NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Notice of Funding Opportunity for Individual Programs and the Awards for Faculty Program Announcement at the program's resource page for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

The application format has been changed since this application was submitted. You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above links).

Project Title: Women at Odds: Indifference, Antagonism, and Progress in Late Victorian Literature

Institution: Prairie View A&M University

Project Director: Riya Das

Riya Das
Prairie View A&M University

Narrative

Competencies, skills, and access: My book project, titled *Women at Odds: Indifference, Antagonism, and Progress in Late Victorian Literature*, is based on my doctoral dissertation. My project received a Mellon Faculty Support Award from Prairie View A&M University in Spring 2021. The award has allowed me to make preliminary revisions to the four chapters comprising my dissertation. The NEH grant would enable me to add a new chapter, extensively revise two existing chapters, and polish the manuscript as a whole. These revisions will transform my dissertation, which presents focused analyses of gender politics in nineteenth-century novels, into a monograph that tracks a genealogy of the late nineteenth-century feminist movement in imperial Britain. I intend to publish my book with a university press. Ohio State University Press, which has a rich repertoire of titles in Victorian studies, has expressed interest in my manuscript.

Significance and contribution: Since the late 20th century, scholars have understood solidarity, especially female friendship, as an intrinsic part of both political progress and narrative coherence in nineteenth-century fiction. A critical tradition stretching from Nina Auerbach in the 1970s to Leela Gandhi and Sharon Marcus in the 21st century has solidified this emphasis on solidarity in both postcolonial and gender studies. As Marcus has argued in *Between Women* (2007), friendships between female characters lead them to happy domestic resolutions. But these resolutions, I argue in my book, have limits. One, they help maintain the structure of the Victorian family, which women cannot transcend with solidarity. And two, solidarity comes at a personal cost for women—one woman often needs to set her own fulfillment aside in order to help a friend. For a society that extols female self-sacrifice and highly values marriage and motherhood, therefore, female solidarity is useful for maintaining the status quo. It promotes a social system where women share emotional pain, sometimes at heavy personal cost, to ultimately help each other achieve a successful domestic life.

Women at Odds argues that although late Victorian feminism does not challenge imperial ideology, female antagonism and indifference disrupt traditional gender structures, and they do so to a greater extent than solidarity does. I examine several late Victorian novels and demonstrate that female antagonism and indifference, rather than solidarity, helps release a certain class of women from traditional social constraints. This non-solidarity may take the form of indifferent women who refuse to compromise their material security by sharing it with others, or it may appear as direct antagonism from women who maintain firm class and moral barriers to safeguard their intellectual feminist circles. At the turn of the century, the New Woman, the emerging female officegoer, fashions a professional sphere that uplifts her and her intellectual peers to vocational freedom through a process of exclusion and hierarchization. Fallen (sexual/immoral) women and lower-class women, for instance, are categorized as morally unworthy of solidarity, while colonized women are treated as uneducated and foreign to intellectual feminism. Meanwhile, even women of the same socioeconomic status often find that going it alone increases their personal prospects. Thus, my project demonstrates that the New Woman creates new socio-economic realities for herself while leaving working-class and non-white women behind.

Organization and methods: My project contests the critical notion of solidarity as the only force that brings Victorian women's narratives to fruition, revealing instead the limited and troubled but nonetheless effective power of antagonism in loosening rigid gender structures. Chapter 1, which is conceptualized but not drafted, is titled "Wives and Daughters Leaving Home: The Creation of the New Woman." This chapter will demonstrate that the New Woman's rejection of solidarity enforces racism and classism while simultaneously unsettling social norms. By rejecting the domestic ideal of the sympathetic, friendly woman, she carves out a path for her entry into the professional world of the British Empire. This chapter will historically contextualize the figure of the New Woman, whose short-lived but impactful presence in the fin-de-siècle was marked by a slew of novels by both female and male authors, such as Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, George Gissing, and Bram Stoker. These New

Woman novels featured unconventional heroines who desired intellectual freedom and financial security beyond the Victorian tradition of marriage and motherhood. And by doing so, they often ended up on the wrong side of rigid Victorian gender norms. Hadria, the artistically inclined heroine in Mona Caird's novel *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), for instance, abandons her husband and children to pursue music in Paris. In Chapter 1, I will explore narratives such as Caird's novel, social commentary by John Stuart Mill and others, and current scholarly works on late Victorian gender. This chapter will provide valuable historical context surrounding the outdated mode of feminine domesticity and demonstrate the inevitable appearance of the unconventional, unfriendly figure of the New Woman.

Across the next four chapters, 2-5, *Women at Odds* tracks the unfolding politics of female antagonism against a backdrop of British imperialism. Chapter 2, titled "An Unsympathetic Network: Female Defiance as Narrative Force in *Daniel Deronda*," is complete, and a portion of it has been published as an eponymous article in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. This chapter demonstrates that within the context of genteel, patriarchal English society, women can find escape from traditional predicaments by refusing solidarity with one another. Examining George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876), I show that in the absence of any social power, women resort to unapologetic defiance, the only currency they have at their disposal. Instead of banding together in solidarity, which would limit their choices and prolong their suffering, they resort to antagonism against social constraints and against one another. While each woman's defiant individualism has the potential to hurt other women, their cumulative resistance forms a surprisingly forceful network that disrupts patriarchal social mores, drives the plot of the novel, and results in unexpectedly open-ended possibilities for women's futures. *Daniel Deronda* ends not with marriage and motherhood, but with widowhood and untold future possibilities for its hedonistic heroine Gwendolen, and with acquisition of property and financial security for its fallen woman Lydia. Thus, although set in mid-Victorian England, Eliot's novel anticipates the fin-de-siècle New Woman's break from convention and from traditional mid-Victorian poetic justice.

