

A Reflection of Experience and Autobiography in Fay Weldon's Fiction

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Abstract: *In this paper, I will present some of the most important and interesting facts from Fay Weldon's autobiography, *Auto da Fay*, and the way in which certain aspects of her life have influenced her fiction and her attitude towards feminist issues. Weldon considers herself to be a feminist, going as far as to state that she has arrived at "the next stage of feminism", and implying in various contexts that she is a pioneer in certain controversies regarding feminism. Fay Weldon seems to have an opinion on everything, be it romantic affairs, rape, pornography or prostitution, and has been criticized in various cases for the way in which she expresses these opinions. In her autobiography, readers may find the explanation for Weldon's evolution both as a person and as an author, creating characters with a strong background, inspired by the people around her, proving that the social standards have changed, and women have become empowered. Weldon has evolved with the times, suggesting that it is important for feminists to do the same, and help women in various parts of the world where female identity is not as strongly rooted in the social construct as it is in the West. Through the use of concrete examples from her life, Fay Weldon provides background for her female protagonists, giving readers a better understanding of feminism and femininity in the social construct. Her statements have been criticized, however, she has not been discouraged, and has always considered herself to be ahead of the crowd when it comes to feminism; nevertheless, Weldon has emerged as a mature, experienced feminist writer, which is obvious both in her memoirs and her fiction.*

Keywords: *British literature, background, female identity, social construct, feminism.*

Fay Weldon's fiction is a very controversial type of fiction, on one hand she has received praise for being a pioneer, because, in a way, she is deconstructing female stereotypes; on the other hand, however, critics have pointed out that Weldon's fiction actually confines women to certain social roles, following the notion of the submissive woman. Weldon herself has actually

expressed her ideas regarding feminism, suggesting that she has evolved, keeping up with the times. Petr Vyhnálek suggests that Weldon considers herself to be ahead of the times (Vyhnálek 2011: 6), as she has experienced feminism in various stages of her life. Also, equally important is the fact that the feminist movement has had a strong impact on literature and on literary theory in general, especially in the last decades. In this way, Fay Weldon consider herself to be ahead of the times when it comes to feminism and feminist issues, explaining that, as she has aged, she has experienced feminism in different ways, progressing and adjusting her ideas and expectations. It is also suggested that the feminist struggle does not end, but rather it is changing its focus towards other issues related to feminism, evolving with the times. Fay Weldon was born and brought up in the age of feminism, an age when women went from being stay-at-home moms to running businesses. This is one of the reasons why she has had to adapt to this new world order, and she uses her own experience in creating characters which fight social oppression and the patriarchal system in their own way.

Fay Weldon herself has presented her own views regarding feminism in various contexts. For example, in an interview, when questioned whether she felt as part of the feminist movement, Weldon stated that "Inevitably, but I never wrote propaganda because it all seemed so evident. It became obvious that you had to be a feminist because it was such a ridiculous state of affairs." (Saner 2009) Weldon refuses to think of herself as a feminist indoctrinator, considering that feminism was a natural reaction against a patriarch society which would marginalize women and restrict their rights. Weldon goes as far as to state that she is "[...] probably the one, the only feminist there is and the others are all out of step." (Saner 2009) Her individuality and her unique style of writing have helped Weldon become one of the most appreciated contemporary female writers.

Regarding the new waves of feminism, Weldon declares herself satisfied, as it seems that individuals who concern themselves with feminist issues have moved on to more pressing issues, such as the role of women in certain societies where women still lack certain freedoms. As she mentions in an interview,

They're getting a bit better, because at least they are more interested in women in other lands," she says. "In the last five years, it has been so inward-looking – they have been worried about pay gaps, worried about

the minutiae of things – that it got up its own arse. Now, [the feminist movement is] looking outside – you see what's happening to women in Afghanistan and you see the necessity of fighting back. You need to work in those areas. It is too easy for women [in the west] to see themselves as victims and oppressed by men. I think one has to be more rational. [Saner 2009].

Weldon suggests here that she is happy with the way the situation has evolved, focusing more on actually helping women who need help, rather than victimizing women in placing blame on society. In this way, feminism becomes the ideology which it was meant to be, a way to regain a balance.

In her autobiography, *Auto da Fay*, Fay Weldon mentions some of her personal experience regarding such feminist issue as the exploit of women, pornography and prostitution. In the chapter "Sent Out", Weldon comments upon an interesting chapter in her life, her marriage with Ronald Bateman, a headmaster significantly older than she was. In the chapters regarding this marriage, Weldon uses the third person, rather than the first, as is the case with the other chapters, insinuating that she does not hold herself responsible for what has happened during that period of time (Weldon 2002, 198). Even though she seems to not be coping so well with certain aspects of her past, Weldon is not reluctant to speak about some topics which might be considered taboo, going as far as to blame women who appear in pornographic movies or magazines, or women who take their clothes off for money, insisting they are a part of the mechanism which objectifies women, and that feminism has given them a choice. She has expressed her views regarding this subject in an interview:

