

Tribhuvan University

Performativity of Gender in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She- Devil*

A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts in English

By

Rita Rijal

Symbol no. 282052

T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-657-25-2008

Central Department of English

Kritipur, Kathmandu

January 2016

**Tribhuvan University**  
**Central Department of English**

**Letter of Recommendation**

Rita Rijal has completed her thesis entitled "Performativity of Gender in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She- Devil*" under my supervision. She carried out this research from July 2015 to January 2016. I hereby recommend this thesis be submitted for viva voce.

.....

Hem Lal Pandey

Supervisor

Date: .....

**Tribhuvan University**  
**Central Department of English**

**Letter of Approval**

The thesis entitled " Performativity of Gender in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She- Devil*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Rita Rijal has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Members of the Research Committee

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Internal Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

External Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Head

\_\_\_\_\_

Central Department of English

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgements**

I am very much indebted and grateful to my respected supervisor Mr. Hem Lal Pandey, Lecturer at the Central Department of English, for his guidance, inspiration and suggestion. Without his continuous supervision and intellectual guidance, this research work would never have come in this present form. In this regard, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to him.

I am very much grateful to Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, Head of the Central Department of English, for the approval of this research work. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to other respected teachers who inspired me to materialize my dream of Masters of Arts in English Literature.

Remarkable affection and inspiration of my mother, Rammata Rijal and father Dadhiram Sharma plays vital role in smooth completion of my research. I am thankful to thank all my teachers, colleagues and relatives who helped me directly or indirectly in the process of bringing this thesis in this present form.

January 2016

Rita Rijal

## **Abstract**

Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is about the female body and the gender perspective related to the body constructed by the society. Gender or sex is not a natural construct, but it is the role that is assigned to us to perform in the society. For instance, men are assigned perform their role as bread earners for the family whereas women are assigned the role of the caretakers of their family and their homes. To prove this hypothesis, this research uses Judith Butler's concept of gender trouble and performantivity of sex locating the idea in her book *Gender Trouble*. The novel discusses the problems of gender strategy constructed by the society. Ruth performs her role as a wife and a housewife, Mary as a beautiful damsel and Bobbo as a man torn between love and lust. These are the roles that are given to them according to the concept that was established at that time. The gender is not a natural construct, but it is a concept that the society assigns us to perform. We are man and woman because of the roles that we perform after we are born.

## **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Performativity of Gender in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She- Devil*

Ugly Body Vs. Beautiful Body

The Transformation

Conclusion

Bibliography

## **Performativity of Gender in Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She- Devil***

Fay Weldon talks about the women's personal as well as social problems in her novels. Weldon takes an objective approach to relationships, but she is not necessarily always on women's sides. "Weldon doesn't heavy handedly use her female characters to reveal a simplistic thesis about nasty men and victimized women. Through point of view tone her vision of women's relationships with men is more satisfyingly complex" (Krouse 22). One reason why this research is based on Weldon is that she is not well-recognized as she could be and her novel because the readers find them rather poignant down to earth as to women's roles, positions and beliefs. The topics she focuses on are quite universal, love, power and motherhood, sexual attraction, fighting with each other, selfishness, superiority and inferiority. However her fresh and sophisticated style of writing makes her novels extraordinary. This research paper is about her and her novels with focus on the women characters of these novels to find out and learn more about this feminist British writer and her style.

Weldon describes women's feelings in a very sophisticated and authentic style. Her heroines have other roles than being the objects of men's lust and they want to be equal, or at least they try to be so for her ideal relationships do not exist. There is always something corrupting them. Her heroines have to face it and they often conclude that in fact they need men to be happy and learn that relationships are important for every human being. Talking about the characters, Lorna Sage writes about Weldon: "she has a robustly dark view of her world, underlining the limits on her characters autonomy and understanding by holding them at arm's length with authorial intrusions and ironic, distancing devices" (Sage 657).

Weldon's fictions often mirror the insights of feminist theorists about the nature and situation of women. Love does not last, marriage is not happy motherhood

is not serene. Her multiple female characters function particularly well to make convincing a fictional world and which directly or indirectly questions many traditional notions and assumptions related to women and roles provided to them from the society. Once Weldon said about herself: "What I have to do is be faithful to what I see around me, whether I like it or not. My role is be faithful to what I see around me, whether I like it or not. My role is to look at the world, get a true, not an idealized vision of it and hand it over to you in fictional form"(Fay Weldon). This is how Weldon characterizes her writing. Although the role and position of woman has changed greatly during the last fifty years, there are still many issues which should be or more precisely need to be discussed.

