

# A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Gender Role Expectations in George Gissing's *the Odd Women*

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## Abstract

George Gissing's *The Odd Women* is an engrossing study of gender role expectations in the Victorian society on the cusp of the twentieth century. It is an examination of Nineteenth century discourses on Victorian gender ideology. The novel charts and explores the life trajectories of the female protagonists within the novel. This research paper has attempted to explicate the dynamics of gender role expectations through the application of a modern theoretical framework of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to assess how the discourses of the period inform Gissing's narrative. The research findings suggest that the perceptions of gender in a period are directly proportionate to the norms championed through the dominant discourses. The discourses are intricately woven within the episteme of the period under analysis and a conscious review of the constitutive elements of these discursive practices reveals possibilities of change for the future through arming research investigators with insights that account for gender construction in a given period.

**Keywords:** Gissing; Foucault; discourse; ideology; Victorian novel; 19<sup>th</sup> Century; discursive practice

## Introduction

George Gissing (1857-1903) triumphs over his literary peers of nineteenth century through his unswerving stark realism employed in his novels. His themes largely dwell on the poor conditions of the public in the lower stratum of social hierarchy of 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Gissing wrote extensively and, in a large career that straddled two decades, He was able to write twenty full length novels as well as innumerable other works of fiction and nonfiction. His noteworthy works include *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), *The Nether World* (1889), *New Grub Street* (1893) and the novel on which this paper is based, *The Odd Women* (1893).

Given that the research paper at hand attempts to explore the gender dynamics of the period through novel, a Foucauldian examination of discourse constructions on gender roles equips us with the means of understanding how the Victorian ideology

on gender functioned and how it sought validation. Foucault's method on discourse explication, as examined in greater detail in the theoretical framework, identifies discourse as a set of elements within a wider power hierarchy that gets to decide truths and enforces them through its regulatory authority (Bernauer, 2005). For him, discourses operate in their historical epitomes and reviewing them in the specificity of the epistemic occurrence aids in exposing structures of power.

Gissing's *The Odd Women* adumbrates gender roles at the turn of the century. Moreover, the women had only one role as per Victorian gender ideology i.e., to be married off to eligible partners. Now, Foucauldian discourse of the period posits why that line of thinking held sway. This, in turn, can aid us in challenging any discourse that makes a particular stance by exploring its constitutive elements and exploring how discourses around gender role have been constructed through employing Michel Foucault's method of discourse analysis. Being a monumental text that engages the fin de siècle discourses on gender roles, Gissing's *The Odd Women* can provide us a critical portrait of discourse practices on gender within the episteme of late nineteenth century.

This study utilizes Michel Foucault's conception of discourse to evaluate how the discursive practices on gender affect gender identity, shape character subjectivity and influence dominant discourses within a historical period. This equips us with the means to evaluate discourses and the dynamics of their operations. Gissing arrests readers' attention by a bold psychological exploration gender tensions in how they have consequences for formation of a feminine subjectivity or constructions of a female subjectivity through its illuminating juxtaposition of deeply entrenched patriarchal values vis-e-vis a feminist movement championed by the New Women movement. The themes of the novel expose the building blocks of Victorian gender ideology. Gissing presents an extensive treatise that effectively overturn established ways of looking at gender dynamics of the period. The coterie of female characters in *The Odd Women* used by Gissing aid in driving home the elements that sustained gender discourses in the period. Thus, the novel proves inevitable in the scrutiny of gender dynamics of the period which can educate the masses how discourses operate and how to build stronger defenses against them. By considering the issues faced by single women and what it meant for their subjectivity, Gissing's work explores gender roles and invites enquiries as to how can gender be liberated from a value laden system that disproportionately favors one over the other. Hence, the study has significance for the future researchers on how canonical texts engage discourses with real world ramifications and how those discourses are constructed.

Wendy Lesser (1984) opines that the novel "is one of the best portrayals of the women's movement, old or new" by mounting a challenge to the operating mechanics of discourses within their episteme (p. 211). It is widely interpreted as one of the pioneering texts that describes a changing arena for gender issues.

## Gissing's *the Odd Women* and Gender: A Historical Context

Gissing's novel *The Odd Women* explores gender dynamics through a perceptive study of the underlying psychological study of gendered discourses. It is made abundantly clear from its evocative title i.e., *the odd women* which refers to an 1860's survey that revealed that England had half a million women of marriageable age who could not pair equally with men and thus stood in surplus making them *the odd ones* in the mix. This lay bare the Victorian ideology on gender roles that it only saw them a opposite men to be meet their logical conclusion with marriage and if that was not on the offer, they did not matter at all and had to be, as one critic had suggested, sent off to the colonies under English to balance out the field for men.

