

## A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF *PRAXIS*

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### Abstract

*The present paper tries to analyse Weldon's sixth novel Praxis (1978) from the feminist point of view. Weldon's work reflects her views on feminism and it makes rational comments on gender identity/construct. She accepts that she has a prejudice against men in the sense that it is in women's interest to change the way the world is, and it is not in men's interest. Praxis, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is Weldon's most ambitious novel which can be considered as a feminist novel. This novel is significant in the sense that, first time in her novel, there are direct references of women's liberation movement and feminism as such. The protagonist of the novel Praxis Duveen's life is narrated from the age of five up to the old age. In Praxis Weldon has come with strong arguments about women and why they are placed in the subordinate position in society. Praxis in her old age becomes feminist and the world leader of women when she becomes aware of women's exploitation in the male dominated society.*

**Key words:** feminism, gender identity, exploitation, motherhood, womanhood

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**F**ay Weldon, a significant modern British novelist of multi-dimensional achievement as a novelist, short story writer, dramatist, television movie writer, etc. So far she has a very successful career as a writer, publishing over twenty-five novels, collections of short stories, television movies, plays, and newspaper and magazine articles.

The present paper tries to analyse Weldon's sixth novel *Praxis* (1978) from the feminist point of view. Weldon's work reflects her views on feminism and it makes rational comments on gender identity/construct. When she is asked about her own opinion about feminism, she says that she chose her life-style a long time ago, before the Women's Movement, or women's consciousness was talked about. She was an unmarried mother in the 1950s and that was a salutary experience. She explains: 'I chose a life which seemed to provide good, and it has in many many ways, but I've also encountered the frustrations, the helplessness, the feelings of compromise and desperation which are in my characters.' (Wandor 163-64) She saw that what she was writing about could actually be organised into an ideology, a movement.

John Haffenden, in an interview with her, asks Weldon whether she agrees with the view that she is the most 'intelligent feminist novelist' which suggests that she has a campaign going on and she subscribes to it. Weldon responds that there are two prongs according to her: one is that one had better know oneself, and the other is that when she started writing, the structure of society was weighted very heavily against women and their lot was very obscure. She firmly believes 'that woman have to fight as much against their own nature as against the world or against men's behaviour' (312). She does not regard that there is any particular feminist writing which is central to her experience and

views. A whole body of opinion and comment has been fed into society, and no doubt picked up by her. According to her, women must fight in their natures, 'a lapsing back into the belief that you don't have to work and struggle because somebody will always be there to look after you' (312).

Weldon accepts that she has a prejudice against men in the sense that it is in women's interest to change the way the world is, and it is not in men's interest. When people ask her if she hates men, she usually replies that she does hate men because she thinks it's every woman's right to hate men if she wants. She does not call herself a feminist novelist because, she says:

... that would imply that the novels were written because I was a feminist. I am a feminist and I write novels, and because I believe feminism to be a true view of the world what I write is bound to come out to be feminist. You could advance the view that all good writing is bound to be feminist ... it depends on how you're going to define feminist. (Haffenden 313)

Weldon once emphasized that the solution to world problems lay with women and if the potential of women were released into society it would instantly transform itself. But now the picture is more confusing than they realised or hoped. Olga Kenyon asks her if she thinks women have a greater potential to be free than men, she explains that it is hard to tell as so few have it. She thinks:

If you removed the conditioning, I suspect we'd be much the same. Once differences become less, I'll be able to invent male characters more easily. What's exciting at the moment is that women writers are not only changing our view of character, they are changing our very language. (207)

*Praxis*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is Weldon's most ambitious novel which can be considered as a feminist novel. This novel is significant in the sense that, first time in her novel, there are direct references of women's liberation movement and feminism as such. The protagonist of the novel Praxis Duveen's life is narrated from the age of five up to the old age.

In *Praxis* Weldon has come with strong arguments about women and why they are placed in the subordinate position in society. Praxis in her old age becomes feminist and the world leader of women when she becomes aware of women's exploitation in the male dominated society. She points out that women are betrayed on all sides:

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 idleness betrays us, and our apathy . . . . 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! . . . We cringe and placate, waiting for the master's smile. It is despicable. We are not even slaves.

