views and implications said or done by the characters to reveal the context or the frame they live in and what they think about it and how they react, like Mary Barfoot remarks that "The mass of women [has] always been paltry creatures, and their paltriness has proved a curse to men. So, if you like to put it in this way, we are working to the advantage of men as well as for our own" (Gissing, 256). And Monica, for instance, works "thirteen hours and a half every weekday, and on Saturday for an average of sixteen" (Gissing, 31). At the opposite end, Gissing introduces two female characters who train these odd women as a route to an alternative profession. These two characters are Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot, who both represent modern women in the novel, although Miss Barfoot is more moderate in her feminist beliefs than Rhoda (Hendrikx, 39).

George Gissing tries to portray, what appears to be, "a stereotypical New Woman", but by the end of the narrative our image of her has changed to that of a realistic feminist. Rhoda is a New Woman who comes close to compromising her convictions and changing her mind, but also ends up raising a child to become a potential New Woman. Gissing writes an open-ended story and lets the reader fill it in, by Comparing Rhoda's fate to the unhappy marriage of Monica and Edmund, which is controlled and dominated by Edmund. Mary Barfoot, who is a moderate feminist and also a New Woman in the novel, seems to be the most balanced character. She is able to help odd women by giving them an option to be financially independent, rather than the option of marriage. According to her, not every woman is cut out to be single all their lives and they just need an education and a source of income to tide over a period of being a single woman. Gissing's compromise between Mary's moderate and Rhoda radical beliefs, could therefore be seen as Gissing's portrayal of the ideal New Woman. He proves that feminism and motherhood are not always mutually exclusive. Rhoda grows into a feminist "mother" when she shows her maternal feelings towards Monica's child (Hendrikx,47). Gissing's opinion resembles somehow Tennyson's The princess in which he admits the feminist

rights especially the right of education, yet he highlights the spiritual role of a woman as a wife and as a mother, because those parts are inseparable. A woman should definitely get her proper education, but she should not forget her essential roles in life. There must be some kind of a balance between all roles so they to be all fulfilled. Each aspects goes side by side with the other to make the New Woman picture complete. Gissing nailed it by presenting the emotions, thoughts, expectations, relationships and the psychology of those women, despite the fact that he is a man, but he is so talented that he could convey the inner side of a woman. What he is trying to say and make the society aware of is stop taking women for granted and start taking them seriously considering their spiritual, social, intellectual side.

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