*The Odd Women* stands out for its challenging of gender norms within the Victorian period. It seeks and kindles a debate on what it means to be a woman and how the nature of women is constituted as the latter was often mounted as a defense for the unfair treatment of women in the society and the roles they were supposed to play. These skewed dynamics of gender relations was searing factor for the dichotomy evident gender relations. Author Patricia Ingham (2000) notes in the preface of *The Odd Women* that George Gissing challenges readers to review received notions on gender role expectations ignites debates on the inherent ability and nature of women (XIII).

It is therefore pertinent to examine the novel in its historical context as to how the reigning fin de siècle discourses in the Victorian period contributed towards cementing of patriarchal values and gender norms within that period. It is tellingly no coincidence that the patriarch of the Madden family, Dr Madden invokes the idea that it is unnatural for women to earn money and all financial matters must be left to domain as it it's their sole domain to earn while women took care of the households. Dr Madden's gender ideology stems from the discourses on gender in the period. It is at par with the Ruskinian ideal of what it mean to be a 'good' woman. Ironically, Mr. Madden dies and leaves her daughter penniless in grinding poverty as someone unable to 'shepherd' his 'fold' (Gissing, p. 6)

John Ruskin had in 1864 spearheaded gender discourses in Victorian era with his essay '*On Queens' Gardens*' that drew a sharp distinction between the so called 'natural' spheres of women and men whereby men faced and struggled with the harsh realities of the outside world and women were to be custodians of the domestic sphere and supervised domesticities of the daily life. As per Ruskinian ideal, men were to be 'active, progressive' and defensive and women were the to be the provide them with the comfort of a peaceful household as they returned from their outside chores. Women to him were better off for 'sweet ordering, arrangement' of domestic spheres (Ruskin, 1904, p. 44).

It is this idea stemming from Ruskin's essay that is fiercely attacked by Mary Barfoot in Gissing's *The Odd Women* challenging those gender roles expected of women. She

advises the women in her professional academy if they want to break free from such narrow classifications in life, they must learn to be 'militant and defiant' and push their 'claims to the extremity (Gissing, p. 153). In this manner, Gissing uses Mary's character stir a debate on the role and gender expectations in the society. Sloan regards Gissing's female characters in the novel bring into focus an 'interplay of social forces and individual psychology' (Gissing, p. 119). Furthermore, Pierre Coustillas (2002) argues that Gissing was able to incorporate 'genuine realism' in the novel without pandering to mundane didacticism and thus succeeds in engaging the discourses of the period (p. 336).

In a similar vein, Diedre David (1984) maintains that Monica's abysmal marriage to Mr. Widdowson underscores how the discursive practices of the period left no recourse to women than to suppress their individual wishes to a system that terrorizes and forces them into submission through marriage, which in turn plays an enabling agent of the patriarchal system (p. 127). Once caught within the shackles of marriage, there is hardly a way out for a married woman other than submitting to the enforced norms of the society she lives in. Alam and Ramli (2020) are of the view that Gissing has adroitly tackled the dominant gender ideology by evocating alternatives to the conventional roles expected of them. The novel draws attention to the discourse dynamics that make women a willing victim to an oppressive system by inviting focus towards the influences of dominant gender discourses (Alam & Ramli, 2020).

Gissing successfully initiates a debate on gender roles and how discourses shape environments for strands of gender discourses to flourish. Monica's marriage to the patriarchal tyrant Edmund Widdowson serves as a launching pad for his mission. Mr. Widdowson is a typical Victorian conception of man and his thoroughly enshrined in the Ruskinian doctrine<sup>1</sup> which maintains 'an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man' (Ruskin, 1904, p. 171). Widdowson's misgivings towards the 'new women' underscore general apathy of Victorian England towards any attempt to refine gender boundaries as sanctioned by patriarchal agenda.