We betray each other. We manipulate, through sex: we fight each other for possession of the male – snap, catch, swallow, gone! Where's the next? We prefer the company of men to women. We will quite deliberately make our sisters jealous and wretched. We will have other women's children. And all in the pursuit of self-esteem, and so as not to end up cold and alone. (229-30)

Praxis tells women that 'it is not so bad to be old and alone.' Alan Wilde while commenting on Weldon's writing career says, 'Beginning with *Praxis* . . . something new enters, or at any rate . . . starts to dominate, the novels, making their feminism more urgent, bitter, comprehensive, and complex than it has heretofore been.' (409)

The old Praxis is not plagued by the worm anxiety which gnaws away at the foundations of human experience. She is free from anxiety because she has no one to love – parents, spouse, or children. Anxiety is part of women's lives more than it is men's because 'men shake it off more easily, and 'the worm Anxiety snips some nerve in the minds of women, and keeps their heads down.' (*Praxis* 133)

Praxis joins a group of women and becomes convert to the Women's Movement. She becomes editor of the broadsheet grown into a newspaper devoted to the wrongs done to women by society. She now notices wherever she goes women betrayed, exploited and oppressed, and believes that men's lives are without importance and that only the lives of women are significant. She loses her 'belief in the man-made myths of history – great civilisations, great art, great empire. The male version of events'(262). Praxis now realises that this was what she has in fact become. For her:

Ideas which once had seemed strange now seemed commonplace, and so much to her advantage that she was surprised to remember how in the past, she had resisted them. (261)

Praxis's life gets a critical turn when Mary writes to her that she has lost her job in Toronto in a big general hospital because she is pregnant by a married man at a party. Praxis slaps her for not using contraceptives or abstaining from sex. Praxis comes to see Mary in the hospital having a three-day old son. She finds that the son is mongoloid, and concludes that it is the end of Mary's career in Toronto. When Mary goes out to bathroom, she presses a pillow over the baby's face and murders it to save Mary's career. Out of sisterhood she dares to murder it as the handicapped child must have spoiled Mary's future. She is taken to prison where she receives letters from women supporting her: 'they wish they'd the courage to do what [she] did' (277). Women gather round the Black Maria as she leaves the court, tapping at windows. She is sentenced to two years imprisonment but women cheer her: 'We'll be waiting.' 'Don't give up.' 'Don't give in' (278). In the prison when one of the female prisoners asks her what right she has to murder the baby, Praxis says to her: 'She was my sister . . . All women are my sisters' (275).

When Praxis is released from the prison, she becomes 'every woman' and because of Phillip's film 'The Right To Choose' she has become known to all women. She does not want any special status or treatment in her life, it is not what she meant. She makes it clear in the end:

The pain in my soul, my heart, my mind, is not assuaged, as are my bodily aches and pains, by recognition and attention. I am surrounded, at too frequent intervals, by a babel of people, mostly women, either embarassingly servile, or self-consciously unimpressed . . . . I have been elected heroine. (282)

She concludes: 'I have thrown away my life, and gained it. The wall surrounding me is quite broken down . . . . That is quite enough' (283).

In *Praxis*, the heroine even commits incest intentionally to take revenge on her father who has deserted her mother, herself and her sister. Praxis makes love to her father and experiences orgasm that shakes her body. She has thus altogether demystified him and turned him from saint to client, from father to man, from someone who must be pleased to someone who could pleasure her. He is a natty, grey-haired old gentleman, spending the afternoon with a provincial whore, and that is all there is to it. As to being her father: he had renounced his rights to that a long time ago.

For Weldon's women sex is not just a physical activity between a man and a woman for procreation and pleasure. They enjoy extramarital relations with more than one men, and lesbianism and incest not only for pleasure but to escape themselves from the exploitative circumstances created by men. They are attracted towards and choose extramarital sex because their husbands are rude to them, and try to subvert women as wives. Praxis even goes to the extent of taking to whoring because Willy does not give her proper financial support. Though sometimes it appears that due to their obsession for sex with men, women allow men to exploit themselves, but they are marching towards sexual independence because as in *Remember Me* or in *Praxis* they prefer lesbian relations to heterosexual relations with men because 'this isn't a war, this peace' (*Remember Me* 186). Weldon once writes in *Praxis* that 'lesbianism was a higher state than heterosexuality: that there was affection, comfort, consolation to be found in girls; and only war with boys' (244).



