

A THEME OF MARRIAGE IN THE NOVELS OF FAY WELDON

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Fay Weldon is a significant modern British novelist of multi-dimensional achievement as a novelist, short story writer, dramatist, television movie writer, etc. So far she has a very successful career publishing over twenty-five novels, collections of short stories, television movies, plays, and newspaper and magazine articles.

Weldon makes a critique of marriage institution in which women are considered subordinate to men. Marriage is an institution which provides women a social identity. Women are mainly treated as an object for procreation, and men exploit them by manipulating their unpaid labour in the household. Radical feminists define marriage:

as a form of compulsory heterosexuality whose main aim is to control woman's sexuality by tying her to her husband. This, combined with men's control over women's labour in housework, makes marriage *the* central source of women's oppression under patriarchy (Humm 128).

In Weldon's novels marriages are frequently broken due to exploitation of women by men, infidelity or financial instability of women. Most of the time men either desert or divorce their wives on the charge of infidelity. Sometimes women themselves break their marriages because they want to escape from the exploitation of their husbands. Some women, dissatisfied with marital lives, find solace in extra-marital relations with other men. In *Praxis*, Ivor marries Praxis who is working in BBC on a reception counter. After marriage he makes her leave her work since he does not like a working wife but wants her to look after his house because a working wife is a sign of family disaster, disgrace and humiliation. Though Praxis likes her job, she sacrifices her career for the sake of marriage and gives birth to two children Robert and Claire. Later she leaves Ivor with whom she is not happy because he starts treating her rudely after receiving a letter from her sister disclosing Praxis's previous act of whoring. She, then, marries Philip and finds a job in an advertising agency and looks after four children – her two and Philip's two – on weekends. The husbands admire her because she seems to have all qualities needed in a wife. In reality, she is tired of her work both in the house and at office. But she has to leave Philip when she finds him in bed with Serena.

Praxis reflects on the marriage of Willy and Carla when she finds that Carla is not suitable for Willy:

Men are commonly expected to marry someone poorer, less educated and of lower status than themselves. Women, likewise, are expected to marry above them. Thus every wife in the world will automatically feel in her domestic life and status, inferior to her husband. Because in fact she will be: and perhaps this way happiness and acceptance lies. The husband looking down. The wife looking up (*Praxis* 159-60).

Esther comes with strong argument in *The Fat Woman's Joke* against marriage which confines women to their family and houses. She is disillusioned in her life with her husband Alan, so reacts sharply against marriage institution:

Marriage is such a falling away. It hurts. When you go to the pictures you remember a time you used to hold hands. You go to bed in your curlers and remember a time you used to sleep in each other's arms. Nothing is ever as it was, in marriage (59).

Esther tells Phyllis that after her marriage she adjusted herself to the demands of her husband and did household duties. Esther thinks that running a house is not a sensible occupation for a grown up woman. According to her 'dusting and sweeping, cooking and washing up – it is work for the sake of work, an eternal circle which lasts from the day you get married until the day you die' (73). Alan, her husband always searches for flaws she makes, and if he does not find any then he is disappointed. So she thinks it is not right to imprison themselves in their home but find their happiness in separate houses. Esther's servant Juliet alerts her that if she loses her weight, she will ruin her health, and she will also lose her husband. When Esther tells her that her husband himself has told her to lose her weight, Juliet replies sternly:

That's husbands all over. Ungrateful pigs. You do everything for them . . . and at the end of it all, what happens? They find someone else they fancy more. Someone young some man hasn't had the

chance to wear out yet. Marriage is a con trick. A girl should marry a rich man, then at least she'd have a fur coat to keep her warm in her old age (76-77).

Here Juliet appears more practical in her attitude towards marriage. She is for financial stability of women in their old age if in any circumstances husbands leave them.

In *The Heart of the Country* Sally's husband is depressed due to his failure in life so Sally works as a secretary at school while Val lies in bed because his disk is slipped. He all the time finds fault with whatever she does. Weldon, in the novel, writes about such men and how they behave rudely with their wives:

The trouble with men who suffer from mild clinical depression . . . is that they do tend to drink too much and hit their wives in their frustration, and the more their wives try to help the more they are insulted and berated for their pains. Everything's wrong and miserable and awful, and whose fault can it be but the wife's? And since wives tend to take their husband's view of them, they get confused and wretched themselves, not to mention hit, and feel it's their fault their husband's job/back/life has failed, because he keeps saying it is (60).

