

Achieved or Deceived: A Postfeminist Critique on Weldon's The Life and Loves of She-Devil

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ABSTRACT

The primary concern of postfeminist literature is the emancipation of modern women from the clutches of patriarchal characters in various literary works. Literary characters adopt multiple strategies to deal with submissive patriarchal practices in literary works. Ruth Patchett, the protagonist of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* by Fay Weldon, decides to transform herself physically and psychologically to avenge her patriarchal husband. This transformation resulted in her success at the end of the novel. The related literature on the novel appreciates Ruth's transformation from an "ugly duckling" to a she-devil. However, this study explores the negation of Ruth's self and her subjugation through the patriarchal ideals of femininity. Postfeminist literary theory has been used with the conceptual framework of *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf to draw the desired conclusion.

Keywords: *Femininity; Negation; Postfeminism; She-Devil; Subjugation*

Background

Developing a neo-liberal perspective, postfeminism has developed as a contradictory multidisciplinary concept that roots itself in media and popular culture. Having a conflicting nature in the sense that it has earned loathsome comments on one side but on the other side, it has celebrated the freedom of young postfeminists with a perspective of resistance, liberation, and identity of females. Developed with consumerist culture and popular media, postfeminism articulates a polar dichotomy with feminism regarding its 'multiple subject positions' (Genz & Brabon, 2017) and achievements. Consumerist ideology has uprooted the previously feminist concerns. It has restructured them as modern femininity in the postfeminist late twentieth century through media images and popular culture. Perhaps that is why

postfeminist women are rejoicing in their beauty and are more concerned about their bodily well-being. In other words, bodily self-expression and female beauty are the primary concerns of postfeminism. This, in its literary form, is the corpus of this study too.

Abdullah & Awan (2017) write that postfeminist literature is traced back to the female-centered novels of Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austin and thus encourages a craze for female beauty and a rebellious attitude toward conventions. According to Poovey, (1989), it offers a perspective of resistance that seems political, and this defiance is an essential theme of contemporary postfeminist literature. Such a view in postfeminist writings develops an argument about how the parameters of women's lives evolved in the current era. This change has redefined women's identities and roles in modern society. Smith (2008) argues that postfeminist literature structures a complex response to gendered identities and attempts to challenge and subvert cultural expectations about women as consumers, readers, and writers. In this regard, postfeminist fiction presents an exciting site to observe patterns of resistance, rebellion, self-determination, and constructing new gender identities in its subtleties, which is the focus of this study.

Postfeminist literature treats women as territory and educates them to become Barbie dolls that can have everything: career, family, beauty, youth, and sexual satisfaction. Novels like *The Life and Loves of She Devil* (1985) claim that "women are free: free from the constraints of feminism, tradition, objectivity, and stereotypes. They are free to choose anything and everything they want and are happy about this" (Iliet-Martinescu, 2015:124). Postfeminist literature, according to Harzewski (2011) presents female characters as financially independent but emotionally dependent. They struggle in their marital lives, where their beauty and bodily well-being are more important than their career (Harzewski, 2011). In this respect, postfeminist literature defines the lives of the female characters through consumerism, which indicates the social status concerning the consumption of material goods to achieve an ideal body. Consumerism is not about freedom but powerlessness – not simply about watching television or buying more shoes but about the alienation that occurs through the relationship between consumerism and identity. "Has style become so important to the [female] self that [female] individuals are becoming active [and reactive] agents in their trivialization and self-alienation?" (Lodziak, 2002:60). That is why O'Connor, (2011) claims that postfeminist literature is the commoditization of ideal beauty, which puts the female characters into a sense of mistrust and competition rather than universal sisterhood. They still define themselves in terms of their relationship with male characters. Postfeminist characters must "be young and beautiful if [they] want to be loved [and gain power in the postfeminist society]" (Green, 1998:2). Therefore, postfeminist literature is viciously associated with marketing women's desire for transformation. This transformation in the mentioned novel has been looked at critically in this research paper.

