

The Vampire: Re-contextualizing Feminine Evil in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*

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Abstract: The paper focuses on gender war against accepted social and literary hierarchy. Weldon's protagonist Ruth is invested with untold powers of evil that liberates her to exercise choice even in matters of desire and sexuality. She refuses to fall into the collective identity of wife, mother or daughter, rejecting the either/ or criteria for feminine identity. Her resolute psychological/physical remaking of her nature questions the accepted and internalized cultural representation of women. Her apocalyptic rebirth challenges the very notions of 'good' and 'evil'. In spite of her evil Ruth equates herself to Christ in her endeavor to liberate women. Weldon subverts traditional myth of evil to give it a more positive coloring.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Good, Evil, Culture, Representation, Female Villain.

Fay Weldon a pioneer in feminist polemics, having appropriated the myth of the vampire in her text, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* has challenged notions of gender and gender roles, in terms of the dichotomy of 'good' and 'evil'. As a radical feminist Weldon sought to break away from the Victorian concept of Angel in the house, which even the women's movements at one stage endorsed as true female nature. Some feminist writers tended to view morality in terms of gender, so as to define women as essentially good while men as naturally bad. This limited the choices of women characters in Literature and made them uninteresting to the extent that even if they were bad occasionally, (characters like Tess or Hester Prynne) they did 'bad' things only for some 'good' reason. Thus, in order to rescue women characters from being condemned eternally to 'virtue' and to break the monopoly of bad behavior enjoyed by men, Weldon takes up the responsibility of creating immortal female villain that literature has so far never witnessed. Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* as the title indicates has incorporated elements of the vampire myth, the extreme form of evil, into the nature and exploits of Ruth Patchett, the female villain transforming her into the ultimate femme fatale. While Fay Weldon draws her character from the ancient Hebrew mythology of the She – monster Lilith, she has in the process heightened the color of evil by recreating her protagonist as vampiristic and monstrous which gives her untold power, at the same time investing the creator of Ruth with limitless possibilities of carving a niche for female villainy in Literature.

Ruth the protagonist in *The Life and Loves of a She – Devil*, can be considered as a manifestation of the 'traditional trickster' character that instantly gives her the power of shape shifting (Aguilar 151). Ruth had been married to Bobbo for twelve years now with a son and a daughter. Weldon describes their marriage in the novel as 'accidentally espoused' (LLSD 935), since Bobbo, the materialistic and money minded man who kept "working out in his head a monetary scale" even for lovemaking settled for Ruth the ugly duckling as his wife. Their life at Eden Garden which for sometime was like 'Eden' the green, prosperous and beautiful place turns sour when Bobbo habituated to putting a 'fiscal value' to things fell in love with the beautiful but more importantly the rich Mary Fisher (a romance novelist). Ruth compares herself to Mary Fisher in such a manner:

I am six feet two inches tall, which is fine for a man but not for a woman. I am as dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and have one of those jutting jaws that tall, dark women often have, and eyes sunk rather back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy and the muscles in my leg are well developed. My arms, I swear, are too short for my body. My nature and my looks do not agree. I was unlucky, you might think, in the great lottery that is woman's life. (5)

