

**THE IDEA OF FEMINISM IN FAY WELDON'S *PRAXIS*****Berna KÖSEOĞLU\*****Abstract**

Fay Weldon, as a feminist writer, reflects the problems of women in patriarchal societies by referring to the conflicts between women and men. She criticizes the prejudice of the male-dominated society against women and underlines the necessity to eliminate the oppression imposed upon the female and to change the perspective of society towards women. In this sense, in her novel *Praxis*, Weldon explores the unexplored about the female identity and the struggles of women with society. The protagonist, Praxis, and the other female characters, portray the sufferings of women under the control of the male-dominated society. Thus, the importance freedom and equality in the lives of women is stressed through the experiences of Praxis and her relationship with the patriarchal society. The aim of this article is to emphasize how Weldon questions the secondary position of women and how she encourages women to challenge repression and restrictions exercised by the patriarchal society through her female characters in her novel.

**Keywords:** Fay Weldon, *Praxis*, Postmodernism, Feminism, Gender Problem

**FAY WELDON'IN *PRAXIS* ADLI ESERİNDE FEMİNİZM ANLAYIŞI****Özet**

Fay Weldon, feminist bir yazar olarak, kadınlar ve erkekler arasındaki çatışmalara değinerek, ataerkil toplumdaki kadınların problemlerini yansıtır. Ataerkil toplumun kadınlara karşı önyargısını eleştirir ve kadına uygulanan eziyetin yok edilmesinin, kadınlara karşı bakış açısının değiştirilmesinin gerekliliğinin altını çizer. Bu bağlamda, *Praxis* adlı romanında, Weldon kadın kimliği ve kadınların toplumla olan mücadelesi ile ilgili keşfedilmemiş olan noktaları keşfeder. Ana karakter, Praxis ve diğer kadın karakterler, ataerkil toplumların kontrolü altında, kadınların çektiği sıkıntıları sergiler. Böylece, özgürlük ve eşitliğin kadınların hayatındaki önemi, Praxis'in deneyimleri ve ataerkil toplumla olan ilişkisi aracılığıyla vurgulanır. Bu makalenin amacı, kadınların ikincil konumunu, Weldon'ın, eserinde nasıl sorguladığını ve romanındaki kadın karakterler aracılığıyla, ataerkil toplum tarafından kadınlara uygulanan baskı ve kısıtlamalara karşı mücadele etmeleri için kadınları nasıl cesaretlendirdiğini vurgulamaktır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Fay Weldon, *Praxis*, Postmodernizm, Feminizm, Cinsiyet Sorunu

Widely known as a feminist postmodern writer dealing with the issues related to women and their position in society, Fay Weldon, herself, experiences the misery and the suffering many women have been faced with due to the oppression of the male-dominated world. Being a single mother, she has to cope with financial problems and the hardships of life, as a result of which she begins to write about the problems of women. Therefore, her biography is compatible with her works in which she refers to the troubles of women and the oppression inflicted upon them. Moreover, being brought up in a house full of women, she finds the opportunity to witness the

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problems of women (Dowling, 1998: 136). Analyzing the situation of women in her environment, she has become a feminist writer touching the experiences of women. Especially her novels explore the relationship of women with men, children and patriarchal society. In this sense, she also reflects the problems of women and their struggles in a patriarchal society in her novel, *Praxis*.

In *Praxis*, Fay Weldon concentrates on the position of women, the idea of feminism by reflecting the suffering and struggles of the protagonist, Praxis and the other female characters. While portraying the situation of women in the male-dominated society, she employs the postmodern style including fragmentation of space and time together with the discontinuity of narration and duality. Reflecting the idea of feminism, she uses these techniques. While the third person narration can be seen in the first chapter, which contains the situation Lucy, the mother of Praxis, who is isolated and alienated from society, with her children, without a husband; the first person narration comes to the fore in the second chapter by means of the narration of Praxis, who emphasizes the inequality between man and woman and the pressure imposed on them. Then the first person narration is replaced with the third person in the following chapter. In the first person narration, regrets and self-realization of the adult, Praxis come to the fore, whereas the third person narration covers her personal history from childhood to old age. Therefore, duality of narration and double-voiced discourse lead to discontinuity of narration, one of the most significant elements of postmodern novel. In this respect, due to the multiplicity of interpretation, “we are thrust into a shifting, relative world of existential doubt where the assumptions of patriarchal society may be called into question” (Dowling, 1998: 65-66). Analyzing the inconsistency in terms of content and form, fragmentation of events, time, space and the interweaving of past and present appear. Although the focus is on the life, suffering and self-discovery of Praxis in many parts of the novel, the shift from personal suffering of Praxis to the hopelessness and pain of many women in society can be recognized as well. Besides, the postmodern crisis, the conflict between reality and illusion can also be observed as Praxis indicates in this way: “I am alone in the reality I have created for myself. In my mind I invented old age, illness, grief, and now I am stuck with them, and serve me right” (1990: 77). It is obvious that the paradox between illusion and reality takes place as Praxis stresses. Reality, for her, is an invention that turns out to be reality as Murdoch says as follows: “Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture” (1999: 75). So, Praxis also experiences the reality she has created for herself, as a result of which postmodern conflict arises.

