

Does Glass Ceiling Still Exist? Women as Subalterns in Fay Weldon's *Big Women*

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Abstract: With the advent of modern era, a new spirit of individualism was encouraged among both men and women. But, unfortunately men and women did not have equal access to this new culture and civilization. A woman's place is primarily in the family and the reality of her life is work, most of it unpaid and, what is worse, unacknowledged and unappreciated. Fay Weldon (born 22 September 1931) is an English author, essayist and playwright, whose work has been associated with feminism. In her fiction, Weldon typically portrays modern women who find themselves trapped in repressive situations caused by the patriarchal structure of British society. Fay Weldon's main themes are oppression, exploitation and revenge: in other words, power in its diverse forms. Weldon's novels explore a wide range of themes and issues about men and women relationships and the role of power struggle in their lives. "A Woman Needs a Man like a Fish needs a Bicycle"- the famous feminist slogan sets the sarcastic tone of the novel. Weldon projects the picture of a truly patriarchal society which grants men all the power and authority. The paper attempts to examine the subtle ways women are exploited and the nuances of their struggle to assert their identities.

Keywords: gender, conventional, patriarchal, feminist, oppression, exploitation

We know what we are, but know not what we may be, or what we might have been. The dogmatism of science expresses the status quo as the ineluctable result of law: women must learn how to question the most basic assumptions about feminine normality in order to reopen the possibilities for development which have been successively locked off by conditioning. [Pg 16-17] *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer

With the advent of modern era, a new spirit of individualism was encouraged among both men and women. But, unfortunately men and women did not have equal access to this new culture and civilization. The conventional people reacted against women's presence in public offices and as a result, many talented women lost their jobs and they were forced to withdraw into their homes. The public space became progressively more male preserve, and the domestic space was seen as the suitable place for women. In society, there was discrimination against women mainly because of gender. Women endured endless hardships, grief and pain. On every front, women were troubled, exhausted and lonely. Gradually women became conscious of their rights and started participating in various political movements for suffrage that demanded the right to vote for women. Then emerged a new type of woman: a person with will, strength of personality, firm determination and the

power to think and reason. The reality of women's lives is work, most of it unpaid and, what is worse, unacknowledged and unappreciated. In *History of Woman Suffrage*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage remark:

Woman has been the great unpaid laborer of the world, and although within the last two decades a vast number of new employments have been opened to her, statistics prove that in the great majority of these, she is not paid according to the value of the work done, but according to sex. (29)

Boys and girls are brought up to believe that the main responsibility of women is to manage the entire household and bringing up children. This is reflected in the *sexual division of labour* in most families: women do all work inside the home such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and dishes, looking after children, etc., and men do all the work outside the home. Germaine Greer remarks in *The Female Eunuch*:

While little boys are learning about groups and organizations, as well as the nature of the world outside their homes, little girls are at home, keeping quiet, playing with dolls and dreaming, or helping Mother. (87)

The same ideology finds expression in Fay Weldon's *Big Women*:

Myth had it that men were hopeless at domestic tasks. The logic was thereby sustained that men should do what they were good at – creating art, mending the car, contending with the outside world, bringing new ideas into the home, disciplining the children, earning, and so forth – and that women should do what they were good at – cooking, washing, having children, nurturing, soothing, consoling, and being flattered by male sexual attention, and so on. (36-37)

It is not that men cannot do housework; they simply think that it is just for women to attend to such things. Women's role in public life, especially politics, is minimal in most societies. Earlier, only men were allowed to participate in public affairs. Gradually the gender issue was raised in politics. Women in different parts of the world united and fought for equal rights. These movements demanded enhancing the political and legal status of women and improving their educational and vocational opportunities. Though women achieved equivalence in the politics, this does not mean the overall equality. The participation of women in public life is still very low. There are very few women in political bodies. Women still lag much behind as the society is still a male dominated, *patriarchal* society. Women face disadvantages and suffer discrimination in various ways. No wonder the proportion of women among the highly paid and respected jobs is still very small. The Equal Wages Act provides that equal wages should be paid for equal work. But, the fact is that women are paid less than men, even when both do exactly the same work. The problem is actually not with the women, but with the identity of women. A woman's identity is never separate, but it is the extension of a male's identity. This is what encourages people to have a male child, not female. In several parts of the world, people prefer to have male child and abort the girl child before she is born. The birth of a male child is celebrated and that of female is regretted. *The Teardrop Story Woman* by Catherine Lim, a

famous Singaporean author, gives fascinating insights in to this culture practised in most parts of the world. She opines that it is a curse to be born female. The central character in this novel is Mei Kwei. When she is born, her father, Ah Oon Koh declares that he does not want to bring her up. She is detested by her father and ignored by her mother. The following extract explains how miserable a daughter's lot is!

