

PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN: FEMALE IDENTITY BETWEEN EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL OPPRESSION IN FAY WELDON'S FICTION

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*Abstract: Fay Weldon's female protagonists are depicted in a constant struggle, both with the outside world and with themselves. The characters' inner turmoil is what allows them to evolve; however, it is because of social pressure that women in Weldon's novels need to embrace feminism. The present paper deals with the deconstruction of female identity in some of Weldon's novels, including *Praxis*, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *Worst Fears*. Fay Weldon's female protagonists are empowered women, who try to overcome the flaws which society places on them, in order to find themselves. This constant effort to find oneself is made even more difficult by the fact that the protagonists do not find change to be easy. Nevertheless, forced by situations which are out of their control, Weldon's female protagonists manage to distance themselves from social oppression, choosing to do what feels right for them. In this way, Fay Weldon's protagonists become role models, in a way, in societies which do not fully accept gender equality.*

Keywords: Feminism, deconstruction, femininity, gender equality.

Even in an age where feminism is a part of everyday life, the issue of female identity is difficult to explore. There are so many variables to consider, and so many facets of the self, that the character and personality barely begin to explain it. A step forward in the analysis of female identity is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir considers that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"¹, suggesting that gender and sex are different notions, with gender being a culturally constructed concept, and sex referencing the biological characteristics. In this way, female identity is mostly constructed on social norms, and varies between the complete acceptance and total rejection of these norms. In her novels, Fay Weldon uses the social norms in a very peculiar way, deconstructing gender stereotypes through the way in which her characters interact with each other, through a quest of self discovery, as well as through the way in which her female protagonists perceive power. Weldon's characters are not stereotypical; on the contrary, she tries to prove that a gray moral area is more common than a strict black and white standard. As Maria Gonzales explains, "Weldon's novels play havoc with the traditional female stereotypes. Devils are not so awful and angels turn out to be less than nice, at least for other women. Moreover her fictions can serve as effective antidotes to any remnants of binary patriarchal thought."²

Regarding identity in general and feminine identity in particular, Judith Butler poses an interesting question, pondering "To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?"³ In Weldon's case, the concept of identity is extremely connected to the idea of experience, with her novels representing a journey through which the female protagonist finds herself. However, for this journey to take place the protagonists need to escape their comfort zone; as such, the most important obstacle in the path to self-discovery is social oppression. Judith Gardiner considers female identity to be very connected to the

¹ de Beauvoir 1973, p. 301

² Gonzales 2010, p. 101

³ Butler 1999, p. 22

“mother-daughter bond.”⁴ In this way, female identity is influenced both by society as an abstract concept, as well as by the everyday interactions and relationships with family. Female identity represents the balance between society’s norms of femininity and female empowerment. In Fay Weldon’s novels, the protagonists’ inner turmoil comes from the empowerment part, because it is a new, if not totally undesirable concept. In this way, Praxis, Ruth, and Alexandra do not seek or embrace power, at first, because they are afraid of change; however, they go on to find that power is a part of their identity, a part which has been kept secret, mostly through the fault of the men in their lives.

Praxis, Weldon’s protagonist from the eponymous novel, begins her journey as a young adult doing secretarial and domestic work for her boyfriend. She is sacrificing her own academic future, by not fulfilling her potential, in order to spare her boyfriend’s feelings, convinced that, should she outshine him, “she would presently find Willy in the student’s bar investing in the gin and lime which would buy him his next term’s sex, comfort, company and secretarial services”⁵ This passive acceptance of the situation proves that Praxis suffers from low self-esteem, not being able to appreciate her true academic value. Throughout her journey, Praxis faces moral dilemmas, such as the problem of abortions, a problem which, apparently, is still up for debate even today. Praxis finds it extraordinary “that in a world in which men are killing each other by the million, they should strike such attitudes about an unborn foetus.”⁶ Weldon deconstructs the stereotype of the woman as a loving mother in various of her novels, renouncing the belief that absolutely all women are born with a maternal instinct. By focusing on issues which affect both sexes, such as abortion and the right and access to education, *Praxis* anticipates the future trend in the feminist movement – a move towards a more encompassing agenda, focusing on human rights, rather than women’s rights.

