



Working Mother and Stay at Home Father: An Analysis of Gender-Role Conflict in “The Weekend” by Fay Weldon

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ABSTRACT:

One of the attributes of the contemporary society is the gender-role conflict and the consequent dissatisfaction among both genders. The same gets reflected in the relevant literature. This paper seeks to analyse the modern day dilemma of the unbalanced gender role divisions as portrayed in the short story titled *Weekend* by Fay Weldon. The short story *Weekend* addresses the topic through the story of Martha and Martin. While Martha is a working mother, Martin works from home. Much of the existing research on this short story has been with respect to the character of Martha and her apparent plight and although the story is Martha’s “stream of consciousness” the psychoanalytical reading is missing. This paper seeks to analyse gender role expectations and the resultant conflict which arises due to its disturbance. In order to make the analysis the paper has taken help from psychological studies done in the field with a special focus on Gender Role Conflict Theory (GRC) by James O’Neil. This paper would add to the research in the field of women studies with respect to the changes that have occurred in the roles assigned to them after the Enlightenment period in European context.

Key Words: Fay Weldon, Gender Roles, Gender Role Conflict, Feminism

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Feminism has come with a consequence. While Cixous has introduced “écriture féminine” and Simone de Beauvoir discusses the female body (Norton Anthology) and talks of liberating it from shame, women at large have ended up modelling the masculine so that the new gender role assigned to them by the modern society is hybrid. They are expected to fulfil both masculine and feminine roles, so that they are nurturers as well as providers for the families, this creates an overburden and results in them being more dissatisfied than before. “...gender roles have changed the shifts have been asymmetric in the sense that women have entered male-dominated jobs in recent decades” (Kray et al 98). Although enlightenment has elevated the status of a woman to an individual possessing the right to vote and accepted women as authors, it has overburdened women with responsibilities both at home and outside. As a result, they are now expected to earn as well as contribute financially so that the level of discontent has increased multi-fold instead of decreasing. While describing the factors which contribute to the gender role conflict within modern Europe, Deborah Simonon writes: “After French Revolution ... Social morality and the cult of the home overhang views of work and inevitably shaped the context within which women, and indeed men, worked” (87). Short story *The Weekend* by Fay Weldon portrays the scenario in the story of a modern London resident couple going to spend their weekend in their cottage at the countryside. The narrative provides a comparison and contrast of the two genders, the role specified to them by society and the resultant dissatisfaction on the individual as well as at the relationship level. This paper seeks to analyse the gender role division in the context of the story and how the context is built, the gender role expectations constructed within the story and the elements that construct it, the factors which govern these social roles, the gauges against which Martha measures her worth and the outcomes/consequences/impacts of this gender role conflict. The study would be cushioned against James O’Neil’s theory on gender-role conflict. O’Neil’s theory caters to the gender role conflict within the males. This research would also determine whether the theory could be applied to a female character within the context of the story and if not, why?

Although much acclaimed within the reading circles, Fay Weldon’s *The Weekend* has not been critically evaluated in all its scope. The story has a very clear feminist viewpoint and in that a couple of articles have been written on it. An article titled “Weekend by Fay Weldon – Martha’s Life” discusses Martha’s plight and the monotony in her life. A much-detailed review can be found in an article by Dominik Borner. This article discusses the story in comparison with “To Room 19” by Dorris Lessing. The main focus of this study is the “characters and themes”, “responsibilities and desires”, “reason versus emotion”, “different ways of displaying oppression”, “differences of characters”, “differences in settings and perspective”. In that it is a comparative study and caters mainly to the thematic concerns. The narrative of the short story is, however, a literal insight into Martha (the protagonist’s) mind. Still the writer has very clearly constructed a comparison and contrast between what is and what appears to be in the mind of the female protagonist. Martha then becomes the embodiment of the ‘modern European woman’ and a product of enlightenment and feminism. She is discontent and wary and always falling short of her own expectations, the major factor which contributes to her plight is her internal conflict portrayed by the stream of consciousness technique. A study of this conflict is therefore important in getting an in-depth understanding of Fay Weldon’s work and the plight of a modern woman who expects herself to perform, both in personal and domestic fronts under the pressure of feminism.





