

# Through Feminist Eyes: Gender Identities and Gender Roles in the Fiction of Fay Weldon

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Manuscript ID:  
ENG-2024-12037275

Volume: 12

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 12.03.2024

Accepted: 10.05.2024

Published: 01.06.2024

Citation:

Rajagopal, Vidya. "Through Feminist Eyes: Gender Identities and Gender Roles in the Fiction of Fay Weldon." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2024, pp. 37-39.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v12i3.7275>



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## Abstract

*In a society of patriarchal hegemony, women have been subordinated and humiliated in such a way that many feminist writers have highlighted the pathetic plight of women. The commodification and humiliation to which the women have been subjected form favourite fictional themes for writers like Fay Weldon. The premise is that man is woman's protector whose authority she has to acquiesce in whether she wills it or not. Female relationships in all their multiplicity and complexity are what Fay Weldon probes in most of her works. Some of her novels set in the seventies reflect certain features of radical feminism in that they deal with gender difference and its impact on women. This article focuses on Weldon's concern for the creation of female spaces and the need for the assertion of their identities in a patriarchal society. Weldon does not adopt a tone of confrontation, rather strikes a healthy compromise between conciliation and confrontation.*

**Keywords: Feminist, Gender Roles, Fiction, Fay Weldon, Female Spaces, Humiliation**

Being highly insightful and powerfully imaginative, Fay Weldon enjoys a prestigious position among Britain's most appreciated and translated writers. Her gift for humour coupled with a matchless felicity of expression, enable her to create highly dramatic situations that bring out the self-deception and pain which men and women mete out to each other. She is undoubtedly, one of the most undidactic of contemporary chroniclers whose every novel or story is endlessly discussed and argued about.

Fay Weldon is a writer who is clearly stamped as a confirmed feminist. A note of aggressive feminism is discernible in many of her works. Ros Coward classifies the fictional works of Dorris Lessing and Fay Weldon as honorary feminist novels as they deal "not so much with the milieu of contemporary feminism as with charting the experience of women's oppression" (Humm 379). Confessions of sexual experiences, according to Coward, form a pronounced feature of recent feminist writings. This does not mean that all feminist novels focus on female sexuality. It may be noted that Weldon's works, like those of Dorris Lessing, abound in sexual concerns. Female relationships in all their multiplicity and complexity are what Weldon probes in most of her works. According to Paul Schlueter:

*Weldon has both claimed and disclaimed the feminist viewpoint. She has written that she belongs to the last pre-feminist generation: women without power, without theory, often aware of their impotence and oppression, often angry, frustrated and despairing, but also trying to make a life of it. (471)*

The last line in *Down among the Women*, "We are the last of women" (234) testifies the truth of such a perception. Weldon's literary career commenced at a time when the question of women's emancipation had aroused a lot of public attention. It is no wonder that her novels appearing in the seventies reflect some features of radical feminism in that they deal with gender difference and its impact on women, particularly in their relationships with men.

In each of her novels, Fay Weldon traces the intricate interweaving of human relationships, which inevitably restrain the freedom of women. The two feminists who have greatly influenced Weldon's attitude and outlook are Juliet Mitchell and Germaine Greer. The former, noted for her Marxist bend, advocates radical changes in such 'structures' as production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children. Though Weldon is certain that something is grievously wrong with the social order, her convictions are not underpinned by Marxists ideologies, as in the case of Mitchell's theories. At the same time, both are motivated by an urge, as it were, to show women as beings conditioned to be tolerant, if not masochistic, only to be hoodwinked by male subtlety. Weldon seems to subscribe to Mitchell's view that a revolution to alter the order has to begin at home, as the conclusion of *Female Friends* reveals. That the personal is political is overtly asserted.

Germaine Greer and Weldon view women's experiences from a feminist angle, and present men as their enemies despite the adoration they command for short periods. Women's oppression which is inherent in the mind and culture is what Greer and Weldon strive to stress, but Weldon examines the biological aspects of the female body which restrict and restrain its potential. Weldon's famous line in *Praxis*, "Nature is the enemy of women, giving us painful periods, polyps, headaches" (36) indicates how the physical aspects of women often tend to be a hampering and limiting factor, in their efforts to achieve both emancipation from domestic servility and equality with the male sex. Weldon also exhorts women to deny that they are the 'other', as was first defined by Simone de Beauvoir in her sensational work, *The Second Sex*. It is obvious that Weldon is averse to women being regarded as the 'other'.