According to Elaine Showalter (2007), Gissing reignited debate on gender roles through his engagement of socio-economic issues in *The Odd Women* and this challenged gender norms of the period. She argued that Gissing's work contains powerful signs of a world where men are mired in despair and uncertainty in face of changing dynamics of gender where powerful women are ready to take charge. Showalter declares in the preface to the novel that:

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to John Ruskin's idea of women from his 1865 essay 'Of Queens' Gardens', bringing forth the conventional view of women as obedient housewives with 'queenly power' and modesty of nature.

... femininity is a construct; growing up female means learning to play a role. Women can make other women “unwomanly”; men can force womanliness upon them, by controlling their mobility, education, and economic dependency (p. 16).

Historically, woman in Victorian England had had to battle innumerable challenges to carve out liberties for their gender in a patriarchal world. Sharon Marcus (2007) notes that before the Divorce Act of 1857, the doctrine of coverture was in place that dictated that a married woman had to forego all essence to man and in the face of law, the couple was considered entwined as one and wife had to legal right over her property or body. This situation gave the husband full control over the wife until 1891 Victorians regarded family ‘peaceful refuge’ (p. 206). The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 gave reprieve to woman by sanctioning that marriage was a voidable contract that could be annulled under certain conditions. This was met with zealous opposition where critics deemed the law as an attack against the ‘greatest, oldest, and most universal of all social institutions, (Marcus, 2007, p. 213). Philosopher John Stuart Mill (2009) championed the cause of liberty for women and noted in his *The Subjection of Women* that ‘if ever any system of privilege and enforced subjection had its yoke tightly rivetted on the necks of those who are kept down by it, this has.’ (pp. 21-22). To Mill (1909), as he notes in his *On Liberty* the cause for debate in gender norms had to be routinely discussed and debated which will guarantee in the longer run that the subjection and oppression of women would cease to hold sway and will soon be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth’ (p. 40).

Similarly, a leading feminist of the period Mona Caird argued in her *The Morality of Marriage* (1987) that if women were able to ‘secure a liberty as great as that of men’ gender ideology would be greatly affected in favour women (p. 167). Furthermore, she had argued that change in gender was inevitable, and the inherent liberty of women cannot be held back much longer by the ‘moldering branch of patriarchal tree’ (p. 54). Correspondingly, Francis power Cobbe’s (1822–1904), article *Wife Torture in England* (1878) was pivotal in facilitating passing of laws in favour of women whereby oppressed and cornered wives could seek annulment of their relationships in the court of law (Marcus, 2007).

However, there were other in the spectrum of the gender debates in Victorian England who sought to justify the oppressed lot of women and some i.e., Margaret Oliphant (1856) maintained that the institution of marriage was irrevocable, and it was like death that is complete without revisions that goes unchanged for eternities. Similarly, another critic standing against New Women was Eliza Lynn Lynton who argued in her *Girl of the Period* that women must be free from any traces of personal ambition and should only exude domestic modesty by remaining quiet in her conduct and demeanor (340). More strikingly, it was the essay of W.R. Greg *Why Are Women Redundant* that influenced Gissing in the choice of his title for the novel. Greg (1864) had argued that since women of marriageable age in Victorian England outnumbered men by half of million, they must be transported to the colonies as they were the odd

ones and had no role here in England. The idea of a single unmarried women was abhorrible to Greg as he maintained a single life meant a lack of 'natural duties' for women made their lives painful and artificial without purpose (p. 282).

Thus, the epistemic landscape of the gender discourse was undergoing a transition and this change was captured in the fin de siècle literature. Gissing's *The Odd Women* seizes on the spirit of the age and argues for greater gender liberties through its engagement of divisive gender ideology of Victorian England and laying bare its faulty constitutive elements based on patriarchal quest for power.

### Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as the Methodological Framework

Michel Foucault's conception of discourse is particularly amenable towards explicating mechanics of gender as, according to Nicola Gavey (1989), it is considered a construct in the wider web of power relations. It therefore occupies an important place in feminist research. Furthermore, Aram Vesser contends that given the lack of specificity in the operations of gender and they influenced by dominant discourses in a certain epistemic environment, underscores the fluid nature of the ideological basis of normative power and if understood and classified can aid in rerouting discourses (1989). This indeterminate nature of gender and its ideological basis stems from its being amorphous discursive practices that sustains itself within broader systems of thought. As far as Gissing's *The Odd Women* is concerned, Dorothy Zaborzsky (1985) views it as a thorough and a 'fair treatment' of prevailing discourses on feminist movement in the Victorian England (p. 492).

