POSTMODERN FEMINIST ICONS: FAY WELDON AND ANGELA CARTER

Edith-Hilde KAITER*

***Abstract**: Fay Weldon is a prolific author, having written more than thirty-five novels, most of which deal with subjects related to feminine identity. She was also considered an advocate for the women's liberation movement. Weldon's characters not only tell stories, they are totally involved in them. Myths, including fairy-tales allow Weldon's women to dream even those dreams seem to be false.*

On the other side, Angela Carter, a 20th century English fiction writer, is considered an original, radical and stylish writer, delighting readers with her fierce and witty tales, short stories, novels and essays, her work being mostly based on the classic European fairy tales.

The purpose of the hereby article is to bring forward the writing style of both feminist writers and their contribution to feminist literature, by presenting some of their most well-known novels, which deal, more or less, with the condition of women during the postmodern era.

***Keywords:** feminism, identity, fiction, fairy-tale, stereotypes*

During the late 1960s, at the time when feminism started to get a shape in the postwar years, Fay Weldon remarked herself as a writer who sustained feminism. As Fay Weldon, who was inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (1949) – considered a reference text in the critique of the roles forced on women by society and on the cultural constructions of identity –, other female writers started to get courage and express themselves in this way.

Western cultures, although more democratic, have been considered patriarchal, promoting the image of a nurturing, modest, unassuming woman, who defines herself through her husband. The term "patriarchy", referred to as "patriarchal society" by Virginia Woolf in her essays, became one of the fundamental concepts of feminism, considered even one of the targets of feminist critiques. What the term "patriarchal" deals with is enforcing traditional gender roles that picture men as rational, determined, strong, born to dominate, but also to protect women.

Weldon has raised many concerns in her novels, becoming a feminist in the true sense of the word by attempting to deconstruct gender stereotypes in some unusual ways. However, Fay Weldon does not write simply to promote feminism, she does not make her female protagonists become moral compasses for her readers. On the contrary, Weldon acknowledges the feminist movement, but is reluctant to receive a label and she sees herself as having influenced the feminist movement in the same way in which the feminist movement has influenced her views and writings, the latter becoming compatible with the notorious philosophy.

It is believed that Fay Weldon has reshaped the way in which women were regarded in society. In the England of the 1960s and 1970s, Weldon finds herself a woman among many who choose to take advantage of the new world order and work opportunities, fighting the social oppression which tied them to the household and to the condition of stay-at-home moms. The writer thus recognizes the fact that the feminist

* "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy Constanța, green_flower19@yahoo.com

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movement sometimes works against some women, forcing all women to find jobs rather than be allowed to make their own choices and be in charge of their own destiny. This is one of the reasons why Weldon does not idolize her female protagonists, does not make them appear as female heroes, but as ordinary women who live ordinary lives, making it easier to empathize with their problems.

In her work, Weldon tried to bring together postmodern and feminist elements, though critics considered that her approach towards feminist discourses was somehow problematic: the presence of ambivalent attitudes and of anger which is directed both towards men and women.[1]

Fay wrote eighteen novels that she is best known for, her writing being also reviewed in American newspapers and periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, and *Village Voice*. In the mid-1960s she began writing television plays, which were produced by BBC and one of which, *The Fat Woman's Joke*, was published in the United States as the novel *And the Wife Ran Away*. So began her career as a prolific writer of dramas and novels. By 1990 Weldon had written more than 50 scripts for British television.[2]

Auto da Fay, her memoir published in 2002 presents a woman assuming a variety of roles. In this way we find out that Franklin Birkinshaw was born in 1933 and this was the name given to her by her mother, who thought to give her daughter a name which derived from the one of her husband, Frank. She was born in a family which had several professional writers: Fay's maternal grandfather wrote more than seventy novels, while her father was a doctor with literary inclinations and her mother, an aspiring writer. Unfortunately, her parents divorced in New Zealand when Fay was only six years old and Fay lived with her mother and sister, first at the antipodes and then, after eight years, they went back to England to live with her grandmother. Her life in London gave her the feeling that her world was composed of women only and it felt weird as the world outside seemed a patriarchal one.