Gender roles are the roles assigned to the genders. There is a debate as to whether these assigned roles are biological, or society induced. Major theorists of the field generally agree that these are society induced. Usually, males are associated with roles associated with physical attributes, so that male becomes the bread winner of the family, and the female is associated with the domestic roles, she is traditionally the caretaker. If, however, either of the two genders take up roles which are not specific to them a sense of unrest and dissatisfaction is created which results in a psychological conflict. "Gender role conflict (GRC) is defined as a psychological state in which the socialized male gender role has negative consequences for the person and others" (O'Neil qtd in Cormac et al 17). In the context of the story "The Weekend", the gender role conflict is more pronounced in Martha's case, as compared to that of Martin. One of the most important reasons for this is that the narrative takes into account Martha's perspective, there is an insight into her psychological self, whereas her physical self is largely muted. She appears as a "robot" programmed into self-negation and over provision. Martin on the other hand is denied this privilege within the narrative. He is physically active but psychologically under-represented in the story. It is noteworthy that gender role conflict affects not only the individual but also the other people around them. In "The Weekend", Martha's predicament affects the people around her too. This is evident from the fact that Martin points it out to her that she should make the cleaning lady do more work. Also, towards the end of the story all Katie, Martin and Colin ask Martha to take it easy and rest a little but she cannot. "GRC occurs when rigid, sexist, or limiting gender roles result in restriction, devaluation, or violation of self and/or others" (Cormac et al, 17). Martha is therefore devalued and restricted due to the gender role she ascribes to herself or is ascribed to by her husband and society.

"Martin had a horror of clothes lines which might spoil the view. He toiled and moiled all week in the city simply to get a country view at the weekend. Ridiculous to spoil it by draping it with wet towels" (Weldon) The debate between the pre-enlightenment model of a woman and that after it has been a popular one recently. "While the Enlightenment model of woman, as companion to man, ... might have offered more scope for individuality and personal development, instead it placed a premium on woman as educator of children, preserver of morality, and increasingly as creator of a haven for men and children" (Simonton Domesticity, the invention of housework ... 88). This puts undue pressure on the woman and makes her responsible for the well-being of the entire family. As a result, the balance is tipped, which results in psychological unrest within both the genders. This predicament of woman is depicted in the story in question as well. "The CBWFR factor was not designed to measure GRC in women but 'the results suggest that some aspects of GRC may be universal' for both sexes (Liu et al. qtd in Cormac et al). However, contemporary theorizing suggests that masculinity and femininity are germane to both men and women" (Cormac et al 27).

The story opens with the mention of the division of labour between the couple Martin and Martha. Martha is expected to be complete in herself, a true woman. Simonton explains that "The 'cult of true womanhood' was pre-eminently a bourgeois ideology, which was never completely satisfactory for many middle-class women, but which had even more complex implications for working-class women" (Domesticity, the invention of housework ... 87). The working woman was then left with an unrealistic share of work, where she had to contribute financially towards her household and invest in it in all fields of her being, that is, physical, psychological, emotional etc. This left her drained, unhappy, and dissatisfied, which in turn didn't only affect her but all those associated with her as well. Martha was responsible for packing the luggage, making snacks,



putting them in car, doing laundry and cleaning, picking up the cat from one neighbour and dropping it off at the other. In that, she holds responsibility for all the members of the family, along with the cat, the house and even the cottage. The responsibility is depicted through the narrative which holds Martha responsible for everything. However, the obligation is self-inflicted. She feels indebted to Martin for allowing her to work, although it was “her perfect right” (Weldon), it was not good for the welfare of the children. Still, it was Martha’s responsibility, and she took it at that. She had a cleaning lady but did most of the work herself. The fact that Martin reminds her of this shows that the division of labour is Martha’s own choice and not forced by Martin.