Michel Foucault's conception of discourse is crucial to this study given his work puts its primary emphasis on the interplay of power and ingrained discourses of a period affect individual conception of external reality, and by extension how they interact with socioeconomic phenomenon epistemic environments. Foucault's take on power relations attempts to understand the constitutive elements of discursive practices in terms of their effects on social relations (Weeks, 1982). If Gender roles are envisaged consequent upon dominant discourses, it is important that we consider how those discourses garner their valiance at a given period. Since Gissing's *The Odd Women* explores gender roles in the Victorian Society at the turn of century, Foucauldian discourse analysis provides the investigative tools to parse the building blocks of those discursive practices that orient worldviews of the authors and by extension those of the characters in our novel under analysis.

What makes Foucauldian discourse analysis especially pertinent to this study is its viewing of discourse as a dynamic in inveterate flux whereby notions of power and identity emanating from it invariably change in accordance with how the discourse is structured. Thus, according to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, discourse assumes pivotal importance in forming individual subjectivity and how they come to regard as 'natural' domain for gender roles in terms of their inherent ideology that feeds them (1977, pp. 26-27). As with discourse, Foucauldian notion of power differs from

received idea of it as being a fixed entity that seeks to dominate or oppress. It conceives power as fluid and constantly shifting reflective of epistemes. In noting how gender dynamics operate in *The Odd Women*, it is vital how power relations change and in turn affect the course of discourses. For Foucault, beginning in the twentieth century, there was a slow but subtle dynamic in relations of power that ensured subjects self-regulated themselves without apparent outside influence and became cognizant how they conducted themselves in the face of discursive practices. It all happened at a subconscious level without conscious individual attempt. They seek to adjust in term of social regimes. This ensures there are no visible punitive forces that enforce authority (Dean, 1999). All institutions, overtime use implicit power to ensure compliance without in-your-face tools of enforcement. Patriarchal derive their potency from the Foucauldian notion that discourses of oppression are subtle and rooted in the subconsciousness of subjects. Foucault borrowed Jeremy Bentham's analogy of Panopticon in how power structures ensure compliance without tangible display or use of force as was employed in the former times. Bentham's idea of Panopticon is based on the idea of three-pronged Panopticon used in prisons that forces inmates into believing that they are being always observed. Thus, they are kept in subordination without any physical application of force. Similarly, Foucauldian discourse sustains itself through its passive operations of age old. Value systems that ensure compliance in individuals forcing them to a set of gender ideation that obfuscates means to independent thinking.

Michel Foucault notes in his *Discipline and Punish* that domain of knowledge are invariably determined by the duality of power/knowledge relations and ensuing discourses and perceptions of social realities are dependent on the operations their subtle mechanics (1977, p. 26) For him, power manifests itself through its operations and not by means of its possessions. A detailed examinations of the day-to-day discourse practices release how the epistemologies of power operate. Foucault (1980) maintains in *Power/Knowledge* that discursive relations form subjectivity by adhering to their own 'regimes of truth' (p. 132). For him all-encompassing narratives cannot be trusted. In the novel, Gissing's protagonists Monica, Rhoda and Barfoot as subscribing to an ideology of gender that operates on a spectrum of total docility in the case of Monica, a median in Mary Barfoot to total aversion to patriarchy by Rhoda Nunn. This is corroborated by Foucault's argument *Discipline and Punish* that discursive relations form subjectivity by adhering to their own 'regimes of truth' (p. 132). For him all-encompassing narratives cannot be trusted.

His idea of 'hermeneutics of the self' as laid down in his 1993 *About the beginning of the hermeneutics of self* (p. 198) is crucial as it informs the analysis on how power relations assert themselves through their normalizing agents or discourse practices

The theoretical framework immersed in Foucauldian philosophy of discourse aids in identifying discourse practices as they emerge in *The Odd Women* and affect how gender ideology is formed. Foucault's categorization of gender as outlined in his *The*

*History of Sexuality* (1979) is postmodernist in character. He views it as a socio-economic, cultural and historical construct which is subject to change akin to discourses, fluid (p. 147). This conception breaks parts with the dominant view of gender as a fixed dichotomous binary carved in stone. Judith Butler also agrees with Foucault that it is, in fact, an ideology that has constructed gender as a binary and it is not a scientific fact impervious to change (2009). This belief system is sustained by patriarchal institutions through discourses that cater to their interests.

