

# Treatment of Female Independence, Womanhood and Gender Bias in the Select Works of Fay Weldon

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## Abstract

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century France, Christine de Pisan, challenged prevailing attitudes towards women with a bold call for female education. She became the first feminist philosopher to question and draw the attention of society towards women's issues and unequal treatment. Though like Christine de Pisan there were many people who advocated for the dignity and equality of the female sex, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the efforts for women's equal rights coalesced into a clearly identifiable and self-conscious movement, or rather a series of movements. In the nineteenth century, alongside many other movements, feminism as a political movement gained ground and the contours of the movement became visible. Literature was one of the prominent mediums to promote various feminist issues and their intensity. Feminism became an endorsed concept and the first feminist wave began in 1850. The spearheads of the women's movement were equality in education, labour and electoral rights. There are many British novelists who published great works during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with feminist issues as their major concern. One such novelist is Fay Weldon. In spite of having authored many novels, she is not a widely researched author. There is immense scope to understand the intricacies concerning feminist issues in her works. The present article is aimed at analysing her select novels to explore her treatment of female independence, womanhood and gender bias.

**Key words:** Fay Weldon; Female Friends; Female Independence; Feminist Issues; British Feminist

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## I. Introduction

Fay Weldon, a British author, was born and brought up in New Zealand and went to St Andrews University in Scotland where she graduated in Economics and Psychology. After a decade of odd jobs, she started writing, and her first novel, *The Fat Women's Joke* appeared in 1967. It was followed by *Down Among the Women*, and *Female Friends* was her third novel. Over her 55-year writing career, she has published over thirty novels, numerous short stories, and a wealth of articles and scripts. Weldon's writing often deals with themes of motherhood, feminism, power dynamics, and the complexity of female identity. She is best known for her novels about female independence. Weldon has also written other many novels and a very popular TV mini-series, *Family Said Wednesday*. In her writing, she is often compared to Doris Lessing, who was another British author in the same genre.

Fay Weldon is an extraordinary author whose work has won wide critical acclaim for voicing her concern about women and society. She has been celebrated for brilliance and wit, at times caustic while handling sensitive women related concerns and feministic views. Her fiction often focuses on female characters who are trying to find new zest for life and break away from society's expectations. Her first novel *The Fat Women's Joke*, centred around a fat woman, who rebels against her family and makes her own decisions about how she wants to live her life, was adapted into a film. This novel remarkably draws the attention of society towards women's rights. Not only this novel but almost all novels of Fay Weldon focus on emancipation of women caught in hapless situations and biased socio-cultural patterns. Her novels have graphed the intricacies involving the fight for female independence and the effect it had on themselves and other women's lives. It is interesting to note the unique style of Fay Weldon who very finely balances the pleasures and pains of women's struggle. She draws a satirical image of women who focus solely on their selfish needs, but also gives these "big women" a voice of power.

Weldon's novels often feature overweight plain women who are able to overcome any obstacle thrown at them. In the year 1987, Weldon established her own publishing house and began to explore science and physical changes in regards to media and life. Her work often features science and physical changes in relation

to how society views female independence. This exploration of science combined with her witty writing style helped shape feminist literature as we know it today. Fay Weldon's novels have had a lasting impact on how society views female independence and how it affects women's lives. Her novel *The Cloing of Joanna May* (1989) depicts a woman who defies expectations of her society to lead an independent life. Weldon, ruthlessly perceptive observer of her period, leaps into a future where individual identity is far more elusive. This novel is a captivating story about male dominance and female power, as well as a new generation of women for whom practically everything is possible. In *Puffball* (1980), Weldon examines cloning through the story of two wicked women who attempt to clone themselves for power in an unconventional way. Weldon has also written articles on gender roles in literature as well as scripts for television shows such as *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) which was adapted into a movie in 1986. Weldon in her wide range of published works explored female independence from various perspectives. Her novels often depict women making mistakes while dealing with the issues surrounding their own and women's relationships in society. In her autobiography, *Auto da Fay* (2002), Fay Weldon has also described how she was visited by "sobbing ghosts" which inspired her fiction and explored the issues of children and their parents, as well as what it means to be an author. Her work has made women more aware of their own power and potential within society, while also exploring relationships between female friends and families.