The impact of postmodernist idea upon the novel should be stressed as well. According to postmodernism, there is no ultimate reality; binary oppositions should not be taken for granted (Habib, 2005: 566-568). Therefore, in *Praxis*, the unreliability of reality is also questioned as follows: “How much is fiction, and how much is true? There can be no objective truth about our memories” (1990: 76). In this respect, the subjectivity of truth is emphasized. As a branch of postmodernism, feminism also rejects the reliability of truth and the binary oppositions about the position of women and men. In other words, the superior status of the male and the inferior status of the female determined by the male-dominated society cannot be accepted by the feminists, so they question and challenge the inequality between women and men by reflecting the struggles of women in the male-dominated society and encouraging women to reject being regarded as the second sex. In this respect, Weldon also problematizes the gender roles by criticizing the secondary position of the female and the primary position of the male.

In the novel, by means of the suffering and desolation Praxis experiences, the gender problem, the situation of the oppressed women and their attempts to survive are questioned. For Weldon’s female characters, mothering, pregnancy and childbirth bring about anguish and desperation as can be recognized from the suffering of Praxis, her mother Lucy and Miss Leonard. Therefore, Weldon as a feminist draws attention to the conflict between male and female in the very beginning of the novel in the words of Praxis along these lines:

They (men) do not try as we did, to understand it and get the better of it.

They simply wipe out the pain by doing away with its three centres – the heart, the soul and the mind. Brilliant! Heartless, soulless, mindless – free! Look at me, Praxis Duveen. Better for me to look at myself, to search out the truth, and the root of my pain, and yours, and try to determine whether it comes from inside or from outside [...]. (1990: 17)

In this respect, Praxis handles the issue of feminism from the very beginning by highlighting the inequality between the two sexes, in other words, the struggles of women for the sake of their rights. Thus, she refers to “the turning point, culmination and action,” regarding the independence of women in the male-dominated society (Faulks, 1998: 36). She portrays the sexual and the psychological pressure imposed on her from the beginning of her childhood to her adulthood. Her illegitimacy, her mother’s madness, her sexual experiences play a fundamental role in her despair and distress. In this manner, the discovery of female sexuality can be realized in the novel. Praxis’ menstruation, her first sexual experience, the loss of virginity, the dancing scenes including sexuality, her self-realization of the colonized female body due to the male power, all of them, contribute to the self discovery of female sexuality and identity, which were considered to be taboos before the rise of feminism. As Hutcheon stresses, the feminist concept of the colonized, appropriated, even mystified female body (1989: 158) is reflected in the writings of feminists. Likewise, in Praxis, one can notice a similar portrayal. So, the exploration of female identity is reflected in the novel through the female struggle with the patriarchal society, which oppresses women sexually, socially and psychologically.

Isolated from society due to her illegitimate daughters; the mother of Praxis, Lucy, finds no meaning in life, turns out to be mad and “takes her breath in her body for the sake of the girls, nothing else”(1990: 20). In this view, the attribution of madness to a woman proves that women are associated with the evil in the patriarchal societies, as a result “[s]tatistical overrepresentation of women among the mentally ill has been ascribed to their social situation, both their confining roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and their mis-treatment by a male-dominated profession” (Dowling, 1998: 76). Consequently, the position of women in society and the degradation they are exposed to can be realized in the novel as well. Moreover, the reason of the mother's madness is also questioned in the novel along these lines: "Was she always mad, or did the world send her mad with its prudery, hypocrisy and unkindness?"(1990: 50). Thus, compatible with the idea of feminism, the prejudice against women and the injustice they face cause women to become mad, to lose their control when they are so much exploited and abused.