Ruth's story comes to us through her own narration in the first person. Having left home in her teens, due to the invasion of her space by her step-father and his 'model' train and in turn, her mother running away with her lover, Ruth came to live in the hostel run by nuns. Ruth started working for Bobbo's father and impressed Brenda much that she was invited to live with them which ended in her marriage to Bobbo. When Bobbo's affair with Mary Fisher upsets her apparently happy home, Ruth sets out to realize her potential as a 'She-Devil' for that's what Bobbo calls her when she messes up the dinner party, "In fact I don't think you are woman at all. I think that what you are is a she-devil!" (47). This new denomination provokes the ever so enduring wife Ruth who is forced to reconsider her self in a new role. She realizes that it is wonderful and exhilarating for "If you are she-devil, the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, and no dreary striving to be good. There is only in the end, what you want. And I can take what I want, I am a she-devil!" (48). For twelve years Ruth had tried her best to live up to the expectations of a good wife, good mother fulfilling her 'womanly' duties. Ironically this role only earns her the title 'She-Devil'; she was 'good' so far, but when the occasion presents itself she does not hesitate to become 'bad' for the sheer sake of it. She decides to revenge Bobbo and desires for power and money. Frost suggests in his book that according to the Rabbinical doctrine "the she-monster Lilith was conceived out of Adam's voluptuous imaginings" (Frost 6). In a sense Ruth the She-Devil is the making of Bobbo, "I, the She-Devil, the creation of my husband" (LLSD 53), the selfish, insensitive husband who forsakes his wife and children for money and pleasure. Little does he know that in the future he has to bear the brunt of his provocation. Ruth does not waste time in realizing her revenge, she changes her nature

when she is dumped for being 'plain' and 'virtuous' (53). At first she has to tear out the good in her as "it takes a little time to become wholly she-devil" (56). Ruth recreates herself as the demoniac she-devil without undergoing any kind of physical or corporeal death, through in attitude, nature, behavior and through deliberate slicing of the body, (in a sense an unnatural death of the original self) into a smaller dimension as that of Mary Fisher, she can be said to reach the 'undead' stage. The change is achieved in the first place through her self-knowledge at the moment when Bobbo abandons her, as when she says,

In the end I sucked energy out of the earth. I went into the garden and turned the soil with the fork, and power moved into my toes and up my stubborn calves and rested in my she-devil loins: an urge and an irritation. It said there must now be an end to waiting: the time for action has come. (56)

Ruth with hairs sprouting from moles under her chin understands that in a man's world even whores had to be beautiful, whereas she being the epitome of ugliness does not fit into the myth of 'woman' as prescribed by patriarchy. She dreams of herself as a fairy-tale damsel, though ugly, but who would be rescued by a knight in armor by looking at the beauty of her soul and make her his queen rather than by looking at her physical beauty (63). She therefore decides to change herself rather than try and change the world. During the course of revenge, her demoniac enterprises begin with the burning down of her house at Eden Grove, a symbolic burning, or destroying of her past life, that was almost paradisiacal. Although she is hot thrown out by Bobbo who represents Adam/God, Ruth walks out of her own will. She dumps the children with Mary Fisher and Bobbo. Brian J. Frost traces the existence of one of the earliest forms of female vampires in Hebrew mythology that of the succubi and the incubi (male counterparts). These vampires i.e., the succubi (Lilith, the succubus) and the incubi were originally said to be a band of fallen angels (Frost 6). While the ancient Semitic folklore mentions Lilith as the female demon that lives in desolate places and medieval Jewish folklore describes Lilith as the first wife of Adam before the creation of Eve, Ruth deliberately having caused fire is covered with smoke all over with only her eyes glittering, appears like a she-devil incarnate. Garcia, Mary Fisher's servant feels that even ferocious Dobermans whined and fell silent at her looks. He thought that her reddish glitter and the smell of smoke on her reminded him of hell-fire. Ruth alludes to the Bible by equating herself to Lucifer in her struggle for revenge. She tells Geoffrey that "she was taking up arms against God himself. Lucifer had tried and failed, but he was male. She thought she might do better, being female" (*LLSD* 94). Ruth transforms herself many times, first as a nursing home attendant where she takes care of Mary Fisher's mother and instigating her to live with her daughter. She then changes her identity to Vesta Rose a prison attendance. From Rest wood she moves on to Lucas Hill Hospital taking care of the criminally insane. She then becomes Polly Patch, live-in household help and part-time masochist, and later as Molly Wishant the priest's housekeeper. "A shape-shifter, Ruth ascribes her new power to that of transforming into a