### **Female Independence: women's bodies and social identities**

Fay Weldon is like a conjurer who never fails to surprise her readers with characters that are unacceptably raw like the stink of fresh blood. She is a feminist who holds mirror to other feminists. The mirror reflects not just the struggle of women but blatant at times harsh, unpalatable intricacies of their struggle. Weldon's women characters are subdued but they are also depicted as being endowed with destructive feminine powers at their disposal. She is to feminism what nitromethane is to fuel. *Female Friends*, her third novel, is a cleverly disorganized book with a confusing back-and-forth layout that is bitter and venomous. Many readers have mentioned it to be an uncomfortable and compulsive read. "An uncomfortable read especially for English white heterosexual married men, if this sample of one is anything to go by." (Eyre, May 7, 2016)

Fay Weldon brings out the worst in her characters without making a fuss about it and that's compassion. Their particulars, grotesque and even cruel, give the novel its absurdness but she (Fay Weldon) is actually painting on a bigger canvas without making a fuss about it. Marital life, betrayals, friendship, sexual politics and more in this witty and somewhat compassionate little novel. In the novel *The Life and Loves of She-Devil*, Weldon's portrays the mindset of the women that seems quite objectionable. Unlike feminists, who question the male domination, patriarchy and gender inequality, Weldon finds fault with the women who are willingly enslaving themselves. Ruth serves the entire family hand and foot. Ruth symbolises the docile women who do not have self-worth and live a life of confined to the four walls. Ruth does not show any sign of self-love or self-respect as she has very low self-esteem. She takes care of everything, except her own life and individuality. Her husband, Bobbo, has uncommonly liberal views about marriage. He believes having sexual partners outside marriage as acceptable. When one is loved and appreciated, one can proceed to make physical relation with anyone. According to him, there is no reason for Ruth to be jealous as he is not cheating. Ruth could never question her husband's audacity in claiming himself desired and loved into sexual relationships outside marriage. Like a dumb woman, she too applauds and considers him superior because of his 'looks'. She broods being unable to accept to her own appearance that according to her is not feminine.

I am six feet two inches tall, which is fine for a man but not for a woman. I am as dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and has one of those jutting jaw which a tall, dark woman often has, and eyes sunk rather far back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulder is broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy and the muscles in my legs are well developed. My arms, I swear, are too short for my books, do not agree. I was unlucky, you might think, in the great Lucky Dip that is a woman's life. (TLLSD, pp11)

Fay Weldon draws attention of feminists as she is not attacking the society for all the sufferings of women. She is unapologetically raw and authentic in showing the flip side of the coin. Nevertheless, Weldon acknowledges the challenges for a woman to live life with sense of 'self-worth' as the society was not used to it. According to her, "It is not a minor task starting the world again from the beginning." (Mara, May 22, 2013)

When Bobbo deserted his wife Ruth, she takes on the role of the Devil, as he used to call her. This evil in her empowers her to seek revenge and she is ready to destroy the whole world. Obsessed by the idea of controlling the whole world she wants to possess Mary Fisher's High Tower as that was a symbol of power according to her. As Bobbo deserted her to live with Mary Fisher in High Tower, it becomes a matter of conquest and occupation to Ruth.

Mary Fisher lives in the High Tower. She loves it there. Was there ever a more enchanting address? High Tower, the Old Lighthouse, World's End? When Mary Fisher bought the place five years ago it was a ruin: Now it is the outer and visible sign of her best achievement. She loves the way the evening sun stretches across the

sea onto the old stone and makes everything a warm soft pinky yellow. Who needs rose-tinted glasses when reality is so cozy? It can be done, you see. Mary Fisher has done it. (TLLSD, pp73)

Thus, Weldon empowers Ruth with evil powers in order to help her take charge of her life. She wants Ruth to take action bring her distraught married life, owing her own self-subjugation, under control. She one by one explores the institutions from which she was kept away during the years of her marriage with Bobbo. By disguising herself she takes up several jobs. She finds out the whereabouts of Mary Fisher's mother and manages to send her to her daughter's house from the old-age home. Having known Bobbo's poor handling of his own finances, Ruth deceives and manages to get him put into custody with the help of a sadistic judge, who is convinced by the evil-empowered Ruth who uses her sexual talent to convince him that Bobbo is guilty. She manages to get Bobbo's money into her own account and with this additional 'capital' power succeeds in deepening the miseries of Mary Fisher.

Ruth after being in possession of both power and money has monstrous energy to do whatever she wants. She experiments with sex having relationship with the judge, with the priest with a woman and a man. She ends up being apparently the winner as Mary dies of cancer, and she gets her husband back and also the High Tower. Thus, through the character of Ruth, Weldon shows the evil side of the so-called respectable, successful pillars of the society, who are in possession of respect, status, power and money.

Weldon's creative corpus is in perfect harmony with real life where we see not just men and manners in terms of black and white. Her depiction of women characters brings to forefront the vast differences in the temperament of women. Their handling of situations speaks about their mindset and orientation. Some are docile and subservient, lacking the drive to speak up for themselves and protect their self-respect and individuality, like Ruth in the novel *The Life and Love of She-Devil*; whereas, there are also women who are extremely rebellious like Grace in *Female Friends*, to the extent of being considered loathsome.

