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Images of Women and Patriarchy in Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend*

When Helen Zahavi's novel, *Dirty Weekend*, was first published in 1991, it became almost at once the subject of a wide-ranging debate, not only about the theme of sexual violence which it takes up, but also about the explicit way in which the author dealt with it. In an interview with Zahavi which was made in Paris, where Zahavi now lives, Libby Brooks refers to the uproar which the novel caused in Britain. She writes that Zahavi's tale of vengeance "sent the liberal literati into serious hysterics," quoting some of the more extreme reactions which it produced:

Nicci Gerrard in the *Observer* found the novel "more offensive than pornography," Angela Lambert in the *Independent* declared it "obscene," while the *Sunday Times* published a poll of psychiatrists debating whether the author was bonkers. "It sounds like this woman hates men very much," declared one outraged academic, without having read the book. (8)

Yet, despite these few negative responses, Zahavi's novel has been mainly read as a radical feminist text. Julie Burchill described it for example as a "brave, brilliant and beautiful book," while Naomi Wolf characterised it as "a literary turning-point ... a mimetic description of the revenge fantasies that women who have been sexually assaulted really do, if they are mentally healthy, experience" (quoted in *Dirty Weekend*, np. Hereafter *DW*). Helen West calls the book "a tonic" for any woman "who has been attacked or harassed" and who "wishes they hadn't felt so powerless or vulnerable" (quoted in *DW*, np.). Zahavi herself dismissed the few critical female voices that were raised against what she had written by suggesting that such women were hysterical:

Some women were enraged by my depiction of female fear and vengeance. Mostly a certain type of middle class female journalist. They refused to acknowledge that woman has a right to defend herself—there's a right to use violence to defend a child, but it's unwomanly to defend yourself. Men identified with Bella the underdog fighting back. You have a right in law to defend yourself. But some of the reviews were hysterical. It became clear I was hitting a nerve. (quoted in Marshall 1)

It is therefore obvious from the above that the reactions to Zahavi's novel are indeed polarised and this in itself suggests that the text is in many ways problematic both for the general reader—male or female—and for the literary critic. I myself find that there are fundamental aspects of the narrative which need to be questioned and explored in particular with regard to the radical feminist reputation of Zahavi's novel. It is true that

many women have enjoyed reading *Dirty Weekend* and clearly felt empowered by it. It seems at first glance to provide them with a source of surrogate satisfaction in, at least in fictional terms, giving the men a taste of their own abusive treatment of women. The story can thus clearly be read as a piece of feminist wishful thinking, in that Bella does what certain women only dream of doing.

However, I would claim that this represents only a superficial reading of the text and that the conflicting reactions to it indicate that all is not what it seems. By examining the images of women and patriarchy in the book, I find that instead of undermining the sexism and violence that characterise present-day society, Zahavi succeeds only in giving support to the status quo of gender oppression. My argument is that, despite the apparent radical provocation of Zahavi's text, the images of men and women which it provides are not only conventional and stereotyped, but deeply offensive to the cause of women's liberation. *Dirty Weekend* is, in my view, in no way a feminist text, but one which exploits the issue of sexual abuse in a pornographic and sensationally violent manner.

There are therefore a number of questions that are linked to my claim which I want to explore here. *Dirty Weekend* is clearly ambiguous in its ideological message and I want to bring out some of the most important contradictions in the narrative, many of which are related to the main character of Bella herself. Is she for instance to be taken as a portrait of an individual woman who is pushed to the limits and beyond, or is she meant to be seen as being representative of the oppressed women in Western society? Moreover, the description of sexual violence in the book is another question which needs to be addressed, since Zahavi places it at the centre of her story and renders it in such a graphic and explicit way.

Dirty Weekend thus presents any literary critic with a difficult challenge, since Zahavi's consistent use of irony and a comic tone of voice seems to suggest that the text is self-consciously aware of its own provocative nature. In the discussion which follows, I want to try and get beyond Zahavi's slippery language and pin down the supposedly feminist qualities of the story to the reality that lies behind Bella's weekend killing spree. Is Zahavi truly a literary champion of women's rights or a wolf in sheep's clothing? My essay will attempt to answer this question and I will begin by looking at Bella herself, the woman who woke up one morning and realised that she had had enough.

