

**FEMINISTIC THEMES IN FAY WELDON'S NOVELS****Sheetal Sharma**

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**ABSTRACT**

*An extended fictional work in prose, usually in the form of a story, is known as a novel. The novel provides such a facile and attractive means of popular appeal and is so adaptable to literary fashions, that its continued vitality will surprise no one. It projects the images of life, which in turn reflect the images of feelings and aspirations of an individual, a community, a nation and world at large. The cultural context and the life style of people, their hopes and despairs are mediated in the fictional images. These differ to the extent, according to the life experiences behind them differ. At times, in the history of a nation, there occur revolutions or upheavals of far reaching consequences. Such changing conditions inevitably bring a new outlook and often lead to a new social order.*

*A literary person is as much a product of his society, as his art is a product of his own reaction to life. Even the greatest of artists, is sometimes a conscious, sometimes an unconscious exponent of his time spirit. It is the total outcome of all the political, social, religious and scientific changes of a particular age. The historical aspect of literature therefore, unimportant though it may be for aesthetic purpose, cannot be totally ignored. Most of the eminent literary figures and critics are unanimously of the view that a nation's life has its moods of exultation and depression, its epoch of a strong faith and strenuous idealism. They admit that while the manner of expression will vary greatly with the individuality of each writer, the dominant spirit of the hour, whatever that may be, will directly or indirectly reveal itself in his work.*

*The origin of Weldon's style might be found, on very practical or materialist level, in her early years as an advertising copy writer. She has stated in an interview published in the Time Literary Supplement, "What experience in advertising gives the writer is sense of power."<sup>3</sup> This accords well with Weldon's sense of purpose. The fact she states, "I quite frequently moved to write, by a sense of outrage and indignation. Otherwise I would not do it in the first place."<sup>4</sup> Almost all Weldon's writing possesses this sense of urgency. She comments further in terms of her purpose in writing, "Style seems to me, in the end, a matter of economy, of how to get down rapidly and exactly, with precision, what you wish to say. If you have enough to say, you want to get it down as quickly as possible and this is what develops an individual style."*

## INTRODUCTION

There are many famous novels and novelists in the History of English Literature but the novelist I am concerned with for my Research is Mrs. Fay Weldon and her Feministic novels. Fay Weldon is most widely known in Britain and abroad as a feministic novelist, usually concerned with women issues. She was the daughter of a novelist, a granddaughter of the Vanity Fair editor and a niece to a novelist, a screenwriter and a radio & television dramatist Selwyn Jepson.

Her real progress as a novelist has been traced back in mid 1960s but it was in the early 1970s that she began fully to establish both her name and public voice. After finishing her schooling she went into a world that was, as we know changing, evolving, growing and diminishing by turns. She became novelist and her novels are the reflection of her own life. Fay Weldon writes, "All I can do, when considering the changing face of fiction, is to look back to my own life and using my novels as evidence for and against me, give an account of a political and fictional journey through the last twenty years, taking as it were, the feminist route, no other, so I always felt being open to me."<sup>1</sup>

**Thus, Fay Weldon, a well-known English Novelist belongs to post-modern Age**, which is usually assumed after World War II (1939-45). A literary person like her is as much product of her society as her novels are products of her own reaction to life. In her age, the novel remained an important instrument of expression in England.

She was born in Worcester England on 22nd September 1931. She was supposed to be born in New Zealand because her father was a doctor at New Zealand and her mother returned to him, when she was only five weeks old. Her mother Margaret was an aspiring writer of commercial fiction, under the pen name „Pearl Bellairs“. Her father Frank had a charming personality but he was not sincere to his family. He had literary leanings and socialist opinions. Both of her parents were English and her mother was singularly unsuited to being New Zealand doctor's wife. The marriage was unstable from the start. Husband and wife took turns to disappear and Fay and her elder sister Jane spent much of their childhood, being shuttled between parents, in hostels and boarding houses. The marriage of their parents was stormy. Eventually they divorced when Fay was five years old. Fay grew up, loving her father but was unable to trust him.