Weldon entered St. Andrew's University in Scotland on scholarship at the age of sixteen. When she completed her master's degree in economics and psychology, Weldon was only 20 years old. Weldon was married only for six months in the early 1950s to a schoolmaster who was 25 years her senior. When her son Nicholas was born in 1955, Weldon found it difficult to be a single parent and support them both. She tried unsuccessfully to write novels and worked for 18 months at the Foreign Office writing Cold War propaganda. However, this experience is to be identified with the one of Scarlet, her first major character from her novel *Down Among the Women*.

In 1960 she married Ronald Weldon, an antiques dealer, and they had three sons. After thirty years of marriage, Ronald divorced Fay because he had met another woman, a psychoanalyst. But Ronald died of a heart attack before their divorce had been finalized and Fay considered herself a widow rather than a divorced woman.

All the moments she went through during her life had a great influence upon her fiction as well. Alan Wilde traces the development of her vision from her early novels denouncing male irresponsibility to an even gloomier perspective from which women have to fight more than men: "The earlier books […] are, by and large, feminist

[1] Eduard Vlad, *Authorship and Identity in Contemporary Fiction*, Ovidius University Press, Constanța, 2005, p. 88.

[2] http://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/historians-miscellaneous-biographies/fay-weldon

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in their orientation, their aim being to expose the inauthenticity and bad faith of her male and, not infrequently, of her female characters."[1]

Returning to *Down Among the Women*, published in 1971, one can say that it is a novel which sometimes presents things in a funny way, but times it is sad too. It is the story of three distinct generations of women in the two decades from 1950s to 1970s. The book's characters are Wanda, her daughter Scarlet and her female friends, and Byzantia, Scarlet's daughter and Wanda's granddaughter.

What is to be noticed in this novel is a combination of first person and third person narration and an alternating shift from the present to the past. The "I" narrator is Jocelyn, one of Scarlet's friends and it is she the one who starts narrating around the year 1970, going immediately back to a certain day in 1950. According to their destinies, Jocelyn sees women as not only as victims, but as friends and rivals. Audrey runs a women's magazine and she has an affair with a married man, thing that makes her extremely happy. Sylvia too ran with a married man only to be walked out on the moment his divorce came through; she is pregnant, she has no money and she is deaf because the man beat her. Later on, she finds out that her best friend Jocelyn has an affair with her boyfriend. Helen, another friend of Scarlet's is dead in 1970, having decided that anything was better than staying "down among women."[2]

The action goes back in 1950 when the twenty-year-old Scarlet is pregnant and unmarried. She feels inferior, she has no money or job and she decides to ask Kim, her father, for help. But her father has a new wife, Susan, actually her stepmother, who is younger than her and pregnant too. It happens that Scarlet gives birth to a baby girl, Byzantia, in her father's house, while minutes later Susan is taken to hospital to have her baby. As time passes by, both Scarlet and her stepmother realize that they live in an unfair world, a rather patriarchal one, full of suffering, discrimination and inequality, where one has to fight for everything. Scarlet first marries Edwin, an elderly man but the relationship doesn't last because she meets Alec, a man who is her age and she will progress. However, it is Byzantia, Scarlet's daughter, who seems to be the strongest of all. She is more like her grandmother Wanda, but even more ambitious, trying to define herself in terms of her own worth, as she states at the end of the novel.

Another Fay Weldon's early novels, *Female Friends* (1975), published at the peak of her feminist "phase", deconstructs female and feminine stereotypes in order to present the writer's own views on feminism. It speaks for a generation of women, who struggle to find their place in a male-dominated world, through three protagonists, who are neither happy, nor perfect. It is again about the war of the sexes, though the "enemy" is not very clearly defined. The novel is narrated by the character Chloe and it revolves around her and her friends, Grace and Marjorie, with an aim at depicting the falsehood and hypocrisy that surround female friendship.