The midwife threw the newly cut cord, glistening, wet, twisted, into the chamberpot on the floor ; that of the son had been preserved in lucky red paper, tied with lucky red string. (5)

Even the treatment given to a girl is very much different from how a boy is treated in the family and Mei Kwei was not an exception. While she starved, his brother grew fat. She was given thin rice gruel, made from broken grains; while he enjoyed good porridge made from whole grains. All this is well known. Yet issues related to women's well being are not given adequate attention. One way to solve this problem is to make it legally compulsory to have a fair proportion of women in the elected bodies. Generally speaking, the aspect of a woman's role and status in society is associated with the *feminist movement* which began in the nineteenth century and re-emerged as a powerful social and political force in many countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There are many British feminist authors who deal with women's position in the society, like Margaret Drabble, Fay Weldon etc. Fay Weldon (born 22 September 1931) is an English author, essayist and playwright, whose work has been associated with feminism. In her fiction, Weldon typically portrays modern women who find themselves trapped in repressive situations caused by the patriarchal structure of British society. In 1967, she published her first novel, *The Fat Woman's Joke*. For the next 30 years, she enjoyed a very successful career, publishing over twenty novels, collections of short stories, newspaper and magazine articles etc. Fay Weldon's main themes are oppression, exploitation and revenge: in other words, power in its various forms. Weldon's novels explore a wide range of themes and issues about men and women relationships and the role of power structures in their lives. Fay Weldon has written many novels, most of which focus on different roles of women in society. Most of her works tend to have a married or unmarried mother at their centre. She picks up some of the issues associated with the women's movement such as friendship and rivalry between women, motherhood, women in homes and workplace, the repressive nature of heterosexual relationships, patriarchal principles and attitudes towards women etc. *Big Women* by Weldon is the story of Layla, Stephanie, Alice, Nancy, and company- a small vibrant group of feral livers, free thinkers, crazy for life, sex and experience, who were on their way to turn the world upside down. In the beginning of the novel, we find Stephanie pasting up posters on the dark green wall of a Victorian urinal. The year is 1971. The posters declare over and over, "A Woman Needs a Man like a Fish needs a Bicycle" (5). This famous feminist slogan makes no sense to many people who just stare and pass by. In the following extract, Weldon projects the picture of a truly patriarchal society which grants men all the power and authority.

Everyone needs men. Masculinity is all. Armies need men, and

government and business and technology and high finance. And teaching and medicine and adventuring and fashion . And all the serious arts. Offices, except for the typing pool, which is female, need men. It's homes which need women, except for the lawn which is male. Women are for sex, motherhood and domesticity. Men are for status and action. Outside the home is high status, inside the home is low status. (5-6)

To celebrate the birth of 'Medusa' , they dance naked around the living room in Stephanie' house. But, the interesting fact is that the women who come together at the start of the novel to establish the publishing house display no interest in one another. These women fight each other all the time - sometimes over authority, sometimes over ideology, and sometimes over one another's husbands. Their opinions differ but they work as a group. Layla is independent and strong. Alice is practical and intellectual. She sounds like a real feminist when she states, “ If man is born in chains...how much truer is it that every woman not financially independent finds herself chained to an individual man, husband or father, needing his goodwill for her very survival and that of her children” (24). Stephanie is the wife of Hamish. They are not happy with each other. Hamish sounds like a true patriarch when he says, “ Women earning more than men upsets the natural order of things” (14). She finds it hard to cope up with Hamish who is having an affair with Daffy, who is single. Finally, Stephanie leaves her home and Hamish, leaving the children, Ronald and Rafe in his care, custody and control. Later , we find Stephanie's both male children using filthy language for their own mother . One day, while coming back home from the shop with Daffy, Hamish's mistress, they see their mother and comment, “It's the witch...the nasty old witch...isn't she ugly” (91). This clearly indicates that socialisation of a male child grants him the right to insult a female; be it his sister, wife, mother or any other female. History reveals that women in the past had been very creative and highly intellectual human beings, but their talents and contributions were never recognized. In *Big Women* , when Layla makes the comment, “ Men have art, women have babies” (33), Alice remarks, “ Of course great female artists exist, but they are hidden from history. They have always existed. Patriarchy denies them” (34). Virginia Woolf also makes a similar remark in *A Room of One's Own* :

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction, in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of husband. (44-45)

This speaks volumes of the pathetic condition of women. It is observed that warmth and camaraderie in marriage are more important for women because they want to articulate their feelings and solve personal problems while men are silent, reserved, distant and unfriendly. The situation often results in domestic violence in the family. Women are very

often insulted and beaten in their own homes by their husbands and the home becomes a very unsafe place for them. Women are treated as sex objects and their prime concern is to please men. The following reference from *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft defines the role expected from a woman: She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused. (35) Feminist literary criticism is essentially associated with the political movements for equality of the sexes and to end the discrimination against women. In the early twentieth century. Olive Schreiner, Virginia Woolf and later Simone de Beauvoir have written on the gender questions and challenged the patriarchal ideology. In fact, women's position is not natural but the result of their ruthless social and political oppression. One of the characters, Layla comments aptly in *Big Women*, "Men have made us meek little creatures: it's to their advantage. But we weren't born like that. (17). This is what Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, rather becomes, woman" (293). It's culture and conditioning which makes boys behave like boys, and girls like girls. The values associated with a woman are- weakness, feeble-mindedness, tolerance, faith etc. and the traits associated with a man are – violence, aggression, hostility, revenge, infidelity etc. This is what needs to be changed, if we have to make this planet a better place to live. Germaine Greer's remark in *The Female Eunuch* is indicative of a new beginning:

The world will not change overnight, and liberation will not happen unless individual women agree to be outcasts, eccentrics, perverts, and whatever the powers-that-be choose to call them. There have been women in the past far more daring than we would need to be now, who ventured all and gained a little, but survived after all. (367)

We cannot rely on the existing ideologies which are the product of male's whims and fancies. We must understand that feminism is not against males, but it is an effort to eradicate what is socially undesirable and intolerable. This is a fight not to benefit women and disregard men, but this is for the humane treatment for both the sexes and maintain their dignity in the society.

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