**Her father died of a stroke in 1947, as she was starting her university studies.** She could not mourn him properly because of his being dishonest to her mother. Fay lived with her mother, sister and grandmother until she started her college and as a result grew up believing „The world was peopled by females.“

When Fay was 14 years old, her mother returned to England with her two daughters and mother; on the first ship after the war. Post-war Britain was bleak and very unlike the fantasy of home. Money was desperately short. They moved from one cheap flat to another while her gallant mother tried to make a living by writing fictions. Certainly life for her and her family was never to be settled and easy but luckily they were an adaptable and unconventional lot. Somehow they managed to meet both ends. Her mother also found way to university of St. Andrews in Scotland, where Fay took admission and studied Economics and Psychology. Her actual christened name was „Franklin Birkinshaw“. Her mother gave her this name, because she worked out by numerology that the name „came out the same“ as William Shakespeare. This name contributed to her being accepted at St. Andrews and permitted to study Economics. The school assumed that she was a male student applicant. Thus she got degree in Economics and Psychology.

During the fifties, at St. Andrews, she discovered sex in a big way and acquired reputation for it. Her elder sister Jane married an artist and got pregnant, so Fay promptly got pregnant too but without the convenience of a husband. Her mother was upset at this matter. Fay gave birth to a boy and named him Nicolas. Her son's father, Colyn Davies could only offer her life as a gas fitter's wife at Luton. It did not appeal her and since she could not earn enough money to support her son, on her own, she accepted a proposal of marriage from a respectable looking Head Master from Acton, West London in 1957. The months that followed alarmed her so much that her memoir's narration switches from the first to the third person. „Mrs. Bateman was disgusted,“ she writes. Mr. Bateman was bully. Therefore she took her son and ran away. Her two years as Mrs. Bateman sound quite extra ordinary because when first Mrs. Bateman explained the reason of this marriage on the part of her ex husband. She told Fay the secret that her ex-husband always puts married with son when applying for Headmaster's posts, so he needed to be able to produce a wife and a son at all times. It was true.

When Fay left him, he immediately acquired another mother with son.

**Fay Weldon's another novel; The Shrapnel Academy** was first published in Great Britain by Hodder and Stoughton in 1986. Its first American Edition appeared in 1987 by Viking. This novel is about the illustrious Shrapnel Academy, housed in one of England's grand manors and dedicated to the memory of Henry Shrapnel, genius in inventor of the cannonball. On a weekend, the members and the officials of this institution were to attend a military lecture at this Academy. General Leo Makeshift has the charge of delivering the annual Wellington lecture at this occasion. He arrives well dressed along with her mistress Bella, who looks considerably younger than him. Medusa is the correspondent from Woman's Times. She is also invited to present her report but she is delayed to reach there as the gas ran out on her motorbike, on the way. Any way, it seemed a mistake, to allow a feminist reporter on the scene.

On the greeting committee are Joan Lump the institute's dictatorial Director, her lithesome secretary Muffin and Acorn, the butler, a stunningly, handsome South African, whose army of Third World Servants, is primed to rebel against the ruling class. Meanwhile fate provides a heavy snowstorm, which makes escape impossible for the gathering. Lust, jealousy, bigotry and greed provide the other essential ingredients for all, during the Wellington weekend. As a chronicler, Fay Weldon has never been more brilliant or more ruthless, about the folly of human relations than in this novel. Its devastating update of the English country house novel, as savagely funny as it is topical.