Multiple factors contribute to develop the expectations regarding the gender roles within the context of the story. The most explicit of these is Martha’s monologue to herself, but there are other factors like, Martin’s dialogue and the characters of Janet, Katie and Collin. Martha judges herself, when Martin complains about her old car, she takes it personally and interprets it as a slur on her physical appearance. “Martha worries about her age, her tendency to complain, and the width of her hips” (Weldon). The inner workings of Martha’s mind are proven to be harsher in establishing gender role expectations as compared to external factors.

She takes Martin as a reference point and a gauge against which she measures herself worth. She is in constant need of his approval. “Martin doesn’t like Martha to sleep while he drives” (Weldon). She judges herself for falling asleep while Martin drives. This results in constant anxiety on her part. Martha appears to be up-tight and constantly passes judgements on herself. While trying to engage her children by showing them scenery, the narrative reprimands her on getting Concorde wrong by calling her stupid. At this instance it is difficult to judge the source of the slighting remark. It could be from Martin, Martha or the writer. It serves to mark Martha as “stupid” and when later she refers to Stonehenge for the benefit of the children, the children call her off by saying that they’ve seen Stonehenge many times.

The greatest wish in Martha’s life seems to be to secure the affection of Martin. She derives no pleasure out of physical intimacy, her prime focus seems to be her husband’s fulfilment. “Sex! Ah sex. Orgasm, please. Martin requires it: Well, so do you. And you don’t want his secretary providing a passion you neglected to develop. Do you? Quick, quick, the cosmic bond. Love. Married love” (Weldon). She then puts up an expectation of herself regarding her physical appeal and her assertiveness and aggression. Another factor which serves to put up expectation for Martha in terms of physical attractiveness is the character of Katie. “Katie was languid, beautiful and elegant. She drawled when she spoke. Her hands were expressive: her feet were little and female. She had no children” (Weldon). Katie was the person men felt attracted to while she appears to be putting up minimum of effort for the cause.

She concedes to Martin’s physical advances despite her tiredness. “Don’t do it tonight, darling”, ““It’ll only take a sec’. Bright smile, not a hint of self-pity. Self-pity can spoil everyone’s weekend” (Weldon). She does not allow herself to feel down at the risk of spoiling fun for others. Martha gets confronted with her conflict regarding her gender role in terms of Katie. Katie seems to be far from perfect, a self-pleasing individual, yet, she is more appealing for the males, who enjoy her company and seem to be more satisfied in her presence. “Dishes were boring, Katie implied by her manner, and domesticity was boring, and anyone who bothered with that kind of a



thing was a fool. Like Martha” (Weldon). The expectation is then to be physically, psychologically and emotionally present at all times at the expense of the self.

The narrative is designed in a way that although the main voice is that of Martha, there are various factors in shape of characters, circumstances or voices which take part in shaping the expectations from the characters. The most dominant of these is that of Martha’s mother. Although dead and absent from the main stream narrative, Martha’s mother is the single most influential factor in shaping her thoughts, actions and feelings. ‘Don’t get like your mother darling’ exclaims Martin, after which there is an explanation of Martha’s mother. “Martha’s mother had led a secluded, suspicious life, and made Martha’s childhood a chilly and lonely time”. (Weldon). The description then leads into Martha’s comparison of her life with that of her mother, making her hold onto everything she had, firmly and contently. “Much of what a girl learned about the life she was to lead as an adult was acquired from women around her, especially mothers and other female relatives, thus forging another link in the female network” (Simonton 64). The mother daughter relationship then becomes an important factor through which role expectations are acquired by Martha. The link within the chain is completed when, towards the end of the story, Martha finds out that her daughter is menstruating. The last sentence of the story, “Her daughter Jenny, wife, mother, friend” (Weldon) sums up the entire picture and provides the reader with the understanding that the cycle would be completed. This is also the instance where it is hinted that the roles were defined as such and are repeated generation after generation in a similar cycle.