Weldon was born as Franklin Birkinshaw on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1931 in Alvechurch Worcestershire England. She lived with her mother after her parents were divorced when she was 14. During college, she got pregnant and married Ronald Bateman twenty five years older, because she did not want to be a single mother but, the marriage only lasted for two years. After she left her husband, she started to work on the advertising industry. All these experiences are strongly reflected in her novels and her writing style is also influenced and inspired by her advertising career when she was twenty-rune, she met Ron Weldon and later they got married. After thirty years of marriage, Ron left her for a therapist Emile saner. These experiences of her life have inspired her to write about marriage, love, betrayal, broken relationships and revenges. She has published a number of books from her very first novel." *The Fat Women's Joke* 1967 to *Big Women* 1997. She is still writing novels scripts for telefilms, plays and doing much more.

Weldon was appointed professor of creative writing at Brunel University in west London in 2006. In her own words;

A great writer needs a certain personality and a natural talent for language, but there is a great deal that can be taught how to put words together quickly and efficiently to make a point, how to be graceful and eloquent, how to convey emotion, how to build up tension, and how to create alternative worlds. (Fay Weldon)

Weldon wrote and based her characters on her own experiences. Her life and her experiences of her have greatly inspired her to write about the man-woman relationship. She criticizes the roles given to certain genders of the society and searches for some kind of revolution. As Finuala Dowling suggests in her book:

Weldon has pointed out that she did not need the Women's Movement to introduce her to feminism. Her explanatory comment, "I was an unmarried mother in the 1950s and that was a salutary experience", not only suggests, in her case at least, a direct co-relation between permissiveness and consciousness raising, it also allows us to make a fundamental connection between her literary impetus and that of Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer (Dowling, 33)

Weldon herself knows very well that it is quite difficult to define her approach to feminism because throughout life, our opinions and views are changing. It is obvious that Weldon is a feminist but it is not possible to apply a short sighted, strictly feminist point of view on her novels because their author is much more complex and experienced, and feminism is just one part of her personality as well as of her novels. She is strictly feminist in her criticism of men and their lust for power, at the same time she is very realistic. She is a feminist but not a radical one.

Weldon has written various types of novels which talk about man-woman relationship, love, hate, infidelity, romance, betrayal, revenge and many more. In *The life and Loves of a She- Devil*, Ruth Patchett tells us about how she turned into a she-

devil from a loving, caring yet mistreated wife and mother. She allows us to dive into her personal life where she is constantly criticized and abandoned because of her bad looks. Ruth is constantly fighting alone to save her marital relationship with Boboo who is having an adulterous love affair with beautiful Mary Fisher. Mary is a romance novelist who writes romantic fictions where her heroines are beautiful women bringing the dark knights to their knees. The heroines in Fisher's books are beautiful damsels who bring dazzling knights to their knees through their beauty and passion. In the same manner Mary has trapped Boboo into a romantic affair leaving Ruth aside.

*The Life and Loves of a She - Devil* emphasizes on the complicated man woman relationship where beauty plays a barrier on personal happiness and relationships. Boboo is a banker who does not want to be with his wife because she is large and taller than him and is ugly monstrous figure. He seeks solace into the arms of Mary Fisher and divorces his wife Ruth. Ruth is shattered and left with her ungrateful children and a mother. It is at this point Ruth realizes that one needs a beautiful outer appearance to live or survive happily in today's world. Nobody looks at the inner quality or beauty but everybody is running after the outward appearance. It is at this moment that Ruth realizes that if a woman can be an angel to please her husband then she also can be a devil to punish him or make him come to the right track. However being ugly or being not beautiful Ruth faces a problem that is her husband leaves her. Despite her favoring the inner qualities of any human, the circumstances put her in such condition that she has to transplant herself as a beautiful human being through cosmetic surgery. Despite this resistance of a beautiful outward appearance, Ruth gives herself away to the world or surrenders herself to beauty and implants a cosmetic surgery.