The Representation of Women in *Dirty Weekend*

Since its publication in 1991, *Dirty Weekend* has been acclaimed by some feminists as a modern classic in which women can finally read about the revenge fantasies many of them seem to share. As a female reader myself, I must admit that I first enjoyed Bella's particularly expeditious way of dealing with male chauvinists. Later on, my encounter with the critics of

the novel seemed to confirm these initial and very positive impressions of the book. The feminist Andrea Dworkin, for example, said about Zahavi's novel that "It's good—it may even be beautiful—and it's true" (quoted in *DW* np.). Another feminist, Naomi Wolf, sees Bella as an empowered woman, "a reluctant angel of deliverance" who achieves what "the rest of us would not dare" (quoted in *DW* np.). In an article by Libby Brooks in *The Guardian*, the main character of the story is once again described as an "avenging angel" (8). In a Swedish review, Marielouise Samuelsson characterises Bella, in her turn, as an "avenging goddess, a feminist terrorist who lets men come in her way, with their idiotic proposals ... and then punishes them with death" ("På Turné med *Dirty Weekend*", my translation). In an interview published in Swedish, Helen Zahavi herself says that though she has never been active in any militant female group, she discovered after the writing of the novel that she was a feminist (Rubin np.).

In another review of the book that appeared in the *Sunday Tribune*, the critic clearly approves of the seemingly feminist character of the story, saying that Bella represents "the humiliation and anger of Everywoman" and that the vengeance she wreaks on men is one against "the oppressive weight of Everyman" (*DW* np.). By describing Bella as Everywoman, these critics suggest that we can read the character of Bella as an archetypal figure, therefore a suitable representative of the oppressed female population.

Indeed, what Bella wants or rather does not want is obviously what many women experience in Western society in their everyday lives and would like not to. However, one of my own initial reservations to the novel involved the portrayal of Bella as an extremely marginalised woman in a world dominated by men.

Bella's Marginal Position in Patriarchal Society

In many ways, Bella does not exactly resemble the average woman. She is an ex-prostitute, and is a very marginalised figure living in a stifling basement flat in Brighton. One could argue that, being an ex-prostitute, Bella knows about the darkest and most abusive sides of men and is therefore in the best position to take her revenge on behalf of all women. But I find this problematic since it also confirms the cliché of women as whores.

Another, more discrete form of violence to which women are subjected is the image of themselves they are exposed to in books, advertisements or films, which often exploits their bodies in a denigrating way. Women are objectified and viewed as being easily available to the male observer. In the novel, Bella lives up to the expectations of this eroticised male gaze and dresses herself accordingly:

She walked like a witch down Marine Parade. Her high heels clicking on the ice-covered pavement. Her cheap cotton coat, and her red satin dress, and her sheer silk, slut-black stockings ... Her thin summer coat blown open by the wind. They see the scarlet underneath. The wind off the sea blows her summer coat open, and they shudder at the dress underneath. (*DW* 92)

Thus, frequently, the imagery attached to women which both taints them and excites men at the same time is that of the prostitute, a stereotype to which Bella seems willingly to conform. This is not only a question of Bella's chosen style of dress. Her background as a prostitute is also deeply problematic and, as I have mentioned before, tends to put in doubt the whole representativity of her experience as a woman. There is, however, another aspect of this identity which strains the feminist credentials of the text even further, when Bella herself admits that she at least on some occasions really enjoyed the business of selling her own body to men. When the clairvoyant asks her why she chose such a life, Bella replies:

'It seemed a good idea at the time.'
'You enjoyed it?'
'It had its moments.'
'How many?'
'Two, perhaps.' (*DW* 31)

The implication of both the questions and her ironic replies above is that Bella actually chose consciously to work as a prostitute, something which once more seems to deny the whole issue of the complete humiliation and denigration that women who are involved in this vile trade endure.