“GRC is theorized to be experienced in three contexts: (a) within the self, (b) caused by others, and (c) expressed toward others” (Cormac et al 25) The role division as the bread winners/providers of the family is also an important factor which results in a general sense of dissatisfaction within Martha. Martha was “a market researcher in an advertising agency, he a freelance designer” (Weldon). “The ‘growth in female employment, is accompanied in many European countries by a fall in male employment, the diversification of household structures” (Brannen 76). Martha’s self is the most critical of her. The narrative of the story reveals that it is not the outside factors but the internal commands given by Martha to herself which affects her the most, so much so that a reader is often obliged to question whether there is indeed some other factor or just Martha’s self which is tormenting her. When Martin passes a comment on Martha’s car, she ends up questioning herself. “Martha worried about her age, her tendency to complain, and the width of her hips” (Weldon), similarly there are many instances in the story where Martha literally commands herself to negate her wishes and desires for the benefit of others. “Martin doesn’t like Martha to sleep while he drives” (Weldon) and then “Martin can’t bear bad temper ...” (Weldon). There are multitude of instances throughout the story which reflect that much of the ordeal that Martha is going through is of her own making. The gender role conflict then affects her the most within herself.

The external factors which affect Martha in terms of gender role conflict are often appear as dialogues by other characters. “Don’t get like your mother darling” is the expected answer from Martin should Martha say anything about the way he spoke about her car. Similarly, when she points out towards the Stonehenge, the children exclaim “Mother, we’ve seen Stonehenge a hundred times. Go back to sleep” (Weldon). The very dismissing way in which her family responds to Martha comes across as the outside forces which portray the gender role conflict within her. The presence of other characters, like her mother, her childhood history with her, Colin, Martin and





Katie. The way the males respond to Katie as opposed to their behaviour with Martha and the comparison between Janet and Katie which Martha draws for herself are the factors which affect Martha from the outside in terms of gender role conflict.

Martha is a character who is largely mute during the course of the story. Her monologue is only for the benefit of the reader and her lack of expression with the other characters becomes a source of her discontent. She feels things and prohibits herself from expressing them, thus the self-censor affects others in a way that it stops a bond from forming, making Martha aloof and dissatisfied. This attitude also stops a bond from forming causing all of Martha's relationships to be strained and she doesn't seem to form a bond with anyone, may it be her mother, her husband, her children or her guests. The only character she identifies with is that of Janet, who is as unhappy as her and is left by her husband. This is how gender role conflict affects Martha in three domains of the self. "The psychological domains of GRC imply problems that occur at four overlapping and complex levels—cognitive, emotional (affective), behavioral, and unconscious—and are caused by restrictive gender roles learned in sexist and patriarchal societies. (O'Neil et al 12). The analysis of the story done so far reflects all of these domains being affected by gender role conflict in Martha's life.

"Women's participation in the paid labour force is an indicator of women's achieved status in a community" (Mahon 153). In the context of the story however, Martha's status is not exalted. She has ended up making sacrifices on all fronts for she is guilty of pursuing her career goals on the expense of her children's well-being. As a result she is held responsible for it. She ends up hurrying about everything and everybody. The aids for her pursuit of career, like the cleaning lady, have to be paid by her. She loses on the domestic front as well as in her work life as she had to take long leaves for the benefit of her children which resulted in her losing her seniority. She is however, forbidden to complain. All this results in a general sense of discomfort and dissatisfaction within her character that comes across as gender role conflict. "... in relation to the sharing of the workload or looking after the children, the weight of which rests mainly on the woman's shoulders" (Bimbi and Catellani qtd in Mahon 191). If we read "The Weekend" in the broader context of the European society, the burden put on the shoulders of the woman becomes apparent in the case of Martha and Janet. Katie however, is another woman who refuses to be burdened by this infliction. It is noteworthy though that Katie is unmarried, doesn't have children and defies marriage. It is then not only the society but the institution of marriage which demands conformity from a female. "... subjective modes of reconstructing reality often appears to differ ... between the two partners about their respective educational and interpersonal roles" (Giovanni and Molinari qtd. In Mahon 192).

"The Weekend" is a short story which presents a model of modern European society and the gender roles prescribed by it. It reflects the resulting abnormality within the gender role division in modern European society. Martha as a model of a modern working woman comes across as over-burdened and conflicted in her psychological self. The resultant gender conflict has consequences for herself, her family and her community. This paper does not exhaust all possibilities of research in the area, further study can be conducted on the space-identity conundrum of Martha and her household space.

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