Thus wives are conditioned in marriage in such a way that they believe in whatever their husbands say, even though that is nothing to do with them. So, for Weldon, 'Marriage [is] a breeding ground for deception' (*President's Child* 211) because in *The President's Child*, Isabel's husband Homer joins with others in a plan to kill Isabel and her child Jason; and becomes a spy to them. Ruth tells about her married life with Bobbo which involves looking after her children, her husband, the dog, the cat and the guinea pig:

This is the happiness, the completeness of domestic, suburban life. It is what we should be happy with: our destiny. Out of the gutter of wild desire on the smooth lawns of married love (*She-Devil* 9).

In Chapter Five of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Weldon writes the Litany of the Good Wife in which the code of conduct for 'ideal' patriarchal wife is given:

I must pretend to be happy when I am not; for everyone's sake.

I must make no adverse comment on the manner of my existence; for everyone's sake.

I must be grateful for the roof over my head and the food on my table, and spend my days showing it, by cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from my chair; for everyone's sake.

I must make my husband's parents like me, and my parents like him; for everyone's sake.

I must consent to the principal that those who earn most outside the home deserve most inside the home; for everyone's sake.

I must build up my husband's sexual confidence, I must not express my sexual interest in other men, in private or in public; I must ignore his way of diminishing me, by publicly praising women younger, prettier and more successful than me, and sleeping with them in private, if he can; for everyone's sake.

I must render him moral support in all his undertaking, however immoral they may be, for the marriage's sake.

I must pretend in all matters to be less than him.

I must love him through wealth and poverty, through good times and bad, and not swerve in my loyalty to him, for everyone's sake (17-18).

In order to keep herself in tune with the above litany, a wife has to sidetrack her ambitions in life.

Women leave their careers for the sake of their husbands in Weldon's novels. Helen in *The Heart and Lives of Men* gives up her work at Southby's, and starts going to Cordon Bleu cookery lesson. Both Helen and her mother Evelyn suffer a lot in their lives because they are submissive, and dependant on their respective husbands. But if women keep the domestic peace simply by agreeing, they become confused and depressed. Even famous lady like Starlady Sandra in *Leader of the Band* has to suffer when she marries Matthew who enforces restrictions on her. Sandra concludes that 'what can it be other than a generalised guilt which makes men so convinced that their wives are always on the brink of bringing about their downfall (89).' Matthew makes use of her fame for his promotion to the Bench. He imposes restrictions on her saying there is no scandal, no more topless bathing, no more transparent blouses, and nothing for the press to get hold of. Sandra comments on her status: 'One of the unclassed, that was me. Once we were married, he made me very aware of it' (88-89). So

according to Weldon, it is the custom of intelligent and competent men to marry women less intelligent and less competent than themselves because they fail to acknowledge their equal status.

Affliction or *Trouble* is about Annette Horrocks who lives with Spicer, her husband; and two children – Spicer's son Jason by his first wife Aileen, and Annette's daughter Susan by her husband Paddy. Annette's marriage of ten years with Spicer comes to an end as she becomes pregnant and he does not want her to deliver his baby so he starts giving her trouble by all means till she herself leaves him. On the other hand, he has an affair with Marion, Ernie's girlfriend. He is jealous of Annette as she is a novelist and he does not like her to take part in the Oprah Winfrey Show. But, she makes every effort to keep her marital harmony in tact by submitting herself to him. With the help of Dr. Rhea and Herman Marks, he tries to prove her to be a sexually abnormal and a mad woman. He even takes support of astrology to prove his point. The Marks try to convince her that she is not suitable to Spicer but she thinks that they have put that idea in Spicer's head. Annette, under the influence of Spicer, develops negative opinion about her sexual life. She thinks that he has affair with other women because of her. She concludes:

It is because I'm so bad at sex. It's a kind of disability. You can't blame Spicer. Sex just doesn't come naturally to me, the way it does to other women. I say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing at the wrong moment and spoil everything (92).