Another problem in the description of Bella's revenge as being Everywoman's, is the fact that there are no other females present in the novel, except for Mary, the old woman sleeping on the streets. Where are the other women we could associate with Bella to make clear the necessity for her drastic reaction? Nowhere. Against the group of men described as oppressors and punished by Bella, only one woman, apart from herself, is presented in the novel: this old woman who gets attacked by a group of young lager louts. It seems therefore that the solution proposed to solve women's problems is a completely individual one, which goes against the basic feminist idea that the only fundamental way to change our situation is to engage in a collective struggle against patriarchy. Therefore, I would claim, the character of Bella cannot be read as a role model but rather as merely the representation of one woman in a particular context in which her own desperate way of coping with her situation is depicted.

It follows therefore that when Bella begins her weekend of revenge, what she is fighting against is not the problem of women, namely patriarchy in all its forms, but only its most violent symptoms: the direct physical abuse of some women, herself among them. In this respect the text gives us only an understanding of the consequences of the problem, albeit

facing a large number of the female population. Therefore, the method she uses to retaliate, that of individual violence, would never truly make any difference to women—either in fiction or reality.

The Violence Used by Bella

Bella's adoption of the same kind of violence that men are mainly linked to in our society, and the fact that she shows the same emotional detachment which is traditionally associated with male behaviour, do not in any way subvert the assumption that violence is primarily a male solution. In choosing it, Bella seems to suggest that she accepts such male behaviour as representing the human norm, and therefore we could read her character not as a representation of a woman but that of a masculinist female. Thus, despite its supposed feminist radicalism and difference, the propagation of violence in Zahavi's novel makes Bella look more like the cultural stereotype, that of the—predominantly—male serial killer we are constantly exposed to in Hollywood films like *Seven* and in novels like Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*—works which contain an abundance of gratuitous and uncontextualised violence. This is something which is reinforced by the use of language in the text, which we can be characterised as being predominantly phallogocentric, illustrated for example by the idealisation of the weapons Bella herself uses: a hammer, a gun, a car, a knife:

She slept the sleep of the just, and woke up thinking guns, the way one does ... She was thinking how badly she needed a gun. Any gun. A musket gun. A rifle gun. A carbine gun. A gimme-the-money-and-run gun. A catch-me-if-you-can gun. She was thinking explosives. She was thinking sawn-offs. Flame-throwers, cannon and cordite. Dynamite, gelignite, sheer delight. (*DW* 63)

The image conveyed in passages like the above seems therefore to be that, for a woman, to behave like a man is in itself a feminist act. This is something which can also be illustrated in real life by the following comment of a Brighton social worker addressing the problem of girl-gangs in the town: "Girls started to think—why shouldn't we do it too. Why shouldn't we go round thumping students? You could see them as tomorrow's feminists"(Johnson, np.). The confusion is problematic especially in this case since most of the girl-gangs' attacks are directed against other girls. Yet another example of this could be seen in the depiction of violent women in films, such as *The Last Seduction* or *Terminator 2*, which, as Angela Neustatter claims, is an image which is widely viewed as giving women a "tough post-feminist persona" ("Mad, Bad and Dangerous" np.).

Though of course it can be argued that Bella's case is different in so far as the violent acts she commits can be seen as a form of self-defence, especially the first time, she seems to move along the same trajectory as

these other violent women. In her book *Doubly Deviant, Doubly Damned*, Ann Lloyd warns against the perpetuation of "a distorted vision of who and what violent women are" because, she claims, "the price for ordinary women ... is injustice"(quoted in Neustatter, np.). By that she means that the accumulating descriptions of women as cold blooded murderers impact negatively on the way ordinary women, who have killed in order to defend themselves against abusive husbands mainly, are treated by the courts.