In this extraordinary novel written by a female, Weldon locates the personal struggles and familial tension of everyday people in the struggles to keep their positions in that society where beauty plays a very significant role. As an epic tale of love, romance, betrayal and revenge, the novel takes us to that society where women are tortured because of their bad looks. In the then British society, the female's outer appearance, her grace or simmering eyes sparkled with droplets of tears, her tiny beautiful figure with brown soft hair were counted to make a woman beautiful. But opposite to the orthodoxy of beauty, Ruth possesses a giant figure with large hands and legs. She has wiry hair and she is taller than her husband. While small women look up at their men to control them, Ruth has to look down upon her husband because of her tall figure. Weldon has beautifully presented the contrast between the so called "beautiful" and "ugly" women of that era.

Weldon contrasts the concept of beauty through her leading characters. She has presented the two perfect opposites in her novels. Ruth portrays her rival Mary in the following lines: "Mary Fisher is forty three, and accustomed to love. There has always been a man around to love her, sometimes quite desperately, and she has on occasion returned this love but never have I thought, with desperation "(Weldon 5).

Ruth describes herself:

I am as dark as many Fisher is fair, and have one of those jutting jaws which 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 flesh, and the muscles in my legs are well developed. My arms, I swear, are too short for my body. My nature and my looks do not agree. (Weldon 9)

This above extract presents how Ruth feels about herself and other beautiful women including Mary Fisher. Ruth has her clear vision, she explains; "But what do I want? That of course could be a difficulty. I want revenge, I want power, I want money, I want to be loved and not love in return" (Weldon 43). Ruth realizes that for this goal, she has to leave everything and get ready for a new beginning. She plans every step and move very carefully, having one and only goal; to destroy and discredit Mary Fisher, defeat her. But this is not only her goal, later she reveals her true plan; to become a new Mary Fisher and get everything that she always wanted to have; men's admiration, love and respect.

Here, we can get the ambivalent attitude of Ruth. Though she constantly criticizes the outer appearance or outer physical beauty, she herself wants to improve her own place on it. She even says that the men do not look at the inner beauty of a woman; rather he looks at how beautiful her outer self is. As the novel introduces us to Ruth, she is ugly, bitter and unhappy housewife but as the novel reaches to the goal its final episode, Ruth is happy in the high tower after her physical turnover. After the death of Mary Fisher, she comes to live in the high tower:

Now I live in the high tower and the sea surges beneath as the moon circles and earth turns, but not as quite as it did.....Bobbo loves me. Poor confused creature that he has become, pouring my tea, mixing my drinks, fetching my bag.....Sometimes I let Bobbo sleep with me. Or I take my lovers in front of him, what agreeable turmoil that causes in the household I even the dog's sulk. I cause Bobbo as much miser as he ever caused to me and more. (Weldon 239-40)

This particular extract shows the real plan and goal of Ruth. She has ambivalent attitude to the idea of money, beauty, love, sex and all those things which she did not

have but badly wanted in her life. After she gets them she has some different attitude to all those things.

In all of Weldon's books, the women are unhappy creatures; though all of them reach their goals in some way or that, but they are not happy. The female characters in these books are influenced by the era, in which they are living. In Ruth's era, the society paid more value to beauty, party, socialization and life on edge. It is almost unbelievable how the society has changed in all these years. The heroines of all these novels want to be admired, appreciated and loved for their personal qualities.

Putting light on Weldon's works, her books are interesting and inspiring. She plays with the readers and her point of view is original, critical, funny and enriching.

Through the character's study and with the narrator's commentaries they can look deep inside the human relationships. She is very good at satirizing various

conventions. The prototype of devil like woman in *The Life and Loves of a She - Devil* creates an attractive, irresistible and funny microcosm made by Fay Weldon.

Apart from other novels, Weldon creates an absurd, hyperbolic figure Ruth to make a significant contrast to the women of that time and what the women might be. The characters realize their faults, relationships and lives. An ideal relationship does not exist, but it is not too late to try.

*The Life and Loves of a She – Devil* shocked the audiences in the eighties and has the power to shock people even today. The novel or the novelists is not afraid of extremes and unexpected actions, making a brand new world of one desperate, yet dangerously desperate woman Ruth Patchet. Her husband Bobbo has been cheating on her many times before and this time it is Mary Fisher, a romance novelist- a princess like figure as she seems to Ruth. Ruth feels that she can't stand her situation any more,

a situation where all she has is "her ugliness, unrewarding domesticity, a suburban home, ungrateful children and unfaithful husband (Dowling 105).