Weldon's protagonists are very different types of women. Chloe, for example, is an indecisive woman, dreading her existence but not wanting to change. She feels

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[1] Alan Wilde. " 'Bold, but Not Too Bold': Fay Weldon and the Limits of Poststructuralist Criticism." Contemporary Literature, Vol. 29:3, 1988, p. 409 in Eduard Vlad, *Authorship and Identity in Contemporary Fiction*, Ovidius University Press, Constanța, 2005, p. 93-94.

[2] Eduard Vlad, *Authorship and Identity in Contemporary Fiction*, Ovidius University Press, Constanța, 2005, p. 95-96.

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empowered, having escaped her husband's sexual advances by pushing him into the arms of another woman. Chloe struggles to survive in a male-dominated world, where she is in touch with her nurturing, motherly side, and raising children. She feels oppressed by her husband, Oliver, but manages to have a strong voice, with the help of her friends. It seems that Chloe's inability to be happy by herself is not necessarily her own fault, but sooner the result of centuries of social oppression, which have taught women that men are responsible for making them happy, and that no woman can feel accomplished by herself.

Fay Weldon's focus is not only on the husband-wife relationship but also on the mother-daughter one. Marjorie's relationship with her mother is central to the narrative, and it explains Marjorie's reluctance to have children. Having been abandoned by her mother, Marjorie goes through an identity crisis which culminates with her guilt over her mother's health. Marjorie is an example of a woman trapped between two worlds; in a way, she is happy with the freedom feminism has brought her, but she still suffers from her mother's rejection. Marjorie's decision to get a hysterectomy may be regarded either as her surrender to the thought that she will never become a good mother, because of the example Helen has given her, or as an acceptance of the fact that she chose to give up on various feelings.

Grace, on the other hand, represents the type of woman who chooses to live her life, regardless of what others believe about her, and neglecting her child in the process. She does not want to feel responsible for a child's life and to be trapped in a marriage in which she is constantly persecuted.

Family and the mother-daughter relationship seem to be on the first place in Weldon's novel. Therefore, Grace finally goes for motherhood, as a sign that she has overcome her mother's death, while Grace's relationship with children in general is, again, an example of her feelings towards her own very unhappy childhood. It is to be noticed that even the friendship between the three female protagonists is portrayed in the shadow of motherhood.

While Fay Weldon is a realist writer, conscious of and concerned with revealing the gritty problems that exist "down among women", her work wonderfully combining elements such as outrageous humour, exaggeration and occasional forays into futuristic settings (as in *The Rules of Life*), Angela Carter is considered to be a fabulist. Her fiction, although it is at least as referential to literary tradition as in Weldon's, features transformation of time, gender and reality that recreate a different world. Carter is not fond of mythology and she considers myths as being negative. For her it is folklore which has the potential to have a single shape, whereas myths tend to have a shifting structure and they can be manipulated.

Angela Carter is seen as a very strong figure, a prominent female author in Britain, though she has never received the prestigious Booker Prize. Her writing style involves a multitude of meanings and the reader is challenged to get the right one. Her fiction has also been associated with magical realism, considered as the manifestation of postmodernist writing, idea developed in her third book, the novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967). Even from the title, the reader is challenged to differentiate between the female protagonist's idyllic childhood home in the countryside and the ominous Gothic house in London.

The author uses the fantastic in a wonderful way. Her fiction means fantasy combined with reality and the magic features of myth and fairy-tale gather under the term "carnivalesque." She uses this concept but she doesn't indulge it for too long, as

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reality challenges the reader after a carnival moment.[1] For example, *The Bloody Chamber* collection challenges the patriarchal ideologies of the traditional fairy-tales and explores the darkness and radiance of the human unconsciousness, making use of imagination and sexuality.