However, the idea of achieving equality by acting like men leads to other more particular problems. As Myriam Miedzian observes in *Boys Will Be Boys*, "many women [assume] that to be liberated [means] to be like men" and that "their tacit assumption that male is the norm [prevents] them from seeing that the male excesses of emotional detachment, toughness, and extreme competitiveness [can] be just as detrimental to the individual as the female excesses of self-sacrifice and dependency"(15). Thus, the image of violence is further decontextualised and we end up with a situation where it becomes totally arbitrary and something that somehow just happens to women, but now also randomly to men, without any deeper meaning.

The Violence Against Women

Another disturbing thing about Zahavi's narrative is the violence directed against Bella herself and against Mary, the old woman. As the story moves from one revenge killing to another we, the readers, are drawn into Bella's sphere and we are compelled to witness one rape—literal or otherwise—after another.

A particularly explicit example of this kind of violent abuse is the passage where Bella ends up in the car of the dentist, her third aggressor and subsequent victim. After several pages of disgustingly denigrating talk about women, how women don't know what they want, how they smell etc., the dentist ends up by forcing Bella to perform fellatio on him:

He removed an ultrabright linen handkerchief from his breast pocket. He parted his thighs and placed it on the seat. "Cleanliness is next to godliness," he murmured. He put his left hand behind her neck and held her right. Had she been the type whose neck has a scruff, that would be where he gripped her. "I hope you're hungry," he said, unzipping his fly, "because it's time for din-dins." And he pushed her head down towards his thick and stubby cock. "Open wide," he cooed. (*DW* 136)

Not only are the acts of these men abject but also the words they say to Bella would have been more than enough—a verbal form of rape. And this is something which is repeated in different forms during all her encounters with men. It is as if Bella as a character has a certain masochistic twist because it seems that she herself creates these situations in the novel. She is

always taking too big a risk. In accepting a lift alone with her dentist, for example, she reflects on the vulnerability of her situation:

You're in for it, now. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. You'll get your comeuppance, that's what you'll get. Never take lifts. Never, ever take lifts. I've told you, often enough. But you got too cocky. You forgot that you're nothing without your weapons. Less than nothing. (*DW* 132)

An Easy Solution

As we have already mentioned above, one of the fundamental turning points in the novel which, moreover, strains the psychological credibility of Bella's character, is her overnight transformation from a frightened and powerless victim into a cold, callous and very competent killer. The suggestion that Zahavi makes here is that the solution lies in a simple change in attitude, that the problem is merely one of will power. This subjective shift of character undermines once again the whole structural analysis of patriarchy. Bella accepts the simplistic, individualist message of the clairvoyant that oppression is only a matter of existential choice, women are either hunters or hunted.

The fact is that by making Bella turn to a typical male solution of individual violence, the questions of what violence is and what its purposes are, in particular in always bringing women down, are never really explored in the text and therefore there is no real hope of putting an end to this vicious circle of abuse. Zahavi opts therefore for the easiest and most eye-catchingly dramatic solution and transforms her study in sexual abuse and violence into a cheap pornographic thriller that merely caters for the tastes of her male readers.

The Representation of Men in *Dirty Weekend*

In *Dirty Weekend*, Zahavi presents us with a series of portraits of men, all of whom seem to be representative of different backgrounds. Despite the obvious differences in their social and professional status, the thing that strikes the reader is the remarkable similarity in their sexist and violent behaviour towards Bella. The only exceptions to this misogynist image of men might appear to be the clairvoyant and the two men involved in the sale of a gun to Bella, if we are to judge by her leniency towards them. As I claimed earlier, the actions of all these men can be characterised as a form of mental or physical rape of women. The expressions of verbal denigration of women are more or less common to them all, and often involve a direct physical threat. For example the Peeping Tom says: "I want to hurt you, but I don't know why" (*DW* 19). Later on, Norman, the University lecturer, after hitting Bella across the mouth with his shoe, says: "Had to teach you a lesson. ... Spare the rod and you spoil the child" (*DW* 110). Even her dentist, who at first seems to be more protective about his own daughter, nevertheless insists that all women want "is a good hard screw and then you

only have to look at them and they start bleating, they start whining, I hate that woman's whine" (*DW* 134). Finally, it is the lone prowler, who meets Bella on the pier, who gives voice to some of the most disgusting comments about the women he is about to rape when he gloats about how they react, some screaming, some crying, some kicking, and some urinating with fright. He himself, like the other men, only takes pleasure in hurting his female victims, thus once again confirming the claim made by feminists and others that rape is not primarily about sex but about power. The rapist himself says:

