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Zarena Aslami. *The Dream Life of Citizens: Late Victorian Novels and the Fantasy of the State*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8232-4199-6. Price: US\$55.00

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In a characteristically caustic passage in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), an anecdote about a man whose engagement lasted seventeen years while he struggled for the economic security to marry leads to some high-spirited, sharp-edged banter between would-be lovers Everard Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn. To Everard's proposal that after ten years' constancy on the part of a betrothed couple, "the State ought to make provision for the man in some way, according to his social standing," Rhoda replies that the institution of marriage might be strengthened if the State required *all* engagements to last at least ten years. Further elaborations on the fantasy follow: aspirants to marriage must pass a state-mandated examination first, while also providing proof that they earn their living "by work that the State recognizes." Government certification of competence as a prerequisite to marriage: the idea that the State might intervene to protect its citizens from their self-destructive erotic impulses—or even their innocence—is presented as just plausible enough to be unsettling.

Zarena Aslami identifies this exchange between Everard and Rhoda as her starting point for *The Dream Life of Citizens*. At such moments, she notes, a personified

State becomes an actor in dramas both public and private. According to Aslami, this habit of mind (which of course is still familiar today) permeated late Victorian Britain. That it did is unsurprising, given not just the rapid growth of government and the proliferation of public services during this period but also the range and diversity of new regulations designed to protect and enhance the well-being of citizens. As a result, “the state was now involved in life processes from birth to death and was articulating the rationality for such practices as the ethical defense of the overall health of the population” (10).

Aslami’s own syntax here underscores how natural it is to cast the state as an agent equipped with intentions and capable of performing actions and of articulating rationales for them. It is instructive to contrast this manner of imagining the state with our usual ways of imagining what Aslami calls the state’s more “glamorous,” more “sentimentally charged” other, the nation (1). While “the nation” can lend itself to personification, it retains the idea of a collectivity of the separate individuals comprising it. We “belong to” a nation, but we invariably think of the state as an entity distinct from ourselves. One’s relationship to the state is thus conceived in terms of self and other. As Aslami persuasively argues, the state is thus available as a locus for fantasy. While a strong tradition of scholarship stemming from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1983) has taught us how to parse the cultural work done by fantasies of the nation, relatively little attention has been given to the nature and consequences of state-inspired fantasy. *The Dream Life of Citizens* seeks to remedy that situation.

Aslami pursues two entwined lines of inquiry. The first has to do with the differing articulations in the period of the fantasy that “the state was not only coherent, knowable, and personified, but also heroic and endowed with the capacity to transform

people's lives" (4). The second takes up what Aslami argues is a new form of subjectivity—a "statified" subjectivity (11)—which emerges largely as a result of the operation of this fantasy. After an introductory overview, the book's arguments unfold through close analyses of a handful of representative late Victorian novels: Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), G. A. Henty's *For Name and Fame* (1886), Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887), Gissing's *The Odd Women*, and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). Fictional narratives, Aslami notes, are well suited both to register with acuteness this new form of subjectivity and to provide standpoints that afford some measure of critical distance from its operations. Aslami points to scenes in the novels where the notion of a heroic and actively benevolent state gives rise to optimism—where state intervention of one kind or another promises to better the lives of particular characters. In her readings, though, such optimism is always delusive, for in the end these novels uncover "the tragic conditions of individuals engaging in state fantasy" (8).

The words "tragic" and "tragedy" run like a minor leitmotif through *The Dream Life of Citizens*. It is a peculiarly postmodern kind of tragedy: not Aristotelian or Brechtian but Foucauldian. In the world Aslami posits, state fantasies are psychic responses to "a new mode of state power that claimed to grant freedom" and self-determination to individuals but which "actually occupied subjects' emotional and sexual lives in such a way that they felt free and bound at the same time" (26). Populations are managed via the myriad and familiar operations of Foucauldian disciplinary power. Subjects simultaneously know and decline to know that they are not the self-determining agents they believe themselves to be. The psychic costs of that fracture are high, giving

rise to fantasies in which no fracture has occurred, where the relation of individual to state is imagined as transparent and mutually beneficial. The outlines of those fantasies differ from novel to novel, but they generally involve a character who seeks some sort of recognition from the state that would either confer or confirm individual agency and autonomy. By the very logic of the fantasy, however, agency and autonomy are thus projected on to the state and away from the individual, whose final position is one of abject—if largely unconscious—thralldom. The personified state produces statified persons, which is to say, individuals whose personhood, at least in the liberal humanist sense of that word, is illusory.

As *The Dream Life of Citizens* inadvertently makes clear, novels, though they deal in agents and actions, are ill-equipped to represent the state as a “character” except by way of extreme displacement. Indeed, as Aslami acknowledges, the state goes unmentioned in at least four of the novels under review. This fact poses some stringent challenges for even the closest reader, who by necessity must argue that the state is palpable in these fictions even when it is absent. In some cases, the state appears by proxy. Though the profession of the stranger Waldo meets in *The Story of an African Farm* is nowhere revealed within the novel, Aslami, citing as evidence a letter by Schreiner, casts him as a government functionary, and thus as a stand-in for the colonial state (39-41). Fitzpiers in *The Woodlanders* and Dr. Galbraith in *The Heavenly Twins* are likewise aligned with the state on the basis of evidence that on the whole tends more towards the ingenious than the persuasive (97, 154-58). In the absence of proxies, the state can appear by way of synecdoche in the form of public spaces: the Botanic Gardens in Grahamstown in Schreiner’s novel (41-43), the road to Little Hintock in Hardy’s (89-

96), and Battersea Park and Trafalgar Square in Gissing's (113-21). Aslami reads these spaces, and the scenes set in them, with great care and to good effect. Public spaces can be rich in associations at once historical, cultural, and political, and Aslami is at pains to show how such associations enable the disabling state fantasies to which the late Victorian period tragically was prone.

Another shadowy character fitfully emerges in *The Dream Life of Citizens*, one whose agency and fantasy life are in some ways murkier than those of the fictional characters. That figure is the reader. In Aslami's view, each of these novels takes as one of its objects of inquiry its own status within the world at large. In effect, she argues, late Victorian novelists were painfully aware of their own uncertain agency; aware, too, that as a genre the realist novel might well be unknowingly complicit with the very forces it sets out to critique. Yet the novelists Aslami considers all retain, to varying degrees, a residual faith in the power of realist narratives to provide critical perspectives that—however provisionally or partially or temporarily—release citizens from their bondage to state-inspired fantasy. Thus Aslami argues, for instance, that “Gissing suggests that the novel can . . . transform the reader into a critical, ethical subject” (129). But who is this reader? By default, the answer seems to be “the late Victorian reader,” except for a few occasions on which “we” are identified as the readership in question. Again, though, who are these readers? For the purposes of the book's arguments, they remain a homogenous or at least an undifferentiated lot. Differentiating them by class or gender or by the many conceivable positions they might occupy in relation to the state would be a difficult task, though potentially a fruitful one. A related line of inquiry would seek to reveal the precise mechanisms by which the novel, to use Gissing's word, can “transform” readers. A

fascinating implication of Aslami's argument is that we, even more perhaps than our Victorian predecessors, remain in thrall to fantasies about the heroic agency of the novel itself, as well as about the novel's capacity to intervene in our lives for our own good.

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