“she-devil”” (Aguiar 105). And as Ruth says “she-devils are beyond nature: they create themselves out of nothing” (*LLSD* 153). She gets Bobbo incarcerated for embezzling of funds which she herself had stolen from his account. Ruth is referred to as Frankenstein by Lady Bishop while the judge's children take pleasure in peering into her huge mouth only to believe that there are demons and dragons living down there. Weldon describes with irony that “they drew pictures of demons and dragons and Polly pinned them to the walls” (169). To the judge, Polly Patch's words sounded like an Oracle:

He thought on reflection that it was the oracle of Hades, not Olympus; of hell, not heaven... she claimed, as the Devil would, that the senses and the soul were one; that gratifying one was gratifying the other. (178-179)

Judge Bishop admired her eloquence on the concept of pain and pleasure. She clearly spreads her influence upon him when he too begins to feel as if he belongs to Hades and not to Olympus, that his function as a judge was to punish not to reform or forgive (181). When Polly Patch leaves his service after she manages to obtain a severe sentence for Bobbo, the judge muses that perhaps Polly Patch was sent by Hell to guide him in this trial and that “Sometimes Hell... is kinder than Heaven” (183), for he had begun to doubt the essential goodness of God. By casting off the chains that bind her—that of family/habits/customs, Ruth is able to change the course of her life, to get what she wants. Once she has become the she-devil, she's immunized against the pain of Love while only hate rules her: “At the moment of her transfiguration, from woman to non-woman, she performs the act herself. She thrusts the long, sharp needle of recollection through the living flesh into the heart burning it out” (187). Ruth as a she-devil is born every morning into a new creature and does not hesitate in the course of her revenge to swindle money, to seduce men including a priest and a judge and also another woman. She delights in her new found power to cause pain to Bobbo and Mary Fisher as much as they had caused her. For this purpose she starts with the reduction of her jaws to a smaller size. She works for Father Ferguson as Molly Wishant in order to reduce considerable weight and become thin. She also changes the priest from 'ascetic to hedonist' (232), using him as a tool to punish Mary Fisher. Once she had drained all money and vitality from both Bobbo and Mary Fisher, her final triumph lies in the cosmetic surgery she undergoes to look exactly like Mary Fisher. Apart from the money involved, she is prepared to suffer immense physical pain in the reduction process, only to get what she wants. Ruth now posing as Marlene Hunter convinces the cosmetic surgeon when she says,

I have exceptionally adaptable personality I have tried many ways of fitting myself to my original body; and the world into which I was born and have failed. I am no revolutionary. Since I cannot change the world I will change myself. I am quite sure I will settle happily enough into my new body. (*LLSD* 236-237)

The cosmetic surgeon also opines that the body once changed, reshapes itself to fit the personality; “there is no such thing as the essential self...it's all inessential, and all liable to change and flux, and usually the better for