The strict opinions against the unmarried women can be seen through Ben’s blaming Lucy for her immoral relationship with him: “Whore. Well she was not his wife, yet she slept with him. She lived in sin. What else but a whore did that make her; and what did her whoredom make of Ben? They couldn’t be married. Her fault, not his” (1990: 11). In this manner, it is obvious that the biased viewpoints against women and the selfish nature of men can clearly be recognized. Furthermore, the doctrines imposed on the female students like Praxis and her sister Hypatia at school demonstrate the representation of women as sinful and corrupted creatures along these lines: “They were daughters of Eve and responsible for leading men into sin and for the loss of Paradise, and must make amends forever” (1990: 21). Defined as leading men into sin and blamed for the loss of Paradise, it is clear that women are suppressed and left behind lonely and miserable in patriarchal society. So, Praxis cannot help thinking “the narrow hypocritical society was right, and that Hypatia and herself had no right to be alive; and had better have remained the outcasts they were born” (1990: 37). This proves that the helpless and the repressed women are doomed to be humiliated and forced to assume that they are evil and corrupted. Thus, as Praxis expresses, she feels the necessity "to cure the world to cure [...] [herself]" (1990: 48). As a consequence, she assumes the role of a survivor to eliminate the prejudices and the harsh practices exercised by the male-dominated world upon females. However, she cannot avoid self-degradation either and her self-questioning starts: “Who will ever marry me? Who will ever want to? Jewess, bastard, pervert.

Daughter of a mad mother, insanity in the blood, running strong” (1990: 60). In this sense, vulnerable position of women under the oppression of men is in the foreground. In other words, before the rise of feminism, they were ignored and despised by men and supposed to deal with their domestic affairs, therefore many women could not find the opportunity to involve in life and express their ideas due to the restrictions they were faced with, thus they were expected to be obedient and to satisfy the needs of their husbands and children without proving their identities. Therefore, these women can be described as *the Angel in the House* as one of the most important feminists, Virginia Woolf, defined them in *Professions for Women*. Hence, she aimed at breaking the typical model created for women by the patriarchal societies. Considering the characteristics of *the Angel in the House*, what attracts attention is the fact that that phrase stands for a phantom, which is excessively submissive, self-sacrificing and repressed, because it represents the condition of the subjugated women, who never questioned their roles in society, never asked for their rights, accepted the submissive role attributed to them and sacrificed themselves for the sake of the others (Woolf, 1931: 2216). Similarly, in *Praxis*, the protagonist Praxis also encounters similar problems and she is expected to be obedient, passive and silent.

In the novel, the morality of the oppressed protagonist, Praxis together with the other female characters, is questioned not only by men but also by women. For instance, Mrs Allbright does not accept Praxis with Willie in her house due to the prejudices in society against adultery. So Mrs Allbright expresses her feelings as follows: “If you are living in sin with a man, I can’t accept you in my house. You understand that? I have to take a moral lead in the community. I believe the sins of one generation are visited upon the next” (1990: 109-10). Therefore, the restrictions, biased views and degradation exercised towards women can clearly be observed in the novel. In such a kind of destructive society for women, Praxis finds it surprising to see that she still survives and expresses her thoughts: “To believe I am still alive, and live as a useless old woman in a Western industrialised society? There cannot be much worse a punishment” (1990: 25). As observed through her expression, in an ironic manner, she indicates that although she is physically alive in the male-dominated society despite the prejudice of society, she feels that she is psychologically, metaphorically dead as she thinks that leading life as a lonely woman under the influence of the patriarchal values is the worst punishment for a female.

Likewise, the mother of Praxis, Lucy’s relationship with a man without marriage is also regarded as a sin and Praxis is despised because of her mother's adulterous affair. Similarly, Miss Leonard and her illegitimate daughter Mary, whom Praxis looks after, are also subjected to the harsh attitude of society. Since Miss Leonard is not allowed to abort the baby due to the general belief in society that it is a wicked thing, she has to give birth to an illegitimate child, whom Praxis will take care of later on. Reflecting the gender issue by referring to the problems of women, Weldon portrays the panorama of the oppressed women struggling to discover their identities, stand on their own feet and prove themselves.

Another example in the novel portraying the repression of women is the reflection of one of the female character's suffering as she is raped. She experiences not only physical pain but also psychological one. Miss Leonard's miserable condition is related to the secondary position of the female in the male-dominated society, therefore although she is the one who should be supported, she cannot express her agony as she feels so vulnerable. Thus, she voices her agony as follows:

"It was rape." Miss Leonard  
 "Did you go to the police?"  
 "No."  
 "Why not?"  
 "I felt too dirty. I couldn't even talk about it."(1990: 71)

In this regard, it is clear that even if the male who rapes her should be punished and she should ask for her right, she remains silent and passive as she feels paralyzed as a consequence of

the patriarchal values, so she indicates that she feels dirty and she cannot reveal that she has been raped. Weldon, as a feminist, reflecting such a kind of example, aims at criticizing the physical and psychological oppression women have experienced and attacks the inequality between women and men. Even if the focus, throughout the novel is on Praxis, Weldon also dwells on the problems of other female characters in order to show all of the problems of women.