The differing ideological lanes occupied by Monica, Rhoda and Mary; the thesis of the novel squarely aligns with Judith Butler's argument that gender is not a fixed reality of nature but a mix bag of incessant instance of performing of gender through cultural feedback dependent upon dominant discourses of power dynamics operating in each society (2009). Besides Foucault and Butler, Norman Fairclough (2007) views gender an essential category of discourse. To him, discourses are not innocuous means of perceiving social relations but play a crucial role in how gender is constructed in the society. Therefore, our sense of reality and the range of subjective action are also determined by discursive practices. Analogously, Foucault maintain in *The History of Sexuality* that regulatory power acts upon a subject by subjugating him through acts of power and for him there is no preconceived or preexisting gender and calls sex a 'fictitious unity' (1979, pp. 81-82).

As discourses affect the sense perceptions of the subject in terms of their engagement with external reality, therefore Foucault notes in *The Archeology of Knowledge* that individuals' scope of action and thought processes are circumscribes by the discussive environment they are a part of. The discourse influence and regulate conduct and determine parameters of social ideals to be upheld (1972). When asked how discourses continue to sustain themselves with unabated legitimizing force, Foucault's idea of 'games of truth' needs to be taken into consideration. That connotes that all systems of values in conjunction with their disciplining institutions enforce their power by giving the impression of being on the side of truth, of classifying taboos and norms and all this is accepted or held true is negotiated through a space of indirect domination.

Gissing's protagonist Monica's world view, in terms of her initial submission to authority in *The Odd Women* aligns with what Foucault calls docile character who gives in to the regulatory power of gender discourses by not only external effect of subjectivity but also self-regulate themselves through their unconscious internalizing of the disciplinary institutions. It is an effect of Foucauldian biopower. Monica conforms to the idea of docility as the forces of regulatory power exercise their control on her subconscious and affect her subjective volition. It is as if, as Foucault (1977) regards it in his *Discipline and Punish*, 'power relations' exercise their hold by forcing the subject to 'to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (p. 25). They operate as formative agent in ensuring a conduct that conforms to a set criterion decided by the disciplinary body. They operate as conduits for the power structures



in the society, giving them legitimacy. Thus identity, although amorphous in infancy, is largely subject to the social cues long set by disciplining institutions and affect how individual consciousness is molded as be preconceived criteria.

### **Analysis and Discussions**

Until the onset of late nineteenth century, there were hardly any means available for women to materialize a meaningful change in how the epistemic gender dynamics operated. The only logical course for women was to settle down and get married. Opportunity for women was limited. Employment was scarce and options were soon exhausted beyond being governesses, companions to rich lady, or rendering services in schools as teachers. However, change albeit subtle, was beginning to manifest itself. The period from 1890 to 1910 in English history has been called the age that gave rise to female clerks that integrated woman into the domains of male workforce and their numbers saw dramatic growth (Chase, 1984). Remington typewriter had made its appearance and the feminist Rhoda Nunn makes use of it in her keeping of book and commercial correspondence (Gissing, p. 27). Furthermore, in the novel, Rhoda's use of typewriter serves a symbolical liberation from the bifurcation of gender roles and uses it to herald her personal freedom despite the fact the scorn from Everard Barfoot who looks down upon her work as mere 'copying with a typewriter and teaching others to do the same' (Gissing, p. 205). Rhoda mounts a rebellion to the patriarchal norms for dabbling in outré adventures despite the scorn of male to open the way for women's socio-economic liberation (Chase, 1984).

The nineteenth century was largely a period of transition the New Women movement had triggered much interest in the debate of educating women to expand their employability and the range in the job market. Activists had burst forth on the scene was zealous calls for a change in the current situation. There was a complete break with ways of thinking in women who thought their primary duty was the service to men and called for education reform that took into consideration the gender dynamics with a focus on the greater happiness of women through an empowerment of their sex (Helsing, 1869). Again, in his *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault argues that the building blocks of the episteme are the discourse mechanisms that set outlines for act (1974). The self-defeating ways of thinking by women against their own interests explains the lasting influence of those epistemes. It thus, demonstrates that the regimes of truth and knowledge do not have an unadulterated essence but are structured by relations of power.