it" (*LLSD* 254). With sheer willpower and determination, Ruth becomes Mary Fisher against the surgeon's wishes (against God's), the transformation is a means of survival, a question of power as Aguiar points out, "Ruth's rebellion takes the form of refashioning her self from socially restrained wife into omnipotent bitch" (Aguiar 104). In the end she has all and Bobbo has none as she says "...somehow it is not a matter of male or female power, after all; it never was: merely of power. I have all, and he has none .As I was, so he is now" (*LLSD* 277). In the remaking of herself, Ruth observes that it was God who "had the devil to contend with" (*LLSD* 269). Ruth, the eponymous protagonist is symbolic of 'every woman' and through her Weldon criticizes those women who have internalized the myth of woman by reading romance fiction at the same time that limits gender roles which the romance fiction supports. As a she-devil, Ruth is empowered to overcome those very limits, "I will be what I want, not what He ordained. I will mold a new image for myself out of the earth of my creation. I will defy my Maker, and remake myself" (*LLSD* 186). Women have always been taught to reject their 'shadow' or negative/darker sides. 'Shadow' being defined by Jung as the conscious projection "that is personal, same-sexed negative side of the personality". (Aguiar 15), as against the anima or animus, feminists disagree with a fixed identity of an archetype (for e.g. .angel/whore division of female character), which denies it subjectivity and growth. In order to recreate women protagonists with attributes of subjective complexity including aggressiveness and sexual instincts, the main purpose of feminist authors like Fay Weldon is to "reformulate the key concepts of Jung so as to reflect women's experiences more accurately" (Aguiar 3). To avoid the general trend of a collective identity as merely wives or angels or bitches, they reject the 'either/'or' criteria for feminine identity, and aim at the integration of the anima/animus, shadow/self, male/female, positive/negative, good/evil etc. Weldon in an interview to 'The Observer' points out that self realization must be the primary goal of a woman, "I think a liberated woman is a woman who has freedom of choice". (Haffenden 306) Ruth Patchett, like Zenia is a liberated woman who exercises freedom of choice to realize the repressed 'shadow' in her self by bringing it from the unconscious to the conscious level. Her sense of insecurity pushes her towards self defense, a means of survival in an otherwise domineering world. Her "six feet, two inches, dark hair, hooked nose and jutting jaw would be acceptable in a man, but as a woman they deny her the only power she can hope to wield in the planned suburban paradise of the ironically named Eden Grove"(Sellers, *Myth* 39). Desiring power and vengeance Ruth's decision "to remodel herself derives from her internalizing the scripts that venerate a certain type of female beauty" (41). She undergoes 'monstrous moldings' through cosmetic surgery in order to fit into prescribed Beauty myth. Patriarchy perpetuates the 'image' of woman through myth and the Beauty myth is a case in point where women are pressurized to conform to impossible aesthetic ideals in their quest for social and political advancement. And the method of attaining this 'beauty' is cosmetic surgery while the myth also aims at creating a divide

between women. Although Ruth experiences a painful transformation from monster to beauty, she ultimately has her revenge against Bobbo and Mary Fisher. While Mary Fisher is dead, Bobbo symbolizing the phallic power is reduced to the position of a confused servant. In her apocalyptic transformation into a she devil, Ruth equates herself to Christ,

I wouldn't be surprised if I wasn't the second coming, this time in female form; what the world has been waiting for. Perhaps as Jesus did in his day for men, so I do now, for women. He offered the stony path to heaven: I offer the motorway to hell, I bring suffering and self-knowledge . . . for others and salvation for myself. Each woman for herself . . . If I am nailed to the cross of my own convenience I'll put up with it. I just want my own way, and by Satan I'll have it. (LLSD192)

Weldon's larger than life portrayal of Ruth shows her as a "daring writer, willing to put into words things which are often uncomfortable and sometimes shocking . . ." (Alexander 59). Ruth is not only made to bend nature to her convenience, but like Zenia has acquired sexual expertise and an appetite for sexual pleasure that she can pick up and drop men in a very contemptuous and casual manner. Beneath her lovely flesh she does nurture a 'sadistic' and 'ferocious' nature. She establishes the power of her sexuality when she lets Bobbo suffer continuously by taking in Garcia, the servant with Bobbo's knowledge. But to her "to join with him (Garcia) is a political, not a sexual act, for me if not for him. How emotional men are!" (LLSD 276). Both Ruth and Zenia learn to treat their men with contempt, thereby ridiculing and reducing patriarchy to the position of the 'other' while they appropriate the male sphere gaining subjectivity and power to defy male domination. The purpose of Weldon therefore, in recasting the myth is to render women play complex roles, and not to just represent them as merely existing. The author seems to express the view that the bad female character is but the 'shadow' of everywoman, that if she loses her 'shadow', she tends to lose her 'soul' as well. In other words, Weldon has tried to rewrite the prevalent literary tradition that speaks about mute/inactive/virtuous women, by a re-contextualization of the feminine evil that demythologizes the status of women as soulless shadow.

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