Chapters 3 and 4 move to the fin-de-siècle when the alternative possibilities for women raised by *Daniel Deronda* are much more plausibly realized. But as I show, indifference and antagonism continue to be useful tools for women interested in maintaining their new status. Chapter 3, titled "New Professional Boundaries: Female Retro-Progress in *The Odd Women*," explores the establishment of a female professional class in the fin-de-siècle. The New Woman, represented by characters like Rhoda and Mary in George Gissing's novel *The Odd Women* (1893), employs what I call retro-progress—a dialectical feminist vision that recycles mid-Victorian notions of female morality—to empower herself. Extolling the virtues of sexually chaste, educated women who are interested in vocational pursuits, she forms small communities of middle-class women whose training in secretarial professions offers them an alternative to marriage and domesticity. But her pursuit of financial independence and intellectual fulfillment outside the home is inseparable from her indifference toward women she categorizes as too immoral or uneducated to participate in female progress.

Chapter 4, titled "Sites of Conflict: Purposeless Indifference in *The Story of an African Farm*," demonstrates how the lack of cross-class solidarity amongst women is refracted by colonial space. Like the New Woman in England, the white woman in the colonies—in this case the stubborn female protagonist Lyndall, in Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), who temporarily relocates to London for a better life—also overlooks other women's oppression with impunity. But while at home in England the New Woman enjoys the community of her chosen feminist peers, the colonial white woman is absolutely alone. Dismissing native women as foreign, and herself unable to belong to English feminist circles because she is tainted by the colony, she stands outside of any recognized categories of belonging for a woman. Thus, an ambitious colonial heroine's attempt to emulate the English New Woman results in total failure to fashion sustainable progress.

As substantial revisions to Chapters 3 and 4, I will add sections demonstrating that the strict moral and class restrictions of the New Woman movement erected larger cultural boundaries. The new sections will show that both *The Odd Women*, an urban novel set in London, and *The Story of an African*

Farm, a rural novel set in a South African kraal, reveal the broad racial and class-based boundaries of the New Woman's feminism. Despite the notable disparities in setting, both novels portray women who relocate to London for financial independence, but the New Woman's retro-progress ensures that only the middle-class English aspirant is allowed access to this progressive lifestyle. Through her zealous upholding of moral and educational credentials, the New Woman restricts her feminism to refined Englishwomen in thriving English metropolises, where female vocational talent has effective institutional outlets in the form of schools and offices. Thus, her retro-progressive feminism effectively excludes women in rural and colonial spaces, whose liberation is sacrificed at the altar of British imperial geography.

The revisions to Chapters 3 and 4 will facilitate the transition of my book to its final chapter, where it comes full circle in charting the genealogy of late Victorian female progress. Chapter 5, titled "In Solidarity with Empire: The Professional Woman in *Dracula*," shows that women in genteel Victorian society seek progress for themselves against the backdrop of the British empire's global reach. This chapter, complete and in need of minimal revisions, demonstrates that the New Woman's antagonistic self-fashioning, charted in the previous chapters, is ultimately co-opted into a new patriarchal order, one that does not preclude female progress, but rather channels it into the service of empire. Mina, the central female character in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), represents a new professional woman as she uses her secretarial skills to help resolve the novel's mystery. But like the mid-Victorian Angel in the House, Mina also reinstantiates the moral authority of traditional domesticity, her status as loyal wife contrasting Dracula's sexually voracious female companions and suggesting no need for solidarity with any woman beyond the pale of sexual norms. Despite advocating for a woman's intellectual value, Stoker's novel also uses that same woman to help expel the threat of foreign, sexualized others and women. This chapter shows that the working Englishwoman, once a shocking concept, has been normalized by the British empire, which finds her to be a useful support for masculinist quests.

While my project participates in the longstanding critical tradition of nineteenth-century gender studies, drawing on work by foundational scholars like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Anne McClintock, and Sharon Marcus, I turn my critical attention to the long-overlooked socio-political value of antagonism between women. I use insights from new formalism, building on Bruno Latour and Caroline Levine's work on the concepts of hierarchy and network, to explore the limits to solidarity as a feminist affect. By arguing that antagonism can lead to progress as well as foster intellectual female community while simultaneously increasing the distance between privileged and underserved women—all of which produces narrative innovation in the late nineteenth-century—my project rethinks the notion of female friendship as a political and narrative tool. Finally, *Women at Odds* reevaluates the significance of female solidarity and the fin-de-siècle New Woman in the context of empire.

Final product and dissemination: My monograph lays bare the myriad Victorian literary renderings of the non-normative woman—the sexual/fallen woman, the ambitious woman, the materialistic/selfish woman, the lower-class woman, and the foreign/nonwhite woman—and explores how antagonism produces possibilities for each woman that are in turn refracted by her social and geographical situation. The novels I explore work together as a group to demonstrate the predicaments of non-normative women who encounter the New Woman's retro-progressive feminism in domestic, professional, colonial, and imperial contexts. By bringing these late Victorian narratives together in my book, I show that the one important subplot in the story of imperial England is the way it converted Englishwomen who defied patriarchal norms into useful agents of the Empire. And so, while my project calls for rethinking female friendship, which can serve oppressive patriarchal structures by dooming women to suffer in solidarity, I also show antagonism's limited ability to upend the status quo before it returns to the service of normative power structures. *Women at Odds: Indifference, Antagonism, and Progress in Late Victorian Literature* should be of primary interest to scholars of British literature, gender, and narrative form, and also attract an audience among enthusiasts and participants of global political movements for equal rights and social justice.

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