### **The Ugly Body versus the Beautiful Body**

Ruth and Mary are the perfect opposites in this novel and are the most obvious contrast. Mary, blonde, fragile, tender, neat and tidy, is a personification of her own heroines but Ruth, clumsy, dark and manlike, she describes herself as " I'm as dark as Mary is fair and have one of those jutting jaws which tall 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 legs are well developed my arms, is wear, and are too short for my body. My nature and my looks don not agree (Weldon 9). Mary believes that nobody can interfere with her world-but she discovers how weak this world is when she suddenly has to face to take care of Ruth and Bobbo's children- Andy and Nicole. This difference is not only physical but spiritual as well. When Bobbo calls Ruth a she-devil, she adopts this and in the name of a she-devil, she begins her unbelievable journey, she lives from envy, hate, lack of love whereas Mary, an angelic creature lives from love, sex and tenderness. Thus, this novel portrays two perfectly opposite women characters. Here we can use the concept of performativity of sex. Mary, on the one hand, is assigned to perform her role as that beautiful woman whom the society sees as an iconic figure. She is taken as the mistress of Bobbo. But on the other hand Ruth is assigned to perform her role as the submissive housewife and caretakers of her babies. In both cases it's the women who are appendized to males. Like the appendage woman is assigned to be there for the males, in whichever form it suits them. Not only women were dependent on men, according to Arthur Marwick, "professional husbands, dedicated to success in their careers, depended heavily upon their wives providing them with the comforts and

security of domesticity" (Marwick 65). This generally known pattern prevails even today; a moderate dependence is still one of the major factors keeping men and women together. This role performance is still prevalent throughout the world.

Weldon's interest in the experience of women, her perceptions about their sexuality and friendship, her intelligent view that women's lives are of necessity different from men's, her successful rendering of what to live 'down among women' means make her a most valuable contemporary novelist for the committed feminist and for the general reader who is curious about women. But Weldon's novels are appealing even if one does not share her feminist insights. Their structure, narrative techniques, point of view, style, and humor place them among the finest achievements in recent fiction by women (Krouse 33).

A feminist novelist like Fay Weldon is never in any doubt that the relationship between the sexes is primarily a matter of power politics. Weldon writes with a light touch that cannot disguise the clarity, indeed the ruthlessness of her vision. Though her recent fiction has suffered from self-indulgence, which manifests itself in displays of verbal whimsy, the novels she wrote in the 1970s represent the sharpest statement of the feminist position. (Massie 38)

Weldon not only talks about the gender performance but she has changed her themes to some greater level. She has raised the issue of human behavior and the root cause of this behavior. This entire shift depends upon power politics. In her book, Kathleen Wheeler describes this shift of topic as follows:

Weldon has expanded her themes and settings as well as her techniques to deal explicitly with the various forms of exploitation (sexual, racial, economic and class), the origins of violence and war in

the human psyche and their institutionalization in our social structures, and the role of biology or nature, science and the past in our everyday attempts at free will, to defeat genes, fate and eternal forces. (Wheeler 252-53)

Weldon is such a writer who never doubts that "the relationship between the sexes is primarily a matter of power politics"(Massie 38). According to Eve Pattern, Weldon typically describes the lives of women who are trapped within domestic duties and demands of children and who have adulterous or neglectful husbands (Pattern www-document). Though Weldon clearly has feminist sympathies, her writing also challenges and confuses the guiding principles of the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

Eila Rikkinen talks about the women in Weldon's books: "Weldon's heroines are often women whose dreams of eternal love and domestic bliss turn out impossible (Rikkinen 95). The characters in her novels do not, for example, show very much solidarity towards other women but rather aim at individual survival (Pattern www-document). Rikkinen refers to *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* as Weldon's most famous novel, which has been evaluated both as quality literature dealing with the problems of society and as calculated entertainment. This novel encompasses the genre of romantic fiction as well as Gothic Novel and fairy tales. Romantic tales revolve around the relationship and romantic love between two people and present a hero and a heroine. Generally romantic novels reward characters who are good and penalize those who are evil and emphasize features of 'courtly love', such as faithfulness in adversity (Jackson 39). Similarly fairy tales start with feature characters such as witches, fairies and giants and false heroes representing the two sides in the battle between good and bad. *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* starts

with some simple characters; there is a housewife, the beautiful mistress and the husband who is torn between duty and pleasure. The production of gender is an essential theme in most of Weldon's books and so is the case with this novel. The female body plays an important role in this novel. My main interest is to find out how female body and the societal norms produce gender in the novel. The production of gender relates to the production of subjectivity. The question of subject is important in Butler's thinking in two ways. She is interested both in how individual subjects come to be and how the category of females is produced through various political structures. The central characters in this novel also are categorized according to certain political construction of the society.