Spicer gives her a birthday gift – bangles, bracelets and anklets – which are the gifts offered to the goddess Hera who is endowed with all the positive characteristics of a good wife and mother. She is at the same time so prone to feeling of jealousy that she is prepared to sacrifice everything she believes in – even her own life, if need be – in an attempt to establish what she believes to be her own rights. Consequently, her married life tends to be dogged by ever-growing crisis. Annette now comes to know that her husband, with the help of Dr. Rhea is attacking her with Theo therapy.

Annette goes to see Dr. Rhea and makes her restless with her questions. She asks Dr. Rhea to stop encouraging Spicer to break up their marriage, and accuses her of breaking up marriages. When Annette collapses in the taxi and is admitted to hospital, she has an emergency caesarean. She has been haemorrhaging and the baby is probably dead for a couple of days. After returning from the hospital, Spicer comes to see her, but she does not open the door and asks him to go with his friends, the Doctors Marks. He tells her to get out of his house, as she has no right to be there. Upon this Annette says:

I've given you up . . . I don't like you any more let alone love you. I don't believe anyone can make a human being talk and behave the way you do to me, unless there's a large slice of the human being wants to. . . . There is every excuse for you, but I don't accept them. I want to be free of you (153).

Annette then shows him a photograph of Spicer, Dr. Rhea and Dr. Herman engaged in sexual intercourse in that very room, Dr. Rhea in the middle, Troilism. She supposes she had better go because she just wants to be sure she understands the situation properly. Annette now accepts that she is hooked on her own punishment, a punishment of being addicted to Spicer.

Marriage is also a central theme in *Worst Fears* in which Alexandra Ludd who is a stage actress, is playing the role of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* when her husband dies of a heart attack in her home, the Cottage. She and her husband Ned Ludd have lived for twelve years together as a successful married couple. When her mother, Irene, alerts her about Ned's relations with Alexandra's friends, she becomes suspicious, and starts visiting her female friends to unveil her husband's affairs with other women when he was alive. At first she does not believe that Ned had affairs with other women because they loved each other, and he had a great integrity, but her mother explains to her:

'That's as may be, but you're away an awful lot. Men don't like it. If the wife leaves an empty bed a husband's first impulse is to fill it' (57-58).

Alexandra's best friend Abbie cleans bed sheets after the death of Ned and before Alexandra arrives from London to the Cottage. She tells Alexandra that Ned has died of heart attack in the kitchen at 5.30 a.m. Because of Jenny Linden's hysterical behaviour after Ned's death, everybody concludes that he died making love with Jenny. Even Abbie and Vilna say the same about Ned's death. Alexandra, who does not believe in her husband's affairs, becomes suspicious and paranoid, and goes on searching for evidence of her husband's affairs with other women. Her friends Abbie, Jenny and Vilna try their best to deceive her. As Jenny openly accepts her extra-marital relations with Ned, Alexandra becomes angry and hits her. Even after Ned's death Alexandra feels Ned's presence

everywhere in the house. She contemplates that throughout her marital life she behaved as per Ned's views considering him loyal to her. She thinks:

Perhaps there are all kinds of things I now think which are really Ned's thoughts, not mine. Judgements I make about people and things, not really mine but Ned's and mine combined. Marriage is terrible intertwining, a fearful osmosis; I will have to relearn myself (66).

After Ned's death everybody tries to take advantage of Alexandra's plight. Ned's brother Hamish expects her to have love with him, her mother does not allow her to take her son Sascha with her, Sascha's nurse Theresa behaves rudely with her. Hamish discloses her affair with Eric Stenstrom, an actor, and later declares that Sascha is not Ned's but Eric's. Alexandra also comes to know that Ned has not only married his first wife, Chrissie, but he had also married Pilar when he was nineteen. It is also revealed that Ned has left nothing after his death to her in his will as he has given everything to Jenny Linden including the Cottage and all its belongings.

Alexandra decides not to attend Ned's funeral and, instead, prefers to go to visit the director who is ready to offer her role in big budget film in Hollywood, and she accepts the offer:

I'm not going to Ned's funeral. Ned doesn't deserve to have me there. If he can die in some slut's arms, that slut can do the burying. I won't (122).