Considering the struggles of the main character Praxis, it is apparent that being faced with the pressure of the male world, experiencing a traumatic childhood without a father and with a mad mother, Praxis finds herself in prostitution and adultery, which are considered to be the most sinful and wicked actions for women. On the other hand, the men involved in these situations are not blamed and cursed. In this sense, the link between power struggles and feminism arise as Foucault analyzes as well. He emphasizes the oppression exercised on female body and explores the impact of power, which causes docility of the female (Foucault, 1988: 112-115). In this respect, Weldon sheds light on the problems of Praxis in order to voice the general predicaments on women's ways. Economic deprivation and dependence upon the male in marriage can be regarded as one of the most depressing conditions that make women submissive in the male-dominated society. Praxis also suffers from the economic problems and her financial dependence upon Willie in her marriage makes her more subservient as can be realized in this dialogue between Willie and Praxis:

"I'd like to buy a book on baby care," said Praxis tentatively.  
"What for?" asked Willie. "You have your instincts, surely."  
"They might be wrong."  
"The point about instincts," said Willie, "is that they're never wrong. However, if you're worried, I'll see if I can pick one up somewhere."  
"I want a new one, Willie. Up-to-date."  
"What for? Babies have been the same since the beginning of time, surely."  
"Yes, but-" Praxis gave up more and more easily. It was Willie's money, after all.  
(1990: 110-11).

In this perspective, lack of economic independence and the selfish attitude of her husband are reflections of most of the women's common problems, thus it can be deduced that "Weldon's men, generally practice selfishness and cruelty because of their predominant role in culture; they are accustomed to dominance, which they embrace as a way of life" (Faulks, 1998: 5). As a result of the dominance of the male power in society, women were left behind with their domestic issues at home like Praxis. Hence, struggling to survive despite the hindrances on her way, Praxis realizes her female identity and feels the necessity to struggle as follows: "Nature does not know best, or if it does, it is on the man's side. Nature gives us painful periods, leucorrhoea, polyps, thrush, placenta praevia, headaches, cancer and in the end death. It seems to me that we must fight nature tooth and claw" (1990: 133). She urges the other women not to surrender, but to fight in spite of the pressure practised on them. In this sense, Weldon concentrates on what women want and what they get in return.

The inequality between male and female and the inferior position of women can be defined as the most significant topics explored by Weldon. In this respect, Praxis becomes the spokesperson of Weldon and points out the distinction between women and men as follows: "Men are commonly expected to marry someone poorer, less educated and of lower status than themselves. Women, likewise, are expected to marry above themselves. Thus every wife in the world will automatically feel, in her domestic life and status, inferior to her husband [...]. The husband looking down. The wife looking up" (1990: 144). Thus, the inferior role attributed to the females and the superior role attributed to the males play a significant function in the suppression of women in their marriages. Therefore, Weldon as a feminist underlines the stereotyped roles determined for women and men by the male-dominated society and questions the unquestioned doctrines.

In her feminist criticism, Weldon underlines the restrictions imposed on women by their husbands by highlighting the struggles of women not to be left behind and suppressed as a consequence of the constant surveillance and discipline they are exposed to. The efforts of Praxis to prove her female identity and to achieve her economic freedom can be recognized when her willingness for working is seen. On the other hand, the tendency of the male world to oppress women and prevent them from achieving their goals and from gaining their freedom can be observed through Ivor's attempt to isolate his wife Praxis from the working arena as follows:

“Why should you want to work?

“What sort of work?

“You mean I keep you short of money?

“You find the children boring?

“You want to work with men, I suppose? Find someone new?”

The wives in the estate did not work. Husbands, for the most part, had fought their way out of a world in which a working wife was a sign of family disaster, disgrace and humiliation. They reckoned their achievement in life by the leisure and comfort they could offer their families: the picture windows, the carpets, the air, the light, the safety. (1990: 171)