He wanted to force his way inside her. He wanted to bruise her and make her bleed. He wanted to hurt her. He wanted to hurt her badly. He wanted to hurt her madly. He wanted to show her that she really shouldn't walk along the shore. (*DW* 175)

The above image of the men in Zahavi's novel seems to confirm the claim made by radical feminists like Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin, Myriam Miedzian and others that there is a biological link between men and physical aggressivity in general, and sexual violence in particular. Miedzian insists for example that: "Regardless of how we raise or socialize" boys "they are naturally aggressive and violent" (p.xxvi). Dworkin for her part focuses on the implications that this endemic violence has for women all over the world. In the United States she claims that:

No child is safe in a society in which one out of three girls is going to be sexually abused before she is eighteen. No wife is safe in a society in which recent figures appear to say that one out of two married women has been or is being beaten. (*Life and Death* 143)

Zahavi herself, both in her novel and her public statements in connection with it, seems to corroborate the idea that violence is essentially a male problem, and that women are more often than not on the receiving end of it, quite unable to reverse the balance of power. On the contrary, they end up accepting it so well as to convince themselves that the role of the powerless victim is forever theirs:

"I realised that the behaviour I'd thought for years was rooted in a sweet nature was not that. Actually, I was just terrified of being thumped in the face. The male ego being such a fragile thing, one has to watch what one says. ... Sometimes [women] are grateful if men behave in a civilised way. Aware that we mustn't provoke. Mustn't open our little mouths... I wish I could talk in life like Bella." ... She laughs kindly. "I'd have been dead years ago if I said what's really in my head." (quoted in Brooks 8)

To reinforce this image of the biological predestination of men to violence, we can now consider the apparent exceptions mentioned above—the clairvoyant, Stan and Mr Brown. The fact that Bella does not get rid of any of them might give the reader the impression that these three men, at

least, are on the whole quite inoffensive, demonstrating that there are other men around besides violent lunatics. But if we look at these three figures more closely, we can actually see that there is not much difference at all. Stan, the man whom Bella meets at the gunshop turns out to be just another example of a male chauvinist, and Bella indeed contemplates, for a moment, smashing his head in (*DW* 67-8), only deciding not to do so because of the obvious difficulties of killing a man in a public place, especially without a weapon. Once again, in line with the others, Stan is extremely denigrating, not only of foreigners, who seem to be the first target of his personal animosities, but also of women.

We can once again interpret what Stan says as a form of verbal rape of Bella, as he treats her with extreme paternalism and openly insults a part of the female population and probably Bella among them as “bitches.” So, clearly, this man casually encountered in the shop is no exception to the rule recurring in the novel: all men tend to behave like brutal male chauvinist pigs, out of whose mouths come only verbal filth and sexist abuse.

The last and perhaps less simplistic case of all is the figure of the clairvoyant. His manners make him seem very deferent towards Bella, offering her tea and generally having a way with language that none of the others have. However, we do not need to look very far in order to find that he basically behaves in the same way as the other men do, even if in a less overtly sexist way. In answer to Bella who asks him if he is an only child, he confirms the view that girls and women are not worth much: ‘More or less ... I had four sisters’ (*DW* 26). Later on in the discussion, he behaves even more like the archetypically sexist man described in the novel when Bella asks him if he needs a woman and he replies:

‘I need a woman.’
 ‘Any woman?’
 ‘Any woman.’
 ‘Even a harlot?’
 ‘Do they give credit?’
 ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’m out of touch.’
 ‘Are you offering?’
 ‘I’m not a whore.’ (*DW* 33)

Here again, Zahavi gives us an example of what she suggests lies at the core of men’s behavioural patterns: a total lack of basic human respect for women and their bodies, and quite a high degree of violence and of feeling of superiority, common, more or less, to them all.