But what about the different pressures on young women now – young men growing up on misogynistic magazines, internet porn and lap-dancing clubs appearing on high streets? "Yes, but the women are doing it," says Weldon. "They don't have to. They can always get a job in the frozen chicken factory. Selling your body is no awful," She has a habit of not finishing sentences. "It's not any big deal. Good for you while you have it, you won't be able to do it for long and then you can get a job as a typist or whatever." [Saner 2009]

Weldon's marriage with Mr. Bateman comes to mind when discussing these lifestyle choices, as Weldon has been coerced in a way, to entertain various men, during her marriage (Weldon 2002,

198). In this case, recognizing her past, she does not place blame on the women who choose to maintain connections with such industries as pornography, she simply explains that women nowadays have a choice, and that feminism is all about women making their own choices, rather than being told what to do. She does not play victim, acknowledging that she has made her choices, and is reconciled with her past. As Richard Eder explains, “You hesitate to label ‘Auto da Fay’ – a virtuoso triple pun on inquisitorial self-punishment – as her first venture at memoir because so much of its material shows up as roots for her novels. So do the wit, the shrewdly disconcerting marksmanship, the refusal to engage herself even with herself.” (Eder 2003). Richard Eder points out that many of the events found in Weldon’s *Autobiography* can be found already in her fiction, even though they are not blatantly explained. He praises *Auto da Fay*, recognizing Weldon’s wit and detachment, and implies that the autobiography is not a penance-style type of writing, but rather Weldon’s life story, a reflection of her fiction.

Due to the fact that she prefers to speak and write about concrete subjects such as pornography or adultery, suicide and rape, Weldon is constantly being criticized for her statements. In an interview, Weldon has stated that “rape actually isn’t the worst thing that can happen to a woman if you’re safe, alive and unmarked after the event” (Weldon 1998). Her statement has been attacked by women working with rape victims. What Fay Weldon actually meant was that one incident in the life of a person should not influence the course of that person’s life. Weldon goes on to explain that “Defining it as some peculiarly awful crime may even be counter-productive. I’d like to see it defused for women and deglamorised for men by returning it to the category of aggravated assault” (Weldon 1998). Weldon mentions that labeling the people who experienced such things is counter-productive, and insists that instead of focusing on defining the experience, people would better spend their time otherwise.

Fay Weldon has tried to stay away from labeling and defining as much as she could, having spent her life by trying to not fit in. In her autobiography, Weldon mentions the case of Assia Weevil and Sylvia Plath, two women who have committed suicide, because they felt dissatisfied with their love lives. As Rogers explains, “The result, according to Fay Weldon, was two dead women and a dead unborn child. Only she hasn’t done. Lacking a sense of the ridiculous, she uses what she calls ‘these seminal events’ to preach a hair – raising

little feminist sermon” (Rogers 2002). Weldon’s critique of gender roles is a prevalent theme in her novels; however, she does not chastise women for their lifestyle choices, she merely presents her characters and lets the reader decide what to make of them. It is in this way that Weldon expresses her views that women do not need to focus on their love lives in a destructive manner, and they should not feel discouraged by a failure in the romance department. She has kept true to this idea, focusing on the positive aspects of her life, even when her marriages fell apart. However, she feels grateful that such tragedies as Sylvia Plath’s will not happen again, as times have changed and women have become empowered.

Weldon’s autobiography, *Auto da Fay*, reproduces the patterns in her life, bringing to light new interpretations of Weldon’s fiction. Weldon is self-conscious, and helps the reader understand more about her female protagonists, by evoking memories from her personal experience. As Burroway explains,

Though she announces at the beginning of “Auto da Fay” that she’s looking for the patterns of her own experience (and finds them), she’s a woman so “rooted in the carnal and instinctive world” that she can hardly bend her life-so-far to a single narrative arc. [...] Herself-as-heroine is multifaceted, nuanced and self-judging. Although, like many memoirists, Weldon ends her book just at the point when her career is about to take hold, her story of a lost girl on her way to finding herself winds up having heft as well as lift [Burroway 2003].

Weldon’s autobiography manages to capture various instances in Weldon’s life as a young woman, as a writer, as a mother and as a feminist. Thus, it is difficult to capture only one side of Fay Weldon, however, the background provided in the memoir helps readers better understand Weldon as a whole. The irony and wit which have characterized her fiction are also found in her memoir, allowing the reader to discover her story, thus revealing the background for her fiction.

Fay Weldon presents her journey as a young woman objectively, even going so far as to narrate certain chapters in the third person, making the reader feel as though he is reading a work of fiction, rather than a memoir. Her witticism and sense of humor have allowed Weldon to confess to various episodes which reveal her views regarding feminism and the role of women in the social construct. Fay Weldon helps women by providing both positive and negative

examples of protagonists, encouraging women to construct their own values of female identity.

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