In the light of these lines, it is clear that the struggles of women to stand on their own feet and earn their own living are considered to be unnecessary and dangerous leading even to family catastrophe owing to the presence of a woman among the males. Therefore, the conflict between Praxis and Ivor takes place due to their different perspectives towards life. In this sense, the stress practised on women can be likened to the power inflicted on people in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. In his work, he portrays Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon' in which people are under constant observation, discipline and pressure; so they feel the necessity to control their attitudes (1979: 200). Similarly, Praxis also suffers from the constant surveillance, repression and power exercised by the male-dominated society, which causes the alienation and the isolation of women from the social life and working platforms. In the novel, the conservative approach of men towards women is dominant and this attitude demonstrates the clash between the female and the male perspectives. Like Ivor, Philip also defines women as “fundamentally immoral,” because for Philip, “they go after what they want, red in tooth and claw. Whether it's babies, or a man, or sex, or promotion, they let nothing stand in their way. They are barbarians” (1990: 195). This shows the prejudiced attitude of the male-dominated society regarding the struggles of women to find their female identities as immoral, useless and dangerous. Therefore, in order to eliminate such predicaments on the way of women, “the feminists needed narrative as a form within which to position women differently” (Kaplan, 1988: 32). Thus, the desires and efforts of women to achieve their targets are reflected in *Praxis*. Consequently, Praxis undertakes the role of the initiator of the women struggle by emphasizing the inequality between men and women and the passive status of women in the male-dominated society. She questions the problematic condition of women along these lines :

Our bodies betray us, leading us to love where our interests do not lie. Our instincts betray us, inducing us to nest-build and procreate – but to follow instinct is not to achieve fulfilment, for we are more than animals. Our brains betray us, keeping one step, for the sake of convenience to avoid hurt, behind the male. Our passivity betrays us, whispering in our ears, oh, it isn't worth a fight! (1990: 205).

In this respect, Praxis attempts to encourage the exploited and suppressed women to challenge against the hindrances that thwart their progress and self-discovery. Thus, although Praxis is regarded as the marginal one due to her background and desires, she never gives up. In this regard, it is significant that “[t]he exploration of the marginal in feminist writing projects the female as the place of patriarchy's Other, identified with the dark and discredited negative side of every polarity” (Connor, 1989: 229). Therefore, Praxis represents not only the Other in the

patriarchal society, but also the sufferings and endeavours of all the oppressed women. As a survivor in the male-dominated society, Praxis compares and contrasts the female with the male and concludes that the female is the loser:

Wherever she went she saw women betrayed, exploited, and oppressed. She saw that men's lives were without importance and that only the lives of women were significant. She lost her belief in the man-made myths of history-great civilizations, great art, great empire. The male version of events.  
(1990: 233)

In this aspect, she describes women as betrayed, exploited and oppressed by criticizing the selfish and the strict nature of men, so when she compares the burden on the shoulders' of women with the burden on men's shoulders, she deduces that the struggles of men and their achievements are exaggerated. Hence, "Weldon's work is doubly subversive. It both overturns "reasonable" narrative conventions and wittily deconstructs the specious terminology used to define women. Weldon's disobedient female protagonists – madwoman, criminals, outcasts, and she-devils – assert the power of the Other" (Dowling, 1998: 13-14). Unlike the narrative conventions that define women as merely restricted and repressed, Weldon illustrates the revival and challenge of women, who are considered to be the Other by attributing them the identity of mad and disobedient women, which will enable them to challenge, gain power against the authority of the male-dominated world and not to be silent.

In the light of the issues discussed, it is pointed out that those seen as oppressed and miserable turn out to be survivors and achieve discovering their female identities as seen in the novel: "Those whom she had privately regarded as rejected, humiliated, obsessive, angry and ridiculous, she began to see as brave, noble and attempting, at any rate, to live their lives by principle rather than by convenience" and she inspires women to gain self-confidence "to regard the outside world and see that it could be changed" (1990: 236). Consequently, through her feminist writing, Weldon highlights the power in the hands of women to alter their living and working conditions, to change the perspectives of men, to prove that they are equal to men. Similarly, Hutcheon also suggests that "feminisms have focused on the specifically female subject of representation and have begun to suggest ways of challenging those dominants in both mass culture and high art" (1989: 154). The women identified with suffering, powerlessness and domestic issues are encouraged to stand on their own feet and attain respectable positions in society by breaking the barriers around them and challenging the binary oppositions created by men, as a consequence the protagonist Praxis tries to motivate women as follows: "Why does it take so long? Why do we stay so stubbornly blind to our own condition, when our eyes are not only open, but frequently wet with grief and bewilderment?" (1990: 205). As the spokesperson in the novel, Praxis warns women about the threat waiting for them if they remain silent and blind without questioning the injustice they are exposed to.

To conclude, Fay Weldon sheds light on the feminist struggle and the challenge of women to abolish the impediments on their ways by reflecting the pain and the dilemmas of the protagonist, Praxis, together with the other female characters in patriarchal society. In this perspective, Praxis becomes the spokesperson in the novel voicing the gender problem and the destructive impact of the inequality between the female and the male upon women. As a consequence, there appears a feminist novel including the self-discovery of the female identity and the revival of feminist endeavour to achieve freedom.

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