Weldon in the chapter 'Arguments from nature' satirises the arguments made by patriarchy in the name of nature as an excuse to exploit, degrade and suppress women. As in *Down Among the Women*, the narrator says, 'A good woman knows that nature is her enemy,' (53) so also here Weldon explains how men exploit women in the name of nature. It is nature, they say, that makes women get married and crave to have babies. The old Praxis asks who this nature is – God, or 'our disposition, as laid down by evolutionary forces, in order to best procreate the species?'(147) She answers that the nature is women's disposition. She makes women cautious of it:

Nature does not know best, or if it does, it is on the man's side. Nature gives us painful periods, leucorrhoea, thrush, placenta praevia, headache, cancer and in the end death. . . . We must fight nature tooth and claw. Once we are past child-bearing age, this Nature, this friend, . . . disposes of us.

. . . sisters, when anyone says to you, this, that or the other is natural, then fight. Nature does not know best; for the birds, for the bees, for the cows; for men, perhaps. But your interest and Nature's do not coincide. (146-47)

Then she sums up her argument saying that Nature our Friend is an argument used, quite understandably; by men.

The old Praxis believes that there is hope in the new race of young women who are determined to please no one but themselves like Byzantia in *Down Among the Women*. The old Praxis calls them the New Women. She defines the New Women as she could barely recognise them as being of the same sex as herself. She describes their lives and habits:

If a man doesn't bring them orgasm, they look for another who does. If by mistake they fall pregnant, they abort by vacuum aspiration. If they don't like food, they push the plate away. If the job doesn't suit them, they hand in their notice. They are satiated by everything, hungry for nothing. They are what I wanted to be; they are what I worked for them to be . . . . They have found their own solution to the three-fold pain – one I never thought of.

They 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! (13-14)

Flora Alexander has rightly pointed out how *Praxis* represents women who are exploited of their womanhood in male-dominated society:

In *Praxis* the heroine Patricia or Praxis has . . . allegorical function of expressing the troubled life of women, accumulating experiences as daughter of a mad mother, prostitute, wife and mother, lover and eventually going to prison for having, out of a sense of sisterhood, killed the handicapped infant son of a friend, to release the child's mother from the responsibility of caring for him. (55)

Weldon also deals with another important issue and private female experience in her novels, that is, abortion. She rationalises her views on abortion in *Praxis* more thoroughly. Miss Leonard gets pregnant after she makes love with three men in a night. She wants to abort her child but no doctor is ready to help her. Those were the days of War and Praxis finds it extraordinary that in a world in which men are killing each other by the million, they should strike such attitude about an unborn foetus.

Once, Praxis takes part in a discussion on the reforms of the abortion laws on the television. Mary who is now a doctor writes to her about her views on abortion which points out the other side of the women who abort for pleasure. She says that she would do it happily for the older women, who at least knew what was going on and were as distressed as she was, but she resents having to do it for the girls who use her as a kind of last-ditch contraceptive, because they do not want their holiday interfered with. But for Praxis, whether to abort the foetus or not the choice must be given to the mother. She defends her killing of Mary's handicapped baby which might have spoiled Mary's career:

. . . logically there was no difference between contraception and abortion: that termination of pregnancy at any stage, whether the foetus was minus



nine months, six months, three months or plus one day, must be the mother's decision. (275)

Praxis puts her argument before the judge that she sees nothing worse in killing a four-day-old imperfect baby than in killing a four-month-old perfect foetus, except that it is more disagreeable to do. For Weldon as for *Praxis* 'the Right to Choose' must be given to a mother, whether to keep the child or to abort it, if it is harmful for the mother to keep it.

Thus Praxis, in her old age, narrates her life story to explore the account of her development from her miserable childhood to the world leader of women. Throughout her life Praxis gets humiliated and tortured by one or other men because they consider her as a sex object and nothing else. She becomes happy in her life only when she stops getting exploited as 'sex object' and revolts against this patriarchal notion either breaking her marriages or breaking her love relations with men. Whenever Praxis talks of herself, we come across her feminist views, and she even critically analyses women's life. She is a spokesperson of Weldon herself. Weldon takes a feminist stance and makes a critique of the patriarchal notions; but while doing so she also blames women for their weaknesses. She even comments on the issues relating to women like marriage, motherhood, abortion, sex, nature and the concept of the new woman. As she has clarified in her interview that she is partial to women, she proves herself as a feminist by her stance in this novel than in any of her other earlier novels.

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