To argue that postfeminist literature is a profound shift from objectification to sexual subjectification of the female body would not be wrong. Women's identities are constructed by transforming their bodies into enchanting young women to be 'pleasing themselves'. This construction of a women's agency, which is free to please themselves, leads us to an essential question of how these socially constructed beauty ideals are made their own. Thus, the modern woman's freedom, liberation, and pleasure-seeking present a challenging task to the so-called postfeminist women.

The related research studies suggest that postfeminist literature juggles traditionalism and individualism in the literary characterization of women. Individualism and free choices in postfeminist literature

encourage female characters towards “I” instead of “We,” which puts them in a struggle against one another through the political motive of the beauty myth. The beauty myth is a social and cultural fixation of patriarchy influencing postfeminist characters. They became obsessed with their beauty and bodily expression. This has made them obedient to the cultural formulation of the patriarchal beauty myth, and thus it helps patriarchy to sustain its power in the women’s world. Wolf (2013) writes in *The Beauty Myth* that a “cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience” (187). This cultural construction of patriarchal beauty myth impacts women's representation in literary works. Postfeminist literature is characterized by sketching women who are more inclined towards their beauty and bodily expression. To achieve the ideal pattern of beauty, female characters in the literary works agree to painful surgeries, dieting, and other facets to become the “fittest” in the postfeminist “game of survival.” This game compels them to self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and painful transformation. In that case, postfeminism and literature are a shift from the objectification of women to the sexual subjectification of women.

Postfeminist literature has presented postfeminist women as ‘superwomen’: first, avenging patriarchy, and second, surviving well in the patriarchy through their “transformed” selves. However, it is worth noting that female protagonists are forced to negate their original ‘self’ to survive in the patriarchy and thus subjugated. Moreover, the transformation that happens to them is an ‘imposed womanhood’ that is improvised by the patriarchal politics in the selected novels. This has been done in such a politically disguised way that the protagonists seem to give their willing submission to the politically formulated beauty myth and find their choices of transformation as their own. That is why this study advances this dimension of the said genre through the selected novels to encounter the strong political working of the patriarchal ideology of the beauty myth that has influenced contemporary literature. In other words, the selected postfeminist novels present the self-negation and subjugation of the woman protagonists through the beauty myth and display their willing submission to the said political phenomenon. That is why there is still the need for an alternative paradigm that elevates women’s lives socially and literarily in the true sense. This study has confidently brought the attention of feminists towards a vital aspect of women’s subjugation and negation at the hands of the patriarchal politics in the women’s world in their presentation as characters in the literary genres, either by them or by male authors. This research study has questioned their celebration as a “postfeminist modern woman” who is in the misconception of being freed from the clutches of the patriarchy. Furthermore, it has focused authorial attention on the developing discourse of so-called postfeminist resistance through transformation by characters in the said genre.

This research study mainly examines the patriarchal politics of sustaining power structure in women’s writings through women. That is why it is focused objectively on writing critically on the postfeminist literary genre in relation to the postfeminist concept of the beauty myth and its impacts on contemporary women’s writings by discussing the selected postfeminist novels. However, this study has been limited to analyzing the subjugation and negation of the protagonist in Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. With this objective specifically, this study has addressed how subjugation and negation happen to the protagonist in the novel.

Methods

It must be noted that information gathered on the subjugation and negation of women from sources other than the selected novels as documentation of the feminist social reality has never countered the objective

of this research study. In the upshot, the textual analysis offers a deep understanding of the new dimension of postfeminism through the extracts taken from Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. This novel has been analyzed to explain the subjugation and self-negation of the character in the mentioned novel.