Weldon shows the roles given Ruth, Mary and Bobbo in the leading role and to some other characters as well. Ruth performs her role as a mother, wife and a daughter in law but nobody is happy with her because she is ugly. Mary performs her role as a beautiful woman. She represents the concept of the society that woman should be beautiful no matter what the condition is. Bobbo is torn between love and lust. He likes Ruth as the caretaker of his house and mother of his children but he wants to live with Mary. In the same manner there is the role of a lesbian, a doctor, a butler; all those who want to have relation with Ruth after she turns beautiful. Towards the end of the novel, the women and their role changes but the performance is the same for the society. There is still a beautiful woman, now Ruth; a mother, now Mary and a husband. These roles will be there for the eternity of time.

The ideal woman has traditionally been a loving, sacrificing and forgiving and willing to adjust her own needs to those of the family. Making and keeping the family happy and satisfied has been seen as a natural task for woman, one that women's

characters are especially built for. Women are putting their own personal happiness on hold for the sake of their families.

*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Weldon talks about the transformation of Ruth as something that Ruth wants at her free will.

"I do not put my trust in faith, nor my faith in God. I will be what I want, not what he ordained. I will mould a new image for myself out of the earth of my creation. I will defy my Maker, and remake myself" (159). Ruth is pushed into changing her basic character from nice and subordinate to evil during a disastrous dinner party when she has an argument with her husband, and he calls her a she-devil. Ruth starts to feel powerful hatred instead of shame and guilt which have directed her behaviour in her life so far. Ruth starts to see herself as the person who has gained power over her own life:

I want to give hate its head. I want to drive out of love, and I want to follow hate where it leads: and then, when I have done what I want with it, and not a minute before, I will master it. . . . Glitter glitter. Are those my eyes? They're so bright they light up the room. (43-44)

. . . I have no place, so I must make my own, and since I cannot change the world, I will change myself. (56)

It is difficult to say whether Ruth is a villain or a heroine in the novel – it seems she is both. Her plotting and scheming lead to her revenge which appears justified; after all, Ruth suffers a lot because of her husband's negligence and affair with Mary Fisher. Ruth's metamorphosis into a she-devil means that she begins to act as a subject of her life and passionately aims only at her own good.

Ruth does not, however, change herself into a beautiful woman all by herself. The cosmetic surgeons who alter Ruth into a Mary Fisher-lookalike see themselves as

creators as well. Dr Black's wife calls her husband Frankenstein because of the alteration work he does at his clinic. When Ruth is having one of her biggest operations, the shortening of her legs, the situation turns critical and the doctors fear for their patient's life:

There was an earthquake, a nasty rumble, the crust of the earth yearning to split along the line of its weakness, the San Andreas fault. That was the day after the major operation to her femur was performed: life-support systems had to be switched over to the emergency generator. They thought they would lose her in the seconds it took. Ruth observed their pallor, their distraction. When she could speak she said, 'You needn't have worried. An act of God won't kill me.' 'Why not?' asked Mr Chengis. 'I don't imagine he's on your side. 'He has the Devil to contend with,' said Ruth, before lapsing back into unconsciousness. (Weldon 232)

Ruth refers herself as a devil because it is the society that made her to be so. Bobbo is the main cause for her turning into a devil. The alteration is so important to Ruth that she is even ready to sacrifice her life. In another case regarding her surgery, Ruth as well as the doctors challenges the God, as the maker of her body:

A violent electrical storm on the eve of the second major operation fused the power supply again. ---'God's angry,' said Mr Chengis, suddenly frightened, longing to go back into obstetrics. 'You're defying Him. I wish we could stop all this. 'Of course He's angry, ' said Ruth. 'I am remaking myself'. "We're remaking you,' he said sourly, 'and in one of his feeble and more absurd images, what's more.' He had come to hate the photograph of Mary Fisher". (Weldon 233)

Even though the professionally ambitious doctors start to have second thoughts about Ruth's surgeries and see themselves less as magnificent creators than at the beginning, Ruth herself is sure she will prevail. Ruth survives the storm and her massive operation miraculously and Dr Black compares her to Frankenstein's monster, a creature that needs electricity in order to awake and get going.