Fay Weldon employs every possible means to mock at the unfair and wrongful attitude to femininity, a product conceived by the fashion industry. Her popular novels, *The Fat Woman's Joke* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, present two bold women who do not conform to the patriarchal standards of femininity. The deep rooted notion that a woman should be attractive for man's appreciation by being dainty and delicate is held up to ridicule in these novels. She charts out the difficulties not only of marriage and motherhood, but also of sustaining

stable relationships. Her relentless attitude towards 'domesticizing' stereotypes, which curtail women's potential, makes her comments highly vituperative and harsh.

Womanhood in Fay Weldon manifests itself in two different lights-motherhood and mothering. Motherhood is the concept of a sacred institution and mothering is a sacred duty. According to Andrea O' Reilly, "Motherhood refers to the institution of motherhood which is male defined and -controlled, and mothering refers to experiences of mothers which are female defined and -centred" (97). In her famous book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone points out that there is a universal answer to the question of why it is that women are dominated universally by men. According to her, it is reproduction that lies at the basis of female subjugation. In the outstanding work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich exposes the connectedness between reproduction and sexuality by setting aside Firestone's emphatic espousal that technology will magically undo them. Rich describes the 'erotics' of motherhood and it is basically an approval of the well - established tradition of maternal power. She makes an obvious distinction between the social institution of motherhood which controls women's reproductive and social possibilities, and the great power and pleasure that the experience of motherhood invests a woman with. Weldon's views on motherhood and mothering were moulded to a great extent by the theories formulated by Firestone and Rich. Her novel, *Puffball* embodies Firestone's faith in the effectiveness of technology as well as Rich's belief that motherhood is a source of pleasure and power. In this novel, which revolves around the reproductive capacities of Liffey, Weldon makes use of a series of chapters entitled 'Inside Liffey', in order to portray the perils and pleasures of conception, pregnancy and childbirth. Liffey realizes that her pregnancy has decreased her power in the public world, as she cannot help being dependent on her husband Richard, economically and socially. At the same time, her ability to communicate with her unborn child, coupled with her psychic powers, emboldens her to overcome the perils that come across her way.

A detailed study of the sexual politics of motherhood constitutes a major part of Weldon's

fictional works. The President's Child has its major focus on this area and celebrates woman's complex position in the system of patrilineal inheritance. Weldon interprets the dialectic of sex as a battle between the sexes in order to gain control of women's reproductive capacities and the sons she bears. By making her novel revolve around the theme of the patrilineal system of inheritance, Weldon provides ample scope for a probe into the contradictions of power and vulnerability associated with women's reproductive capacities.

A widely read novel by Fay Weldon, *Remember Me* presents a unique situation where a dead wife Madeline, becomes more persuasive and powerful than when she was alive. Her husband Jarvis puts her to untold indignities and his daughter lacks proper care and protection. But Madeline after her death haunts Jarvis as a revenant and compels him irresistibly to take care of his daughter thus revealing the powerful bond that exists between the mother and the daughter. *Remember Me* is a novel in which Weldon describes the essential forces that conjoins parent and child, and husband and wife. The mothers whom Weldon creates have their own distinctive ways of tackling their problems. They are all inherently strong and display amazing dexterity in struggling against adversities, and finally in achieving their goals.

As a novelist, Weldon's primary concern is to voice the grievances of women. She has a feminist urge to improve women's attitude to themselves and to their sisters. She opposes the devaluation of women as brainless sex objects and resents the fears and dependencies arising from maternal indoctrination. At the same time, Weldon does not make any pretence to being a moralist. She observes:

*My moral fiction is slightly amoral because it doesn't toe the party line of moral. It is not ideologically sound or indeed moral, for an intelligent and competent woman to turn herself into her husband's fancy, pushy, idiotic mistress-now is it? But that is what Ruth does in 'She-Devil'. My idea of morality isn't about women becoming strong and forceful, competent or whatever; it's about having a good time. (113-115).*

A general undercurrent of sympathy for suffering womanhood, the salient trait of all feminist writing,

which is essentially humanitarian, invests Weldon's fiction with a certain dignity. In Fay Weldon, sympathy often takes the form of an outcry of pity for the victimized womenfolk. She in her works exhorts women to be aware of their inherent potential and nurture the feminine energy within themselves. Her novels hold a mirror up to the injustice and indignities that hapless women have to face at all fronts. In fact her works have the power to throw away a system into disarray, providing ample instances to illustrate that women should not make themselves willing victims to masculine machinations and tactics.

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