Conceptual Framework

Beauty myths made women conscious to think about their beauty. Fiction, since then, verbalized to women what they should look like and dictated time-consuming and thought-provoking behavior. However, women, too, have often encountered the waves and lashes of the submissions by their patriarchal masters. After the Industrial Revolution in the last decades of the 18th century, women started becoming economically independent like their male counterparts (Marx, 2016). This has been a serious challenge to the sustainability of patriarchal power, which is why patriarchy introduced the best way to weaken them psychologically and thus physically by setting beauty standards. Perhaps that is the reason Wolf (2013) writes that the "myth of beauty" is a violent counter-reaction to "Feminism", which has manipulated the advancement of females by using the idealized images of female beauty as a political weapon against them. Diet, cosmetics industries, and plastic surgeries work as a patriarchal impulse to generate unconscious anxieties in women. Unfortunately, these anxieties have reduced the "real woman" and meaning of "femininity" to formulaic images of beauty. In general, and in her family domain in particular, these images define female excellence in terms of her survival in the family life or success in the social circle. That is why women have become active consumers of this idealized beauty in pursuit of excellence. Thus, "survival of the fittest" guarantees a happy life in patriarchal power politics. Her economic success parallels her beauty because "whoever is beautiful, she is also rich" (Wolf, 2013: 145). In this case, if she wants to become a "superwoman," she has two challenges: first, to take on the burden of her work and household, and second, to preserve her beauty too for the smooth flow of her social and family life. These are the challenges posed by patriarchy.

Thus, patriarchy has renewed gendering through beauty and caused the double destruction of women. These beauty indexes have become "archetypes" for the young "superwomen" but are widely and willingly adopted too. That is why Wolf (2014) says in her interview at the Singapore Writers Festival that "the enemy is in our internalization." Wolf (2013) writes that the beauty myth is not about appearance but patriarchally prescribed behavior that oppresses women physically and psychologically. No matter how successful the woman is, this prescribed behavior gives a sense of "self-inferiority" that persists throughout her career. To overcome that, she goes through different transformations, sometimes psychological while many times physical. The following image explains the working of the patriarchal ideology of the beauty myth in the domain of controlling the women's life circle.

Theoretical Framework

Various feminist approaches can achieve the objective of this study; however, a postfeminist theory has been chosen to explain the anxieties, contradictions, and problems of modern young women. Gamble (2006) writes that post-feminism in literary studies and criticism develops a phenomenon that reads and analyzes both the texts and every day (female) life from a particular stance. Concerning it, postfeminist theory surrounds issues concerning the construction of women's femininity as portrayed in literary texts. It looks at the structure of the various discourses and representation of the literary characters through the prism of feminist politics of encountering patriarchal impositions and adjustment. In postfeminist literature, Smith (2008) writes that the craze of female characters for beauty, love, transformation, and (through that) rebellious attitude towards patriarchal convention is an in-fashion pattern of sketching the

literary characters, while postfeminist theory analyzes the representation of the literary characters. The politics of identity and power remain the concern of feminist literature and criticism.

Literature Review

The novel selected for the current study has been studied by various researchers through different perspectives. Davis (1991) has studied Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* regarding cosmetic surgeries and the challenges faced by feminists in the contemporary world. She takes the attention of the feminists towards the suffering of a woman who goes to transform her body through cosmetic surgery. She thinks "...that cosmetic surgery is the problem and not the solution" (Davis, 1991:22) for getting accepted in the patriarchal society and, therefore, must be disowned. Being an ill-informed consumer of the culture of beauty, a postfeminist woman has developed a "false consciousness" and has believed that through transformation, she would gain power and control. This is true in the case of Ruth, the protagonist of *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*, who goes through painful surgery to transform her body from an "ugly duckling" to an enchanting, lustful lady. She has also become "the victim of medical technology" (22) for getting the power and control over the patriarchal husband in the novel. Davis (1991) has highlighted the victimization of postfeminist women through the masculinist culture of beauty. The researcher has concluded that "women need to discover themselves and seek liberation from the oppressive norms of feminine beauty" (28). P. J. Smith (1993): Ruth's transition from an ugly duckling to an alluring woman earns her high praise for her act of retribution against her dishonest husband and Mary Fisher. Ruth caused Bobbo's financial collapse and eventual jail through several identity changes and heinous crimes while achieving success and good health. Her ultimate form of retaliation against the guilty couple is her transformation into Mary Fisher through plastic surgery, which entails both practically losing herself and figuratively becoming her opposite (255). Calling Ruth a "monstrous" woman in the novel *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*, Martin (1999) also investigates the approach of the feminist characters towards the culture of beauty. She has appreciated the atrocity of the protagonist, who enjoys power over men after transforming from a 'little ugly duckling' to a monstrous lady at the end. How does she suffer? Who made her monstrous lady? What did she lose? These questions are still being investigated. It is important to note that women find it hard to face their character flaws. Even when female monstrosity is addressed, they present a prejudiced image of themselves in which women's audacity is narrowly investigated. This is true about Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*.