In this way, Praxis begins her journey of self discovery in a relationship, however, she soon discovers that she is not completely satisfied and accomplished in her relationship with men, she starts to acknowledge the fact that she should be enough for herself, and focuses more on her problems. As such, we may say that one is not born, but rather becomes, a feminist. In the beginning of the novel, Praxis is following the social norms imposed by society, by being submissive to her boyfriend at the time, while towards the end of the novel she manages to become one of the “new women” she mentioned, with “their buttocks arrogant in tight jeans, openly inviting, breast falling free and shameless and feeling no apparent obligation to smile, look pleasant or keep their voices low”⁷

Another one of Weldon’s protagonists, Alexandra Ludd, finds herself confronting her most terrible suspicions, in the novel *Worst Fears*. Following the death of her husband, Alexandra finds out about her husband’s affairs and learns that her husband has left the house in which the couple lived to another woman. Furthermore, as the novel develops, Alexandra finds out that her husband had not divorced his first wife before marrying her. The loss of her social status affects her greatly, especially as she comes to realize that she did not know her husband. Her whole identity, as a married woman, was constructed around being a wife, and

⁴ Gardiner 1981, p. 349

⁵ Weldon 1980, p. 100

⁶ Weldon 1980, p. 76

⁷ Weldon 1980, p. 13

following the death of her husband, she finds out that she is not his only widow, thus remaining permanently lost. Her cathartic experience at the end of the novel represents the moment in which she finally takes hold of her life, burning down a house which belongs to her, but which her husband has left to another woman. In Alexandra's case, her post-traumatic stress is triggered by feelings which were once welcomed. Alexandra's memories of her husband have changed very much, becoming a trigger for new experiences. The episode where Lucy cries for Ned, begging Alexandra to be friends, may be seen as one of Alexandra's breaking points: "Please can't we be friends?" asked Lucy Lint, pathetically. 'I hate you being so hostile to me. If I meet aggression I go completely to pieces. We've both of us lost Ned. I'm holding on by a thread. Please be nice to me.'⁸ The final episode, where Alexandra burns down the house in order to receive money from the insurance agency, and leaves for Hollywood represents her beginning a new life. The fact that she now has not only the knowledge, but the power to act in any way she chooses proves that she has found her identity – she does not need her husband anymore to tell her what to do.

Ruth, the protagonist from Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, is an interesting example of female identity. Ruth alters her physical appearance in such a way as to become an almost exact copy of the woman for whom her husband has left her – Mary Fisher. Even though Ruth's transformation into Mary Fisher seems to suggest a clear lack of identity, as Ruth practically takes over Mary's life in all aspects, it is actually Ruth's identity which completes the transformation. Even though Ruth looks like Mary Fisher and ends up working for the same publishing house as Mary Fisher, Ruth has something Mary never had: power. Ruth has the power to refuse her husband's advances, in order to prove to him how much he had hurt her.

Ruth's journey begins when she realizes her husband has an affair with one of his clients: "I am fixed here and now, trapped in my body, pinned to one particular spot, hating Mary Fisher. It is all I can do. Hate obsesses and transforms me: it is my singular attribution. I have only recently discovered it. Better to hate than to grieve. I sing in praise of hate, and all its attendant energy. I sing a hymn to the death of love."⁹ Ruth is adamant in her hate, hating Mary Fisher not only because she has stolen Bobbo, but also because she represents everything that Ruth is not – beautiful, successful, rich. When Bobbo blames Ruth for being "a bad mother, a worse wife and a dreadful cook"¹⁰ and not being a woman at all, stating that she is a "she devil"¹¹, Ruth is stripped of the identity she had. By transforming her body with the help of cosmetic surgery, Ruth is able to transcend her former self and her former problems, thus creating a new identity for herself. Another very important aspect of identity is the name. The name is the first form of recognition a person receives, and is the first thing which Ruth changes in her attempt to recreate her identity, going from Ruth to Vesta Rose, Polly Patch, Georgiana Tilling, Molly Wishant, Millie Mason, Marlene Hunter, only to end up as Mary Fisher with the help of surgery. Ruth goes from her life as a wife and mother, a life in which she was barely considered a person, as her husband used to take all the decisions for

⁸ Weldon 1997, p. 108

⁹ Weldon 1983, p. 5

¹⁰ Weldon 1983, p. 47

¹¹ Weldon 1983, p. 47

her and tell her anything she needed to know: “It is a good life. Bobbo tells me so”¹² to a life where she has all the power: “somehow it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was, merely of power. I have all, and he has none. As I was, so he is now.”¹³

In Fay Weldon’s novels, female identity is a very complex concept; it represents a journey of the woman who must find herself, alone, independent from everyone else. Weldon’s protagonists are Phoenix women, they rise from their own ashes, in order to become more powerful and find their place in the world. They are oppressed by society and they are mistreated in the relationship with their husbands and boyfriends, yet they still embark on the journey to self discovery, and they find themselves. Fay Weldon deconstructs gender stereotypes, giving her female protagonists the power to do what they want with their lives; for them, empowered is not just a word. Regardless of their age or social status, Fay Weldon’s characters share their desire to find themselves, either for power, or for an ideal, or for financial stability.

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¹² Weldon 1983, p. 6

¹³ Weldon 1983, p. 256