And she goes to London, at the time of funeral, to see the Casting Director about her possibility of playing opposite Michael Douglas in his new Hollywood film. Sam, the front-of-house manager is not happy that Alexandra has not been to Ned's funeral and, he thinks, she will regret it. But Alexandra replies, 'Never, I am too proud. I never knew I was so proud'(174). She has thought of herself as a humble little thing, dismissing her celebrity as meaningless, a by-product of the world's folly but that turned out to be Ned's view. She wishes that he has had Ned buried, not cremated. Then she could have slipped into some graveyard by night, and sit there and come to terms with corruption of the flesh; and the slithering in and out of worms. It is more difficult to sit and contemplate an urn of ashes. She confirms, by the way, that Hamish has joined hands with Jenny Linden. She, later, discovers that Ned has not died in the dining room but in his bedroom, not while making love with Jenny but with Abbie Carpenter. Thus she comes to know about her 'worst fears.' This revelation changes her attitude to her own personality and she ceases to be a submissive, timid and make-believe kind of woman. She becomes aggressive and sets her most lovable home, the Cottage on fire, thus, not allowing Jenny and Hamish's plan to fulfil. She, then, decides to go to Hollywood requesting her mother to look after Sascha who is four, and tells Eric Stonstrom to see Sascha now and then, and wishes all of them good-bye except the solicitor and Jenny Linden.

According to Deirdre Neilen, 'Alexandra learns that men's perfidy is only exceeded by women's, and that even one's best friends are capable of sleeping with one's husband and then lying about it'. She has also learned that 'the difference between acting and living well' (153). Thus Alexandra falls apart 'confronted with the truth that her picture-perfect marriage was perfect only in her eyes' (Helmond 85).

Quoting the example of Ruth who does everything to keep her female identity, Susan McKinstry points out that Weldon's novel states:

. . . the violent cost of love and marriage for female identity in a world where women must be angelic beauties, where body rather than the spirit must be improved, where violence is turned against women's bodies by women themselves in the name of self-improvement, transformation, beauty (106).

In Weldon's novels most of the time marriages are contracted out of convenience and they are broken on the charge of infidelity. Bobbo, Matthew, Clifford marry their wives out of convenience. Bobbo marries Ruth even though she is unattractive because she is his boss's daughter. Matthew is attracted towards Sandra because of her fame and fortune. Clifford marries Helen hurriedly because she is pregnant and wants to get aborted. But in Weldon's novels marriages are broken when husbands charge their wives for infidelity. In *Puffball*, Liffey's husband leaves her when he comes to know from Mabs that the child inside her is Tucker's. In *The Cloning of Joanna May* Carl May does not tolerate his wife's relations with other men even after he has divorced her, and so goes on killing her lovers. Natalie and Sonia in *The Heart of the Country* face the same consequences and remain unsupported and deserted by their husbands. 'It's most often a bolt from the blue which strikes down a good wife and

mother, especially when she's economically dependent' (11). So 'financially dependent wives are more faithful than independent wives' (*Puffball* 137).

Weldon focuses on victimisation of women in marriage as wives. Women are expected to conform to the oppressive and humiliating principles of patriarchal society. Patriarchy expects that women seek their happiness in marriage and marital obligations. On the other hand, husbands torture their wives in many ways: if anything happens wrong and unexpected, they rest the blame on wives.

Feminist ending of the novel *Down Among the women*, in which Weldon portrays three generations of women reacting differently to the women's oppression in patriarchal society, suggests that there is hope for women in the future generation represented by Byzantia, Scarlet's daughter. Jocelyn wants to be married but if Byzantia is asked about this in her nubile age, she would reply:

I don't want to be married. Why should I get married? I don't want to be some man's wife. Moreover I do not subscribe to these outmoded bourgeois formulae. Children? No, the world's too terrible a place (82).

Her female protagonists come to realize the futility of marriage when they find themselves as victims of this institution. They even revolt against the patriarchal notions of femininity. In *The Fat Woman's Joke*, Esther indignantly states how marriage and female body are the sites of women's oppression. Female body is treated as sex object and degraded by men because they have their own notion of what a female body ought to be like. Gemma in *Little Sisters* tells Elsa how women are exploited in marriage. Wives must serve cups of tea to torturers, chiefs of police, army generals, etc. because it is their duty as married women. If they don't, they and their children will starve. 'Marriage is a con trick', says Juliet in *The Fat Woman's Joke*. Weldon's heroine, Esther, who is fat and who is compelled by her husband to eat less to become slim, revolts against her domineering husband and against advertising images of women, and starts overeating. In the end of the novel, it is her husband, who surrenders before her, and begs her to come back to their home.

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