Abdullah & Abdullah (2017) have considered the same novel to study the psychological impacts of the masculinist culture of beauty on a female's mind. They have argued that Ruth suffers from a hysteric psychological state because of her sexual violation by her husband. She fails to satisfy her eroticism due to her ill-tempted look, which is why she decides to transform her body. They believe that "Ruth reacted against the appropriation of her body and negligence she received from her husband through manifesting what she repressed through her body rather than through expressing this through speech" (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2017). Golban & Karlıp (2017) have looked at the postfeminist world of the mentioned novel as a fairy tale domain where the motif of beauty controls the postfeminist fairy Ruth in the novel. In this fairy tale domain, "not only in fairy tales but in today's world as well, the oppressive beauty norms and the struggle to achieve perfection become a problematical concern for most women" (219). The excessive fascination with beauty and the female body in popular culture exposes the artificiality of such obsessions, demonstrates their abusive and delusional nature, and shows how they harm one's identity.

They conclude with an argument that “[t]he virtue implied by beauty is greatly questioned and mocked in Weldon’s novel” (229).

Rivera (2019) has looked at the Menippean satire used by Fay Weldon in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. The argument made in this discussion is that Weldon uses this particular satiric technique in her book to tell a tale of radical female empowerment and growth that criticizes gendered expectations for marriage and women's roles in society. This thesis analyzes Weldon's portrayal of wives, husbands, and mistresses throughout the book, considering marital and family psychology and satire theory, most notably Mikhail Bakhtin's theories about Menippean satire. Through this conversation, Rivera disproves claims that Weldon's social commentary is anti-feminist and shows the value of Weldon's social critique. Similarly, Huma (2020) appreciates the re-creation of Ruth as a she-devil to encounter gender opposition and internalize the cultural representation of women in the novel. Ruth, a female monster, possesses the character of an archetypal and revenges a male-commanding displace over a female. She becomes a female villain of the patriarchy in the novel by transforming herself into an attractive and seductive woman full of charm. This transformation helps her secure a place in the community. These related reviews have generated a gap in looking at the novel from the perspective of self-negation that occurs to Ruth while avenging her husband and Mary Fisher in the novel. Thus, the corpus of this study is to fill this gap.

Discussion

Feminist discourse has been restructured, revealing how patriarchal moves dominate female appearance by creating standardized frames that women strive to fit into to gain societal acceptance. This patriarchal beauty standard leads to social challenges and physical suffering for women as they attempt to meet these ideals. The feminist discourse is therefore shaped through the female body, a direct locus of social control. Women must either deconstruct these imposed structures or find ways to survive within the patriarchal framework. Postfeminism, particularly the third wave of feminism, offers solutions for women to adapt to patriarchal society by emphasizing the importance of achieving the "perfect" feminine look, which involves monitoring body shape and skin complexion. Characters like Ruth Patchett in literature illustrate this struggle. Ruth's journey in "*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*" by Fay Weldon shows the extreme lengths to which women go to achieve societal acceptance and emotional attachment (Weldon, 2013). Ruth, initially described with a natural and less conventionally attractive appearance, experiences emotional abuse from her husband, Bobbo, who compares her unfavorably to the more stereotypically beautiful Mary Fisher. Bobbo's derogatory terms and comparisons push Ruth to undergo a dramatic transformation.