The original *Frankenstein* was written by Mary Shelley, the daughter of women's rights advocate Mary Wollstonecraft, and the novel was published in 1818. The novel represents a conflict between passion and sentiment: ruling passion elevates and torments, gentle sentiment feature nurturing and comforting feelings that bind individuals to others. The novel's main character is a scientist Frankenstein who discovers how to create a living, non-human being. The monster Frankenstein creates chaos by committing crimes and is abandoned by his maker and unable to receive any human sympathy. The creature is hardened with despair and the novel ends up with Frankenstein's death and the monster's disappearance towards a funeral pyre. (Clery 126-130.)

Doctors Black and Ghengis resemble Frankenstein in many ways; they are ambitious scientists, seeking glory and new worlds and expecting gratitude and obedience from their creation. Especially doctor Ghengis expects romantic gratitude from Ruth because of the work they have done for her, and are disappointed when Ruth wants to keep the relationship between the doctors and patient professional:

'I am her Pygmalion,' he cried. 'I made her, and she is cold, cold! Where is Aphrodite, to breathe her into life?'" (Weldon 223) "She danced with Mr Ghengis in the dew of the morning, as the sun rose red and round over the escarpment, and with every step it was as if she trod on knives; but she thanked him for giving her life and told him she

was going. (Weldon 238)

Pygmalion is a character in Ovid's play "*Metamorphosis*". Pygmalion is a sculptor who is not interested in women, but falls in love with a female statue he is sculpting out of ivory and begs Venus (Aphrodite) to breathe life into the statue. Venus takes pity on Pygmalion and brings the statue to life, and Pygmalion then marries the statue transformed into a real woman. (Gross 1992.) In *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* doctor Chengis refers to himself as Pygmalion, and is bothered by the fact that Ruth refuses to act obediently but insists on being her own creation. Like Frankenstein's monster, Ruth's skin is toughened with her negative experiences, but, unlike in the story of Frankenstein, her transformation leads her into a better life as an admirable and beautiful woman.

### **Performativity of Gender**

Two of the most central terms in Butler's thinking related to the materiality of bodies are genealogy and performativity. Genealogy means that Butler refuses to see sex or gender as something "natural" or "original", but instead assumes it has evolved during time and is the result of the use of power (Butler 8-9). The concept of genealogy comes from Michel Foucault who applied it to sexuality and looked into the ways sexuality has been constructed, denying it as a simple force of nature. "Butler was the first to look at sex and gender from a genealogical point of view and ask how gender has come to be what it is now" (Pulkkinen 43-48).

The idea of genealogy is not far away from traditional feminist thinking which assumes that people are raised into being either feminine or masculine, and this process involves power. This way of thinking was expressed by the word gender in the English speaking feminist theory from the 1960s onwards, emphasizing that people are not designated to a certain identity simply because of their anatomy. The

term gender began however to be used more and more together with the term sex, and this division suggested that in addition to the socially constructed gender people also have a biological, natural, anatomical sex. (Butler 1-7) Sex was seen as a biological, unchangeable and unquestionable certainty and gender as a changeable, social role in which one must act appropriately according to societal norms – in another word, gender follows from sex. In Butler's view the distinction between gender and sex is pointless, because sex was already gender to begin with: there is no precultural, prediscursive, politically neutral concept of a biological body. It is impossible to separate the cultural from the biological. In Butler's view, sex and gender do not exist purely but are both performed constantly.

### **The Transformation**

Ruth's transformation and change into a she-devil can be interpreted as a desire for a drastic change, a utopian change, a move away from patriarchy. It is also notable that while Ruth lets go of many of her patriarchal values, such as loyalty to her husband and her self-sacrifice, she also aims at becoming a physically ideal women. At the beginning of the novel, alienation from the female body and dissatisfaction with it causes a desire for such transformation that also affects Ruth's physical appearance: "I look at my face in the bathroom mirror. I want to see something different. I take off my clothes. I stand naked. I look. I want to be changed. Peel away the wife, the mother, find the woman, and there the she-devil is (Weldon 44).