The main implication of this monolithically negative description of men is, as I have already said above, a tendency towards an essentialist definition of men as violent beings and a biological understanding of the problems that patriarchy obviously poses to women. As Toril Moi observes in her article, “Feminist Literary Criticism”, “/E/ssentialism ... in the end always plays into the hands of those who want women to conform to

predefined patterns of femininity” (209). Even if Moi addresses here the problems of an essentialist definition of *women*, her conclusions are nonetheless relevant in this case of reversal of an essentialist theory applied to men. Indeed, the belief in a given male nature would still put women at a disadvantage since the violence they would be intrinsically subject to would continue to be directed against them, and there would be no possibility for change since what is biological is irreversible.

Images of Patriarchy

As I have shown in the preceding section, the men portrayed in the story all basically have the same violent traits of character and all behave in the same way towards women. In relation to the general problem of women’s subjection, this simplistic depiction of men as obvious and easily identifiable abusers tends to blur in the text both the real structure of patriarchy and the insidious way in which it controls women’s lives in general to keep them down. Indeed, all of the attacks that Bella is victim of are of the same type: each of her aggressors is unknown to her and the violence they use against her is direct and, most of the time, physical. However, one of the most striking facts about the physical violence of men—if we are to relate to what Dworkin says in her book *Life and Death*, to which I have already referred above, is that their female victims more often than not are women who know their attackers well since they are their husbands or partners. This close relationship is absent in Zahavi’s narrative and once again undermines the feminist message of her work. Of course, it could be argued that Zahavi seeks in this way to simplify the problem for her reader and thereby avoiding entering a lot of complications in terms of her dramatic rendering of the real nature of patriarchal violence.

However, the fact that Zahavi chooses only to show us one very limited and generally superficial aspect of the violence directed against women does not in any fundamental way clarify the problem of patriarchy, making it more understandable to everyone. On the contrary this narrative choice blurs the deeper causes and consequences of women’s submissive role in today’s society. The issue of women’s ill-treatment appears to be one-sided and uniform, and therefore the solution proposed by the novel—individual revenge—would seem to be adequate.

The conclusion in all this points once more to the ambivalent nature of Zahavi’s narrative which, on the surface, seems to invite a feminist reading of the text as being radically in favour of women’s liberation. On closer scrutiny however the ideological discrepancies in her essentialist view of both women and men, as well as her reductive understanding of the workings of patriarchy, tend to relativise this initial reaction and suggest instead a more conventional, even conservative position with regard to the issue of sexual violence. Another aspect of this is the question of to whom Zahavi is really addressing herself in terms of readership.

Men as Targeted Readers

If you see a woman walking, if she's stepping quietly home, if you see her flowing past you on the pavement. If you'd like to break her brittle bones, and you want to hear the hopeless pleading, and you want to feel the pink flesh bruising, and you want to taste the taught skin bleeding. If, in fact, you see her and you want her.

Think on. Don't touch her. Just let her pass you by. Don't place your palm across her mouth and drag her to the ground.

For unknowingly, unthinkingly, unwittingly you might have laid your heavy hand on Bella. And she's woken up this morning with the knowledge that she's finally had enough. (*DW* 185)

It seems, even though these final words in Zahavi's book are those that Bella would have liked to whisper in the ear of the rapist, that we can also read them as a warning to men in general, in order for them to understand the problem of women, or at least to try and make them experience the same fear they do. Zahavi clearly wants to provoke her male readers by threatening them so that they would hesitate in acting the way the men do towards Bella in the story and therefore towards women in general. However the fact that the men portrayed by Zahavi in the text are so caricatured and stereotypical would, in my opinion, only end up alienating these targeted male readers and thereby prevent them from identifying themselves with such characters. Thus the moral message of non-sexist male behaviour has no real rhetorical chance of being understood properly and, as a result, the text leaves us with no possibility of change.