Ruth's transformation from her natural self to an "Other Self" reflects a critical issue highlighted by Simone de Beauvoir in "*The Second Sex*" (2011). Women are mythologized as the "Other," inferior to men, and thus must modify themselves to be accepted. This self-modification, a part of patriarchal culture, earns them a place in society but comes at the cost of their true identities. Ruth's story is celebrated by some scholars as a feminist triumph, yet it's argued that her achievements were only possible through compliance with patriarchal beauty standards. Ruth's journey underscores how women are often manipulated by patriarchal norms. Initially, she is a good wife and mother, but her natural appearance leads to rejection and emotional torture by her husband, who idealizes Mary Fisher's beauty. Ruth recognizes the importance of conforming to patriarchal beauty ideals to gain societal acceptance

and decides to transform herself. This transformation, involving physical and psychological changes, highlights the societal belief that beauty equates to success and acceptance.

Naomi Wolf, in "The Beauty Myth: How Images Are Used Against Women" (2013), explains how beauty standards are used to control women, suggesting that beauty is seen as necessary for women's success and reproductive value. Ruth embodies this myth, undergoing painful surgeries to achieve an idealized beauty that she believes will bring her acceptance and power (Wolf, 2013). In "Fat is a Feminist Issue" (2016), Susie Orbach argues that a woman's body is not her own and must conform to societal ideals. Ruth's extensive physical modifications reflect this idea as she sacrifices her identity to meet patriarchal beauty standards. Her transformation is both celebrated and critiqued within the narrative. While she gains power and revenge on her husband and Mary Fisher, she also loses her sense of self, becoming a copy of the very ideal she initially opposed (Orbach, 2016).

Fay Weldon's novel illustrates the paradox of Ruth's transformation (Weldon, 2013). While she escapes domestic subjugation, she becomes entrapped in the tyranny of beauty, exchanging one form of imprisonment for another. Her extreme makeover, intended as a rebellion against patriarchal norms, ultimately reinforces these norms. Ruth's story demonstrates that challenging the status quo can sometimes lead to further entrenchment in societal structures rather than liberation. In conclusion, Ruth Patchett's journey in "The Life and Loves of a She-Devil" reflects the broader struggle of women against patriarchal beauty standards. Her transformation shows the extreme lengths to which women go to achieve societal acceptance, often at the cost of their true identities. This story underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the complexities of feminist discourse and the challenges women face in navigating patriarchal structures.

Conclusion

Ruth's character in the novel represents a typical woman rather than a pro-woman who determines herself a homemaker and is contented to play her role as a good wife and mother. However, she is neglected and dishonoured because of the value system of patriarchy. Patriarchy in the novel appreciates beautiful, dependent, and passive women like Mary Fisher. In the patriarchal norms, the more a woman qualified for the imposed femininity, the more she secured in the patriarchal society of the novel. While the more she wanted to be a pro-woman like Ruth, ignoring the patriarchal norms, the more she is negated in the novel. Ruth wanted to become a pro-woman and live with her own identity, but patriarchy in the novel forced her to transform. This transformation from a good housewife to a she-devil was not her choice; patriarchy made it her choice. In other words, she did not achieve good social status; the patriarchy deceived and negated her identity. She did not want to be a monstrous lady but became a she-devil. Ruth gains nothing but adopting and accepting patriarchal norms. She suffers a lot to secure herself in the patriarchal society. The feminine ideals of the patriarchy in the novel compel her to change herself physically and psychologically. To achieve status in the patriarchal society of the novel, she was forced to abnegate her self-identity and achieve the patriarchal norms of femininity. Thus, she achieved when deceived.

In conclusion, Weldon's *The Life and Loves of She-Devil* seems more an anti-feminist work than otherwise because it encourages more the patriarchal practices that compel females in the novel to negate themselves and subjugate to the feminine ideals defined by the patriarchy. The novel puts the female characters not only in physical pain but also stretches them deep into psychological struggle. It

justifies the patriarchal standards of ideal femininity for the postfeminist woman and thus manipulates the feminist moment of emancipation of women. Through the character of Ruth, Weldon encourages the concept that until a woman does not accept the imposed femininity of the patriarchy, she cannot be secure and prosperous.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: Not applicable.

Acknowledgement: Sincere appreciation to the supervisor and institution for all of the help that was provided in getting this manuscript ready.

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