When Bobbo abandons his wife to live with Mary Fisher, he refers to Ruth as a physically strong person who will be able to manage without a husband as well: Ruth,' said Bobbo, 'you have very good, very solid feet. You'll be okay. Ruth had come to the marriage with nothing. Expect size, and strength, and those she

still had". (Weldon 47-8)

At the beginning of the novel Ruth describes herself as the prisoner of her own looks. She is a large, tall woman, and her size and appearance seem to define her life very much.

It is interesting that other characters in the book start to see Ruth's size more as a sign of power than weakness or inferiority after her inner alteration into a she-devil. It seems her size implies force that can be defined as masculine; the threat of the use of violence lingers about her. Mary's butler Garcia is mesmerized by her appearance at the High Tower when he opens the door:

She stood upon the steps like a figure carved in stone: a giant chess piece, a clumsy black rook come to challenge the little white ivory queen. The dogs whined and fell silent. ... He stood aside to let her pass. He was both frightened and challenged by her (Weldon 68).

At the Rest wood old people's home the owner Mrs. Trumper is afraid of Ruth because of her size: "She was also frightened of Ruth; Ruth was too big. She could snap Mrs. Trumper between forefinger and thumb. Her eyes glittered". (Weldon 88)

Both of these quotes refer to Ruth's supernatural presence after her mental transformation into a she-devil. It seems that Ruth's passion to do what she desires is so strong that it colours her presence. Strong passionate characters are a common feature in the gothic genre of literature. (Clery 13)

When Ruth begins her physical change through plastic surgery, she gives the doctors a picture of Mary Fisher explaining she would like to look like her. The doctors consent to her wishes at first, but when she declares she wants to be as short as Mary Fisher as well, they are at first appalled and tell Ruth she is about to go too far:

He [the doctor] tried one last gambit: 'The other thing that occurs to the cosmetic surgeon,' he said, 'is that though you can change the body you cannot change the person. And little by little – this may sound mystical, but it is our experience – the body reshapes itself to fit the personality.' 'I have an exceptionally adaptable personality,' Ruth observed. 'I have tried many ways of fitting myself to my original body, and the world which I was born, and have failed. I am no revolutionary. Since I cannot change them, I will change myself. I am quite sure I will settle happily enough into my new body (Weldon 202-203).

Before the surgeries Ruth has one final look at her body and fantasizes about her future as a beautiful woman: "She said goodbye to her body. She looked at the body which had so little to do with her nature, and knew she'd be glad to get rid of it" (Weldon 209).

Ruth closed her eyes for sleep with the comfortable thought that for a pretty woman the future lay in refusing men rather than submitting to them – or, indeed, hoping for their advances (Weldon 231).

Ruth knows that after she has become a slim woman who is culturally considered attractive, she will be able to choose the men she wants to have contact with; rather than just hoping that someone will become interested in her. Waugh states that the cultural obsession in Western societies of making female bodies smaller reflects a cultural fear of a mature woman as a reminder of mortality and also of the all-powerful mother of infancy. Slimness represents women as little girls, thus fading the maternal side of women (Waugh 176-8). Susan Bordo says that being slim and losing weight signifies ultimate control over one's own desires and a capacity for self

management. Waugh agrees with Susie Orbach who says that nowadays women's bodies are seen as commodities, as parts and not wholes, and these commodities are always up for improvement (Waugh 176-8). Ruth's way of adapting to the heterosexual order through the use of cosmetic surgery is a highly controversial decision, albeit sort of normal: most women these days are doing things that affect their looks (for example, they try to lose weight, spend money on expensive cosmetics, and take excessive exercise), or would at least like to change their appearances. Ruth's way of going about it is, however, fairly radical and extreme.

Cosmetic surgery as a method of manipulating one's looks is by no means a simple issue.

Fay Weldon's novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is an intriguing and amusing book. Weldon uses satirical humor when she talks about serious issues: the feelings of a woman deserted by her husband, the woman's need for revenge, her situation as an outcast and feelings of failure. Weldon takes her readers onto a magnificent journey with a woman who has decided to shed the norms of conventional femaleness – only to become the ideal woman and to charm her treacherous husband all over again.

At the beginning of the novel Ruth knows all too well her own value as a woman: she is not considered attractive, she has not achieved much professionally and her husband does not consider her a particularly good mother or wife, either. It is not so much Ruth's unhappy marriage that has brought her down, but the fact that her husband is enjoying a passionate affair with a woman who is Ruth's opposite in every way. Ruth comes to the end of her rope and decides she will get even: she becomes a she-devil who knows what she wants and gets her way. And so Ruth begins her vendetta against those who have made her life difficult. But Ruth wants more than

just revenge: she wants to feel admired by men and wants to gain control over her husband.

