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## Book Review

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Giles, Judy, *The Parlour and The Suburb. Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*, 2004, Oxford: Berg. ISBN - 1859737021

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Within much of the existing literature the idea of modernity and the modern has often focused on the public world associated with masculinity and politics, while the private sphere of the home has symbolised a gendered feminine space not linked with modernity. The influence of feminist writings in the 1960s and 1970s have for a long time cast a shadow on the domestic as something negative and oppressive, a place that has to be rejected by women in their quest to become modern. Women's relationship to modernity has therefore been left in the periphery as something that can not be found in their private lives. In *The Parlour and The Suburb. Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*, Judy Giles challenges these ideas and demonstrates that the home and the domestic can be seen as something positive, giving women in the first part of the twentieth century a sense and experience of modernity.

Giles shows that the social and economical changes that took place in Britain in the early twentieth century had strong influences on the home and particularly women. This in turn had an effect on women's roles and the understanding of their 'modern' identities. She argues that 'The home, far from being simply a haven from the demands of modern life or a stifling place from which to escape, became central to the modernity of British life mid-century.'(p.60)

The book explores areas such as the growth of suburbia, the decline in domestic work and the boom in consumer culture including advertising. One of the main points that she makes is that this feminine experience of the modern was class specific and therefore understood differently by different groups of women. The book thus gives a detailed account of the lives of both middle- and working-class women.

In chapter two, for example, she examines the decline in residential domestic

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service. Before the Second World War domestic work was seen as a respectable employment for working class women occupying a large part of the female workforce. However due to the changes that took place during and after the war, the availability of other jobs for working-class women such as factory work, retail and office work became more attainable. This meant that a domestic re-organisation took place. As Giles argues, 'by the 1950s middle-class women were running servant-less houses and working-class women were in the process of acquiring their own homes at the same time as benefiting from the variety of jobs open to them.' (p.67) Middle-class women found new voices and roles in re-inventing their identities as modern housewives, as in professional home makers. This domestic re-organisation also led to changes in the relationship between middle-and working class women where previously this relationship had taken place within in the home. Now with the growth of consumerism and particularly department stores (or chains like *Marks & Spencer* and *Woolworths* in the suburbs) women from different backgrounds and classes were now 'mixing' in public, forming new modern female identities.

In her analysis Giles has used a wide range of sources, from literature, film, women's magazines to advertising, BBC radio and oral history. And even though the book covers many areas and analyses a vast amount of material, it still maintains a depth and a solid argument. For example in her discussion on suburbia she looks closer at some of the criticisms and fears of 'the masses' as expressed in George Orwell's book *Coming Up for Air* published in 1939. Orwell and other intellectuals (both men and women) saw suburbia and its association with everyday life, often linked to femininity, as something degrading. Suburbia was lowering and cheapening, in contrast to the modernity of the urban, masculine ideas about the city. But Giles argues that for many, especially for lower middle - and working-class women, suburbia did give them a sense of modernity. It represented something better. She tells the story of Joyce Storey, a working- class woman from Bristol who moved into a new council house after the Second World War. Her encounter with the modern was the experience of a bathroom. A luxury she had never had before and this, Giles explains, symbolised a distance from Joyce's past. Suburban modernity offered something new, and she argues that it was just as important as the vote in 'enabling people to see themselves as full members of a modern society'. (p.49)

Another interesting aspect of her analysis focuses on consumerism and advertising. The growth of women's magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, together with advertising and displays in department stores and events like the 'Daily Mail Home Exhibition' all contributed in making home life visible. Issues that were related to the private sphere were now visible in the public. And she observes that 'the idea of modern life as a visual spectacle in which we participate as both spectators and performers is central to many of the canonical narratives of modernity.' (p.119)

In the final part the book critically discuss feminist writings about the home and women's relationship to domesticity. She examines Betty Friedan's classic *The Feminine Mystique* (published in 1963) and provides an interesting debate on the topic and on the idea of feminine subjectivities and modernity.

*The Parlour and the Suburb* offers an interesting and challenging contribution to the aspect of modernity and domesticity. The thoughts and ideas suggested demonstrate that the private world of women in the first part of the twentieth century can be seen in a different light and be better understood. The argument proposed by Giles of a feminine modernity is definitely an interesting point that needs further consideration and she makes a challenging re-evaluation of the relationship between women and the domestic.