Gissing's work is a masterful distillation of gender role expectation in force in the late Victorian period. The exchanges on gender dynamics taking place among Rhoda Nunn, Mary Barfoot and Everard Barfoot stand out for their perceptive encapsulation of how discourses were engulfing the Victorian psyche. Monica Madden's unfortunate marriage with Edmund Widdowson allows Gissing to peer into the patriarchal notions on the so-called 'proper' conduct for women. This line of thinking orients Monica's husband to regards her friends Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot as utterly

'unwomanly' by maintaining that both are on the way towards making women 'unwomanly' and their influence could 'corrupt' women into failing their domestic duties and serving their husbands (Gissing, p. 183). Again, Rhoda Nunn cannot bring herself to accept hordes of women who are no more than sheep in a directionless herd where they are operating as 'feeble, purposeless, hopeless woman living only to deteriorate' (Gissing, p. 322). Ms. Nunn is convinced there must be a way out from this purposeless life. She declares:

... I look upon them as a great reserve. When one woman vanishes in matrimony, the reserve offers a substitute for the world's work. True, they are not all trained yet--far from it. I want to help in that--to train the reserve' (p. 44).

Critic Lise Sanders (206) argues that Monica when caught in a relationship she abhors strives to break free the shackles of a system beyond her immediate control by cutting ties with the 'monotonous conditions of bourgeois domesticity' rearing wild fantasies for 'transgressive sexual desires' (p. 194). Her ceaseless anxieties of married life with man who denies her the right of personal freedom makes Mr. Widdowson 'anxious, suspicious, irritable' (Gissing, p. 172). On the other hand, Monica when confronted with the hopeless prospects of domestic slavery under the garb of social propriety engenders in her even greater desire to reject the status quo by indulging in 'comparison with women's labor outside the home' (Sanders 208). Monica's resistance is an instance of challenging the norms outside of her subjectivity. Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality* (1879) that discourse as an entity that besides operating as an effect of power also contains points of resistance given their fluid dynamics of constructions, and Monica's challenge to the draconian mindset of her husband is instance of exploring the points of resistance to seek her own independence. Therefore, resistance is possible where subject can 'do their genders' in defiance of dominant structures of power regulatory power as in Foucauldian philosophy as outline in his *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1974) there is always a possibility of resistance to be able to 'think otherwise' (p. 16).

It is striking how the force of established discourses within the Victorian epistemic space have infiltrated those apparently on the fighting side of women's movement. This is succinctly underscored in *The Odd Women* when Mary Barfoot laments to her friend Rhoda Nunn that men regard women as they often do because woman has been 'a clog upon a man's ambition' (Gissing, p. 97). *The Odd Women* delves deep into the discursive practices around gender values cherished by Victorian by putting in front the woman's quest for seeking out a person space for themselves in a class ridden society where intellectual debate was often stymied by gendered values sustained by the invisible forces of patriarchy held in force by its institutions. Monica's decision to marry the ill-suited Mr. Widdowson is dictated by her personal quest to escape the awful fate suffered by her two elder sisters: of that of crushing poverty and socio-economic oppression in a system that afforded them no window to escape. Monica makes up her mind to marry in order stand out and get a leeway in the face of

entrenched discourses denying her any space to prosper. As scion of discursive period, Mr. Widdowson plays his role of Victorian husband oblivious of discourse mechanics that ensure that he remains an enabler in a cause governed by dominant discourse. He is genuinely at loss in the face of Monica's progressive views and Gissing notes that it was as if 'reason and tradition contended in him, to his ceaseless torment (Gissing, p. 220).

Given Michel Foucault's contention that discourses contain ammunition that can be used to break free from reigning ideological foothold of a period, similarly it is observed that Monica Madden grows to assert her individual self despite the obvious traces of a Foucauldian docile character through her immersion in the novels of the period. She experiences an emotional maturity, coupled with psychological growth in her engagement with the ideas in the texts she reads that give her talking points in her debates of her husband, Edmund Widdowson, who insists upon her being a traditional wife.

Widdowson incessantly relies upon all facets of discourses to gain an upper hand and attempts to sensitize Monica to the force of religion 'a precious and powerful instrument for directing the female conscience' (Gissing, p. 173). He invokes the Ruskinian ideals for what it means to be a wife and genuinely subcribes to the notion that a woman's 'sphere is the home, Monica' as he is convinced that Ruskin's 'every word.... about women is good and precious' (Gissing, p. 171). Monica puts up a fight and does not want herself to be a victim in the traditional Victorian value system that pushed women to the domination of men and denied her personal freedom to assert her independence. Victorian gender ideology is challenged in her debates with Mr. Widdowson.

