REVIEW ESSAY

Clara Connolly

Sacred Cows, Fay Weldon, Chatto *CounterBlasts* no. 4: London, 1989, £2.99 Pbk, ISBN 0-7011-3556-5.

Of all the statements that the Rushdie controversy has produced, by far the most shocking that I've read has been Fay Weldon's *Sacred Cows*. I suppose this is because I expected to be able to share many of her views: she has been Rushdie's most consistent and courageous champion within the British literary establishment; she is a feminist who identifies women as the main victims of fundamentalism; and she has rightly attacked the muddled thinking behind current concepts of multiculturalism.

She writes throughout in a tone that is meant to startle and unsettle us out of what she calls 'our agreeable and passive over-tolerance of everything and anything'. What is truly startling, however, is the ease with which she retreats from this kind of cultural relativism (endemic, she believes, to 'leftish humanist feminists' like herself) to some of the stalest and most overworked myths in British culture: the superiority of Christianity over Islam ('The Bible is at least food for thought. The Koran is food for no-thought', p. 6); the defence of high culture, particularly literary, against the vulgar products of mass civilization ('How much is "good" on TV? Very little', p. 20); and the right of an intellectual élite to decide what's good for the rest of us:

I do not believe it is beyond human ingenuity to restrain persons of low calibre who commit blasphemy against the God of my choice . . . whilst allowing, indeed encouraging, Salman Rushdie to speak in parables in His service (p. 20).

I couldn't resist giving you these quotations to convey some of the

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flavour of Weldon's pamphlet. However, for present purposes I will restrain myself to taking issue with her on two subjects of particular relevance to feminists: her views on censorship, particularly of Page 3; and of multiculturalism as it mediates relations between Black and white women.

The good, the bad and the ugly

'To say that Page 3 was responsible for the Rushdie Affair may be going a little too far, but not all that far' (p. 17). Weldon seems to believe that 'Muslims' (a completely homogeneous category) are burning *Satanic Verses* as a protest against the decadence of Western society, its most offensive aspect (to her, and therefore, she assumes to them) being Page 3 of *The Sun*. Take the boobs off Page 3, and maybe the Asians will stay off the streets.

Such simplifications are both dishonest and dangerous. However sincere her loathing of Page 3, there is undoubtedly an element of opportunism in her choice of target and in her invocation of the name of Clare Short. Thus she can put a feminist gloss on her distaste of British popular culture in general. She is able to flex her respectable feminist muscles to support a position which might otherwise be regarded as elitist.

Secondly, it is dishonest to suggest that women – all women – have common cause with Muslim fundamentalists 'who put their own women in total protective clothing'. She can argue that the veil is in the interests of women only at the expense of ignoring feminists across the world – most notably Iranian women in their thousands after the revolution – who have fought against its enforcement. Of course there are Asian and Arab feminists also who have supported the wearing of the veil, but she seems unaware that it is an issue for debate amongst them. It is surprising that Fay Weldon hasn't heard the words of fellow-novelist Nawal El Saadawi, for example, who says: 'men remain the medium through which [the Arab woman] understands religion. Naturally, men interpret the religion according to their own interests and place themselves in the position of the powerful majority, imposing submission on women' (1988: 19).

Weldon's position is all the more dangerous because she fails to recognize the growth of *Christian* fundamentalism, both here and in the States. In making common cause with fundamentalists against Page 3, (though not on other issues) she fails to distinguish between feminist critiques of pornography and other, more traditional objections to sexual expression. It could be said that this failing is common amongst feminist campaigners against pornography, who in their eagerness to popularize their cause lay themselves open to the danger of contributing to the growth and influence of the Moral Right, capable as it already is of seriously challenging feminist voices on the abortion issue. Feminists cannot afford to be mistaken about the nature of all religious funda-

mentalisms – their effective target is always women's control over our lives and sexualities. It is counterproductive to seek alliances with such enemies on a moral crusade, in whatever cause.

This is probably not Fay Weldon's conscious intention. Nevertheless, her impatience with public taste suggests a very dubious solution to her: censorship, not at the point of distribution, as at present, but at the point of production, 'imposed on the maker's end' (p. 22). Has she seriously thought through the implications of this proposal? At least the present regulations allow for some measure of semi-public debate. The very existence of the film, or book, is its best defence against an arbitrary decision by the censors. How could Fay Weldon herself have defended the Nigel Wingrove film, *Visions of Ecstasy*, against charges of blasphemy if its production rather than its viewing had been banned?

Anyway, censorship of whatever kind is a dangerous method of education in public morality. Only those who have every confidence in the law and its method of enforcement, who can see the legal system as clearly on 'our' side, can easily contemplate it. Pratibha Parmar rightly warns: 'censorship of any kind has always had disastrous and repressive effects for communities without access to power' (1988: 125). This is equally true for minority communities battling to challenge orthodox versions of events like Broadwater Farm, and for minority groups – like feminists and lesbian and gay organizations – challenging current norms of morality.

Neither here, nor anywhere else in the pamphlet, are Fay Weldon's arguments consistent or thorough. I often felt I was eavesdropping on unguarded expressions of witty irritation she would indulge in at the dinner table with friends. It is highly irresponsible to commit such grumblings to the wide distribution that Chatto can provide.