**Fay Weldon's next novel The Rules of Life** was first published in U.S.A. by Hamper & Row in 1987. Its first British Edition was launched in 1987, with illustrations by Amanda Faulkner Hutchinson. The main character and the heroine of this novel is Gabriella Sumpter. She was gracious of form and nimble of mind but now she is dead. Yet, from beyond the grave, her voice returns to recall the details of, what she herself calls "The course of totally selfish and most agreeable life." <sup>13</sup> She tells of her long time lover, Timothy Tovey and battles with Janice, his wife. She also tells about Walter James, who burned down his house in a fit of jealousy. Through this talk of loves

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Lost and cast away, Gabriella tells us the rule of life, she had picked up on the way, by her personal experience. She declares, "People love, where it is in their interest to love."<sup>14</sup> She also says, "Monogamy, amongst the interesting and living people is rare."<sup>15</sup> She also comments, "When discovered in fault, they never apologies, rather they always justify."<sup>16</sup> Such ethics are typical of a heroine gifted with a robust, anarchic energy, an erotic nature and a fierce sense of humour. She is a very marvellous creation, very much in the tradition of Fay Weldon's unquenchable heroines.

**Fay Weldon's next novel The Hearts and Lives of Men** was first published in Great Britain by Heinemann in 1987. Its first American edition took place in 1988 by Viking. In this novel witty, mischievous and supremely artful Fay Weldon announces, on the first page of this novel that she has written a love story and has given it a happy ending. She wrote, "Love at first sight - that old thing. Helen and Clifford looked at one another ----- something quivered in the air between them and for good or bad, Nell began."<sup>17</sup> Thus, The Hearts and Lives of Men is a love story, though, with all the obstacles, both devilish and divine - a tale of innocence corrupted and selfishness reformed.

**The Heart of the Country** is about the unsentimental and unprofitable education of the heroine of the novel, Natalie Harris. She is without husband and without home, thrown on the mercy of bank managers and welfare officers. She depends for enlightenment upon one of her friends Sonia, who had suffered a lot, being abandoned before. Sonia tries to comfort her but she is helpless to do anything solid. In the face of Natalie's own nature and the procession of men, only too ready to take advantage of her appealing vulnerability, Sonia is unable to help her.

Thus in this novel, a cunning satirist, Fay Weldon tickles the myth of the suburban countryside, as place where serenity reigns and the neighbours are kind hearted. She reveals that if the heart of a country is in upheaval, chaos can be exhilarating. As the novelist exposes the foibles of the human spirit, she

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Manages to celebrate its wonderful elasticity. Involuntary though it may be, Natalie Harris's education is not all to her disadvantage.

Fay Weldon's another famous novel The Leader of the Band was first published in Great Britain by Hodder and Stoughton in 1988. Its first American edition was launched in 1989 by Viking. In this novel, Fay Weldon creates an audaciously selfish heroine, the star lady, Sandra, whose unfettered whims lead to a raucous reshuffling of the cards of human morals. She was supposed to be the discoverer of the Planet Athena. By profession she was a television astronomer. She was the wife of a humourless barrister, whom she did not like. Therefore leaving, him, she ran off with the leader of the band named Jack. He has an utterly charming personality but he is a wicked and irreverent person. He is the sax player, so provocative that Sandra falls in love with him and decides to give up everything to follow Jack and his caravan of motley musicians to France – deserting husband, job responsibility and all those fans of her late night astronomy show. Thus the heroine of the novel is depicted unabashedly devoted to her own desires.

The Leader of the Band is both a picaresque adventures an acerbic meditation on marital relations; the appeal of love or the appeal of money; the nature of adolescence in a teenager or a forty year old and the quest for the fulfilment. Every subject is twisted in delightful ways by Fay Weldon's exuberant wit and wisdom and for a while, at least - the message is; you can have it all, if you are not shy about stealing some of it and if you are willing to make a few sacrifices along the way. Thus this novel is full of many good lessons for life, based on experiences.

Fay Weldon's another most famous novel The Cloning of Joanna May was first published in Great Britain by Collins in 1989. Its first American edition was launched by Viking in 1990. In this novel, the novelist has created a Shakespearean tale of confused identities, an enthralling novel, about male control and female power. It is also about a generation of women; for whom almost anything is possible.

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