Victorian gender roles are discussed in the very first chapter of the novel *The Fold and the Shephard*. The narrator tells us that Mrs. Madden had a certain 'role' to play as the mother six daughters and having 'fulfilled her function in this wonderful world' she had passed on (p. 5). This underscores what the family patriarch Mr. Madden expects from her daughters in the world and what their role is to give birth and die in domestic toils not worrying about money matter (pp. 5-6). It is as if all systems are values engulf epistemes as they operate as forces of oppression by defining limits to human values by appealing to a discursively mediated system of truth that does its bidding.

This is Gissing's way of directing the course of the novel on gender roles in a hopeless Victorian set up. Mr. Madden captures the essence of a patriarchal thinking on gender roles. Therefore, as Zaborszky (1985) contends, Mr. Madden is not too concerned with and rejects roles for women in getting an education or working outside the domestic fold (p. 492). For Mr. Madden 'the home must be guarded against sordid cares to the last possible moment ... women, old or young, should never have to think about money (Gissing, p. 6). Here he is, in effect, subscribing to a gender ideology that defined Victorian values on gender roles which was rooted in the belief that while

men braved the outside world, the women stayed at home under the guidance and protection of men. He pays dearly for his views and his patriarchal notions leave his daughters in utter poverty that sets them to a life of miserly pecuniary. Mr. Madden's death puts the daughters in financial misery that precipitates the early deaths of three of them while the remaining three are forced to live on the pittance left by their father. The youngest, Monica, hates her job at the draper's. She did not want to be chained to Rhoda Nunn whose place she considered oppressive and suffocating.

Monica's ill-conceived decision of marrying Widdowson proves to be a huge mistake. She made this choice out of fears to escape poverty. Her husband, Mr. Widdowson propagates the typical Victorian gender ideology and is convinced that 'an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man' (Gissing, p. 171). Mr. Widdowson fears that Monica's association with Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot will corrupt her thinking on domestic values. He declares the latter two to be utterly 'unwomanly' and fears they may work against his interests with Monica (171). He declares

... 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 (p. 171).

The role for her wife was designed and directed by Mr. Widdowson and him 'took for granted that it was his to direct, hers to be guided' (171). He goes to the extent that musing to himself if Monica tried to get away, he would be 'capable of killing her' (265).

According to Deirdre David (1984) Mr. Widdowson is 'chained to an ideology of female inferiority' and thus resorts to incessant moralizing in the hopes of 'reforming' his wife. (p. 124). Widdowson viewed women as 'born to perpetual pupilage', he was convinced women were beyond emotional maturity and remained 'imperfect beings' unable to shake off their delusions inculcated in their childhood (Gissing, p. 219). Now, if we try to trace the ideological underpinnings of discourses that guide Mr. Widdowson's worldviews and in turn his gender ideology. It bears a substantive tinge of Ruskinian orientation on the distinct spheres for men and woman.

Mr. Widdowson's treatment is centered around his gender mores rooted in Victorian discourses. Here the influence of Ruskinian Philosophy is at play in Widdowson's exchanges with his cornered wife. He informs Monica 'the natural law that points out a woman's place . . . commands her to follow her husband's guidance' (Gissing, 185). To him, he is ruling over Monica for 'own good' (p. 250). Monica however does put up a fight her inalienable rights as a human being stuck in a strained relationship and tell Mr. Widdowson how fallacious his views are gender roles are and she would want to experience the world on her own terms by going out and making friends declaring that 'life will be a burden to me before long, if I don't have more freedom.' (p. 183).

Gissing, through Widdowson, presents a window into the Victorian patriarchal gender ideology and the discourses invoked to sustain them, He is imbued the reigning Victorian discourses on gender and his conduct is reflective of his ideology. Under Ruskin's influence. He is convinced that women's lives would be 'unnatural' if they propose breaking of the spheres of gender in vogue (p. 171).