Us and them and multiculturalism

Listen to what she has to say about white feminists:

too involved in rooting out ideological heresies to worry about the fate of Muslim women in our midst . . . pleasanter, easier to be seen on the side of the ethnic minorities, all in favour of the multicultural, too idle to sort out the religious from the racial, from the political; too frightened of being labelled white racist, elitist, to interfere (p. 35).

Few of us will not smile – or squirm – at this description. There is undoubtedly some truth in it: we have too easily allowed multiculturalism to stand between ourselves and Black feminists. How many feminist teachers have organized a Divali assembly, but ignored the racist bullying of Asian children in the playground? How many feminist social workers, assuming that Black communities (but not white ones) are homogeneous, have hesitated to support a woman leaving her family, and thereby her 'community?' – have hesitated to take into care

Black children suffering from paternal violence because of half-baked notions about Black families being 'stricter'?

Not that there is anything wrong with multiculturalism, if it means respect for cultural difference. It is just that racism – in all its institutional and material forms – cannot be reduced to the lack of it. So multiculturalism cannot be substituted for an attack on racism. And, as practised by many local authorities – particularly among its 'caring' professions, it is often unable to recognize sex and class divisions among the ethnic minority communities. Self-styled community leaders – often drawn from the most conservative elements – are allowed to speak for all, at the expense particularly of Black women. (For a spirited development of this argument see Sahgal, 1989).

I have deliberately chosen examples from education and social work, because it could certainly be considered within one's line of duty in these spheres to 'worry' or 'interfere' (in Weldon's words). But organized feminism is a different matter; it hasn't been about taking action on behalf of others, but on our own behalf. The women's movement is not a rescue service. So what would Weldon have white feminists do, once we've disencumbered ourselves of multiculturalism?

This is where her analysis falters. All she has to say of Black feminists is the following: 'too put upon by the black brothers, who insist that any white interference is by definition racist . . . to dare say no, no, we are all sisters: our problems are the same' (p. 36). Where has she been, these last ten years? It is true that Black feminists in the early 80's challenged white feminism – dominated as it was by separatism at the time – to recognize the necessity of working with men, against racism. But they have also campaigned against domestic violence in their own communities, and organized a network (still fragile and unsupported) of Black women's refuges, alongside numerous campaigns for women facing deportation on separation from their husbands (our problems are not *all* the same, Fay).

It is this history of campaigning on women's issues – often in the teeth of Black and white antiracist hostility – that has given some Black women the confidence to hold a public meeting in defence of Salman Rushdie in the heart of one of London's Asian communities (see *Feminist Review*, no. 33, p. 110 for the statement released after this meeting). The same women, encouraged by the response at this event, went on to found a network of Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF). This is an active group of Black and white women from many religious backgrounds who are campaigning for the abolition of the blasphemy laws, and the ending of state subsidies for all religious schools. WAF believes that a secular state is a pre condition for a genuinely pluralist Britain.

Fay Weldon, in contrast, argues for the American model of uni-culturalism: 'let the child do what it wants at home; here in the school the one flag is saluted, the one God worshipped, the one nation acknowledged' (p. 32). Here her thinking is absolutely at one with the Tory right, who would like to see Christianity reimposed in state

schools, and British values inculcated. Weldon's position will only serve to fuel the rising demand for subsidized Muslim schools. But perhaps more extraordinary is her lack of criticism of British nationalism, at a time when we are the disgrace of Europe (which itself doesn't set very high standards) for our narrow xenophobia.

Is she seriously suggesting that we offer a 'British' identity to Black children at a time when Blackness is excluded from definitions of Britishness? What we need, rather, is an antiracist education policy that would include a genuine examination of Britain's colonial past and racist present. (Multiculturalism won't do as a substitute – it professes an interest in *other* cultures and leaves 'Englishness' inviolate). Education, if it is of this kind, can make a long overdue contribution to a broader, more inclusive and more tolerant definition of Britishness than the current one.

WAF received a considerable amount of publicity – not all of it welcome or supportive, from the liberal, white, pro-Rushdie media – because of its picket of the Muslim anti-Rushdie March of 27 May in London last year. How could Fay Weldon have missed it? I suspect this is because it would fit uncomfortably with her thesis – shared by the multiculturalists – that white, Christian or ex-Christian liberals have the monopoly on enlightened values. She believes that 'we' could – if only we would – speak and act on behalf of 'them' – the Black sisters, the Muslim women left to their miserable fate. The only difference between herself and the multiculturalists she denounces is that they have the grace to maintain an uneasy silence on what she bravely asserts – the superiority of a white, Christian morality.

But the real battle-lines are not as Fay Weldon has drawn them in her superficial account of the Skirmish of the Texts. How do we address the brutal forms of racism that corrode relations between Black and white people in this country – including between Black and white women? How do we, at the same time, challenge the claims of the fundamentalists who speak in the name of antiracism, but who threaten to further restrict the destinies and choices of women? That discussion – a complex one – has already started, but it needs serious and sustained contributions from us all.

Note

For further details about Women Against Fundamentalism contact Southall Black Sisters, 52 Norwood Road, Southall, Middlesex, telephone 01 571-9595.

Clara Connolly is a member of both *Feminist Review* and Women Against Fundamentalism.

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