Ruth's way of going about her plan is quite interesting. She decides to change her entire outward appearance in order to resemble the woman her husband fell in love with. To achieve this she must go through several dangerous and medically pioneering plastic surgeries. This does take place, and at the end of the novel Ruth looks like the young Mary Fisher and uses control over her husband and other men as well. Ruth has then become almost like the woman she despised as a betrayed and unattractive housewife.

Patricia Waugh states that Ruth remains enslaved to the myth of romantic love even after her painful recreation (Waugh 191), but I disagree with her opinion. I think that Ruth's main motive for her alteration is to gain power as opposed to her previous position as a bored housewife and not to be seriously romantically involved with anyone. However, in deciding to alter her looks in order to become a beautiful woman, Ruth does obey the norms of the same society that pushed her aside in the first place.

After her mental alteration into a she-devil Ruth already gains something that helps her along in a major way: she knows what she wants and is not afraid to take it. This change in her attitude makes her desirable to men as well: several men find her attractive and wish to pursue a relationship with her, although she is not considered conventionally pretty. Ruth is not, however, content with being a woman who is appreciated by men; she wants to be desired, to be considered beautiful and to be able to turn men down if she so pleases.

Throughout the novel different characters perform gender and sex in various ways. As a housewife Ruth serves her husband and children, works around the house

and walks around in her practical shoes. As a conventionally beautiful woman Ruth attends parties, has affairs with men and has servants attending to her every whim. Thus she does not act in a similar manner as an overweighed, unattractive person and as a notable beauty, who has got a body that matters. After her surgeries Ruth begins to mimic Mary Fisher and her ways of being an attractive, desirable woman. Mary, on the other hand, takes on the role of a nurturer and stops paying attention to things once important to her, such as looks and clothes. Thus neither of these women is simply or truly what they seem to be at the start of the novel, but they both change the way they perform women.

At the same time as their performances change, their places within the heterosexual order change as well. Mary starts off as a seemingly independent woman who contributes to the heterosexual order through the romance novels she writes: housewives longing for romance and excitement read her books and receive energy to continue with their daily routines. Mary is envied by Ruth who eventually takes her place. But although Ruth manages to obtain a position of power after her alteration, she does not abandon her deceitful husband but reclaims him in order to use her new power over him.

Weldon talks about many institutions in her novel; she discusses marriage, single motherhood, lesbianism, the court system, business life, hospitals, prisons, religion, and old people's homes. There are many other orders Weldon criticizes than just the heterosexual order that can be seen when she talks about marriage and love affairs. She paints a vivid picture about how some people are shoved aside in the society because they do not fulfill certain norms of proper citizenry: this exclusion can be based on, for example, looks, size, or the lack of wealth. Weldon describes many kind of injustice in the society and makes her main character Ruth see it as well.

Although Ruth is interested in changing her own destiny only, she changes the lives of many unfortunate, outcast people as well, by making them seize more opportunities. Thus, Weldon's main thought in the novel is perhaps that it is impossible to make the world a completely fair place, but individuals must do what they can in order to survive.

## Works Cited

- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight. Feminism Western Culture and the Body*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. NY and London: Routledge.
- - -. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*. NY and London: Routledge.
- Davis, Kathy. *Reshaping the Female Body. The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*. NY and London: Routledge.
- Dowling, Finuala. *Fay Weldon's Fiction*. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1998.
- Fay Weldon Interviews and Articles*. Web. 14 March, 2010.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. London: Penguin Group.
- Krouse, Nesaule Agate. "Feminism and Art in Fay Weldon's Novels." *In Critique* Vol. XX, No. 2, 1979, 5-20.
- Marwick, Arthur. *British Society Since 1945* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Massie, Alan. *The Novel Today. A Critical Guide to the British Novel, 1970-1989*. NY and London: Longman.
- Rikkinen, Eila, "*Fay Weldon in Naispaholainon*" ed. Tero Norkola and Eila Rikkinen. Teitolipas 146, Helsinki.
- Sage, Lorna; Green Germaine, Showalter, Elaine. *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Sciebinger, Londa (ed.) (2000). *Feminism and The Body*. Oxford: OUP.
- Weldon, Fay. *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983.