On the hand, as a foil to traditional thinking, Rhoda emerges with her militant brand of feminism and urges Monica to overcome her domestic troubles and if she does then she will be able to 'prove by your life that we can be responsible human beings (p. 350). It is an echo of Francis Cobbe's *The Duties of Women* (1881) admonishing women to assert themselves to be 'responsible human beings' (p. 152). Gissing brings out the dominant Victorian gender ideology through the trouble marriage of Monica with Widdowson and treads through exchanges on gender between Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot. Rhoda is Gissing's archetypal militant feminist of The New Women movement. She has attained power through sheer persistence. Rhoda is averse to institutionalized marriage. Everard tries and test her views. Gissing uses Everard to demonstrate the ideology of Victorian men on the role of women and gender expections. Foucault reasons in *The History of Sexuality* that social norms affect individual conduct as its values are internalized through discourses (p. 152). Monica Madden, in her giving in to discourse on gender, comes off as a Foucauldian docile character and is of the view that difference between men and women derives from unfair treatment of the latter (Gissing, p. 183)

Through the works of feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and others, the feminist agenda had already taken off by the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century. These writers wrote extensively to expose the oppressive aspects of patriarchy and how it had systematically used gender discourses to keep women at a socioeconomic disadvantage and in a position of inferiority to men. This mission had been kept alive by feminists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with greater rigor. Barbara Bodichon (1857) had called upon women to rise against oppression and fight for their rights. She declared:

... women may not take a man as a god; they must not hold their first duty to be towards any human being . . . we ardently desire that woman should not make love their profession.' (p. 9)

Bodichon's calls upon self-reliance are reiterated by Gissing's Mary Barfoot in the novel, which she declares in her *Women as Invader* speech. She preached in the favour total gender autonomy so that women could live their lives at part with the male counterparts without prejudice and opt for myriad choices available to them other than being pigeonholed to patriarchal adumbration of gender roles.

## Conclusion

In summation, Gissing's work is a powerful foregrounding of Victorian episteme on gender norms and gender role expectations stemming from deeply entrenched discourses that are in turn sustained by patriarchal values. It furthermore explicates the mechanics of operation of those discourses. It, therefore, stands to reason that George Gissing's *The Odd Women* is a quintessential feminist work that captures the heart of discourses on gender role in the Victorian England. It thoroughly succeeds in charting gender relations within the purview of the epistemic ideology held in place by patriarchal mission. It is a consummate portrait of period where the old arch is losing ground to the fin de siècle discursive forces. A Foucauldian perspective has been crucial at explicating the dynamics of discourse construction. It portrays how, in line with Foucault conception discourse construction, gender roles in Victorian England were deeply influenced by socio-cultural, religious norms and traditional morality upheld by the entrenched values of patriarchy. Gissing as a vocal mouthpiece of his era brings those discourse to bear their full potential which, in the final scheme of things, reveal that Victorian gender ideology was lopsided in its representation, submission and defining of sexual politics of the period. Varying aspects of the emerging discourses from all stakeholders in the spectrum get a substantive intellectual rundown. Gissing brings into focus all facets of the women's question by accommodating all feminist endeavors across the discursive spectrum. Rhoda is the extreme militant feminist; Mary is her softer counterpart and Everard serves a go-between in the charged debates. On the other hand, Edmund Barfoot stands for the typical patriarchal discourse while Monica Madden serves a Foucauldian docile character who succumbs to the patriarchal discourse and becomes its victim. The novel makes a case for greater gender liberation and an obfuscation of gender roles by doing with rigid old views. They wanted this to be reflected in the social policy. The moral injunctions of the period worked their influence on the subconscious of the characters and a constituent of discourses on gender blocked the independence of women. They always see themselves through narrowly carved out discourses that serve the patriarchal mission.

Therefore, *The Odd Women* as a blueprint of an epistemic ideology does not restrain itself in exposing the moral landscape and socio-economic milieu that play subtle parts in advancing tenets of that oppressive patriarchal ideology. It presents a depressing portrait of a family at the onset of the novel. A family patriarch who is opposed any time of female enterprise or their working outside, seeking jobs or being educated, dies suddenly leaving his six daughters penniless. The irony is difficult to escape in how the ideology is a failing vestige of foregone time. Three of the Madden daughters die deaths typical of the time period, one of consumption, another is driven to suicide unable to cope with her depressive lot and a third downs herself, Monica joins a draper in Weston and then moves to firm in London and she detested the idea of serving behind a shop counter. It makes perfect sense to capture the essence of gender arguments laid down in Gissing's work through Mary Barfoot's evocative cry

for change. A dream of world where women are relegated to petty menial positions working subservient to men but a world where they are appreciated for their 'intelligence, of honest effort, of moral strength', it is only then a space can be created where women can say goodbye to vestigial patriarchal moral code injunctions that chains them to a perpetual state of socio-economic dependence and inferiority.

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