The story is narrated in retrospect by a heroine. At the time of the story she is a poor, seventeen-year-old Parisian pianist and her tale begins by describing the night she travelled alone to her new husband, the Marquis's palace. She is in her train compartment, excited about the fact that she leaves her childhood behind and prepares herself to discover womanhood. The heroine recalls the moment when her wedding dress arrives and her mother asking her whether she was sure she loved her husband-to-be. She replies that she is sure. Even though she seems unconvinced that her daughter is making the right choice, she keeps silent out of her wish for financial security. She herself married down in society, and when her husband died at war, she and the narrator were left penniless. However, her mother is seen as a very tough person, she fought pirates and she even shot a tiger.

Back in the train compartment, the heroine can hear the Marquis's heavy breathing and smell his scent. He is big and strong, but also gentle and romantic. He is much older than the heroine and it seems that his eyes miss the light. He reminds the narrator of a lily, because he is so quiet and emotionless that he seems to be wearing a mask all the time and even when he proposed to her, he did not show emotion. These characteristics make the heroine fear the Marquis, and she hopes that once they are at the castle, he will reveal his true self to her. One explanation for the Marquis's seriousness is that he is still in mourning for his last wife. She died three months into her marriage, supposedly in a boating accident, although her body was never recovered. The wife before that was the model for a famous painting. The Marquis's first wife was a renowned opera diva, whose performance enthralled the narrator as a child. The narrator is bemused that the Marquis would choose her to be his wife after having been with such lovely woman.

The heroine reaches the castle at dawn, situated by the seaside, on a cold November day. She is delighted with her bridal suite, located in a tower overlooking the ocean. The heroine is touched by the fact that the Marquis compares her to a saint. The bedroom is filled with lilies, which are reflected in twelve mirrors that surround the bed. The narrator, like the lilies, is reflected in the mirrors so that she becomes "a multitude of girls." But the Marquis abruptly says he must attend to business and leaves her. The heroine dresses and wanders into his library, where she finds a book with sexual and violent images. Just then, the Marquis enters and mocks her for finding the images.

In the morning the Marquis has to leave to New York for business and he will be away for over a month. He and the heroine enjoy their dinner before his departure. Then the Marquis hands her a ring of keys to every lock in the house, all of which she is free to open, explore, and enjoy the contents of but she is not allowed to enter a private chamber. But, searching for her husband's identity, the heroine goes fearlessly there. Her search takes her to a far, dark corner of the castle. When she enters the room, she sees instruments of torture and in the middle of the room she finds a bier with candles around it and lights them to the embalmed corpse of the Marquis's first wife, the opera singer. It is clear from the marks on her neck that she was strangled. Scared, she starts

[1] Ibidem, p. 120.

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to cry and the narrator decides to escape the Marquis, but as many things happen, she cannot. Fortunately, her mother saves her, shooting her husband as she killed the tiger.

Back to present, the narrator, Jean-Yves, the young and innocent piano-tuner and her mother have converted the castle into a school for the blind. They have given her fortune away to charity, disposed of the corpses of the Marquis's other wives and sealed the door to the "bloody chamber." They all live together on the outskirts of Paris where they run a music school and live modestly. As for how the narrator's mother who comes to rescue her – she intuited from her daughter's first phone call that things weren't right. However, one should take into consideration the fact that the heroine has no name. By doing this, Carter thinks that the story represents all women.

The remaining nine fairy-tales of the collection are grouped in threes: the first group focuses on felines (lion, tiger, cat), the next on magical creatures (female vampire, snow-child, erl-king) and the last on werewolves. The individual tales complete and complement each other, showing not only feminist responses to patriarchal stereotypes, but also explorations and externalizations of women's desires.[1]

Fairy tales have a unique place in the literary world. They are the subject of intense and extensive academic discourse at the same time as they are animated and commercialized for children by major production companies. The identity of the fairy tale as literature is hotly contested. Angela Carter's view on fairy tales was that they were on the same "cultural level" as classic works like *Paradise Lost*. In contrast to Carter's view, several authors do not consider fairy tales literature and puts them away from works by major fiction writers. Whatever their place in the canon, fairy tales originate from the oral tradition; they were passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth, both to entertain and to teach life lessons. And this is what Angela Carter tried to do by means of her feminist writing.

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[1] Ibidem, p. 130.

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