Helen: All the same. I want to preserve the child's faith in her father. I think that's so important. If I see too much of her, I am afraid my rancour may spill over and damage her innocence. There is simply nowhere for her to go (FF, 62)

Weldon, already having acquired mastery in portraying a conglomeration of characters and situation has depicted humour, wickedness, and compassion in her writing. It is evident, through her interviews and autobiography *Auto da Fay: A Memoir*, her personal life and writings have had a semblance. They seem to always danced together in public. She has been accused of writing what is impossible to imagine, and yet living what is even more impossible. When her second husband, accomplished painter Ron Weldon, with whom she had three of her four sons, deserted Fay, they had an ugly public fight over alimony. According to the media news he demanded a lot from the then financially successful Fay as well as property they owned. "You'll get this house over my dead body," Ron said to Fay. On the day their divorce was finalized, Ron died of a heart attack. By then he had made over his will to the therapist/astrologer, so Fay bought herself a new home. People said the whole episode read like something out of a Fay Weldon novel. (Berrace, *Psychology Today*)

Fay Weldon through her novels brought to the fore the differences in the outlook of men and women towards the institution of marriage. Women may expect to be supported, but they are very unlikely to treat their spouse as an object or ornament.

'You're like your mother,' Marjorie goes on, blandly. 'You put up with too much. Endurance is a disease, and you caught it from her.'

'It's a question of alternatives,' says Chloe. 'How would my mother have lived, except by putting up with things? And what could Esther have done, except stay with Edwin? How would she have lived? Women live by necessity, not choice'

'Women who don't earn,' says Marjorie.

'I tried to earn,' says Chloe. 'I did, and that's when the trouble started. And Esther Songford didn't have too bad a life, in spite of what you say. Married people don't, it just looks dreadful from the outside.' (FF, 70)

Weldon employs a clever 'pattern' device where the three women – Chloe, Grace and Marjorie - are willing to accept each other's criticism. Weldon shows us how these women make a mess of their lives while striving to do the opposite. Nevertheless, her intention is not to mock or hold them responsible for the status quo. She is poignant and scornful in portraying male characters and reserves very harsh and cruel punishment for Oliver, the most despicable character.

*Female Friends* by Weldon is wonderfully entertaining, apart from being a document of women's post-war lives and struggles for equality. The author seems to have acquired mastery in depicting horrible and loathsome characters 'artistically beautiful.' *Female Friends* has many terrible parents, of both sexes, and terrible husbands and unfaithful wives who try very hard to be good.

*Female Friends* has female characters representing archetypes like the mother, the career woman, and the unstoppable. Chloe's character has motherly touch, particularly of other people's children, whereas Marjorie desires to be independent career woman. The most abominable is the character of Grace who is reckless to an extent that seems unacceptable in a decent society. Thus, the multifaceted, compelling and interesting canvas of

Weldon succeeds in presenting the feminist concerns in a rounded manner - the problems encountered by female characters, the possible alternative responses to the problems through various women characters and the impact of such responses not only on the concerned but other women characters too. She succeeds in weaving multiple shades in a single character. For instance, though Chloe is apparently the most sympathetic and normal among the three prominent women characters, even she has grey shades in her personality that bring out her dishonesty and prejudice.

Weldon's novel *Female Friends* has the non-chronological structure, switching through time. Her forte as a novelist aids her to present women centred issues in an otherwise typical wartime story. She turned the heart wrenching tales of evacuees into representative of the societal trends of the educated in the late 60s and early 70s highlighting feminist concerns and gender discrimination. The result was a thrilling storyline, a compulsive read. Weldon managed to weave together contrasting portrayals - the self-subjugated, endowed with qualities like sacrifice, submission and surrender; and the self-centred, with characteristics of recklessness, indulgence and rebellion. The fine blend that reminds the readers of a typical social set-up struck the chord.

"So, treasure your moments of beauty, your glimpses of truth, your nights of love. They are all you have. Take family snaps, unashamed. Dress up for weddings, all weddings. Rejoice at births, all births. For days can be happy - whole futures cannot. This is what grandmama says. This moment now is all you have. These days, these nights, these moments one by one." (FF, pp. 236)

This wartime novel with short chapters presents satirically married life as the only relief. Barring the satirical representation of Jewish characters with shades of antisemitism the novel is unerringly accurate. The razor-sharp portrayals are like ugliness in the nakedness, a Weldonian streak. Oliver's bullying personality is spruced with deft dialogues. Weldon, in the 1960s was explicit in showing through her characters that women needed more fulfilling lives, that femininity was dangerously defined by appearance and that men needed to take more responsibility for the raising of the next generation. *Female Friends* is a fascinating insight into motherhood and womanhood through the three women; their desperate situations, which are partly self-imposed, and their life choices, which seem inevitable and not really choices at all. It's a very strong dramatization of an unequal society where men can act despicably, and where women's resilience is their worst enemy.

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