At no other point in the text does Zahavi make clear what is the sex of the implied reader, although this closing point in the narrative has certain consequences for the way we interpret the ultimate meaning of the story. As I said earlier, Zahavi chooses to describe all her male characters as being uniformly violent and sexist. Here, in this last paragraph, the essentialist conception of men in general is made even clearer. What men are supposedly expected to feel when they see a lone woman in a street is a desire to "break their brittle bones." If Zahavi is really addressing herself to male readers throughout her novel, it means that they first should recognise themselves in the characters she portrays. However, no man could possibly agree to view himself literally as a rapist. And if Zahavi limits her message only to rapists, it is highly improbable that her novel would have any effect on them anyway, except perhaps in exciting them, something which I want to explore next.

Pornography

The definition of pornography is "the treatment of sexual objects in pictures or writing in a way that is meant to cause sexual excitement" (*Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 801). Moreover, this excitement comes from the

mental appropriation of such images as presented in films, pictures or writing. Therefore, at the basis of pornography, there is always an element of voyeurism. Following on from the claim I made in the previous section that the language in *Dirty Weekend* is clearly phallogentric, I will argue here that the images presented in the novel are highly pornographic. Indeed, if we look closer at the sex scenes—which I have already qualified as really representing rape scenes in most cases—we can certainly find here graphic sexual details which are at the base of pornography. In this context, the scene with the dentist orally raping Bella is particularly revealing. Not only does Zahavi give men like the dentist a voice through which they can express their most offensive pornographic fantasies, she also lets them act out what they have already been allowed to say in words.

Another telling example is the scene that precedes this one, where Bella is described as actually wanting to have sex with Norman, the university lecturer. This man is depicted as being physically repulsive. Yet, despite this, Bella is shown to feel "the merest twinge of desire, the faintest suggestion of kindled passion. For she too has needs. She too has urges. She too has lubricous longings that must be assuaged" (*DW* 105). After this indication of Bella's improbable but clearly willing state of mind, follows a long list of metaphors and crude words in which both Bella's and Norman's sexual organs and sexual intercourse are described. The pornographic aspect of this passage cannot be denied, nor the implication that its particular brand of eroticism of the text is meant to satisfy the gaze of the male reader:

Two plump hands grabbed her hips. Fat thighs forced her legs apart. Something moist and spongy pressed against her privates. He rubbed it up and down. He rubbed it round and round. He moaned and groaned. He cursed and prayed. But all to no avail. Her gaping nether regions felt as though crisscrossed by the drunken meanderings of a garden snail. (*DW* 105)

All these physical details given by Zahavi are, I would claim, overtly sensational and exploitative. Thus, if we accept the hypothesis I proposed that Zahavi is actually writing for men, perhaps even for perverse men, a critical female reader would once again feel the need to question Zahavi's aim in using such pornographic language. Indeed it seems at times that she is catering to the perverse masturbatory needs of her male readers. As I mentioned above, such details of violent sexual acts are, like misogynist violence in pornography itself, destined to satisfy a male erotic gaze which seeks to possess the female object. This is therefore also why all the sexually denigrating terms of abuse are expressed by men in the text, and all the sexual fantasies described and enacted are those of male characters. Moreover, if this is not the case, if these sexual details are supposed to be

meant for women, then the conclusion would be that women do fantasise about being raped. This would mean that the image of rape presented in the text would be the familiarly stereotyped one that links both sex and violence. This would, however, be a dangerous ideological move on Zahavi's part and one which fundamentally puts her feminist credentials in doubt. This same link between sex and violence is something which the writer Jeanette Winterson, in a recent article in *The Guardian*, sees as representing a form of "pathology", an issue at the very heart of patriarchy:

Feminism has long argued that rape is not the confusion of sex and violence; it is not sex at all. Rape is power. Most men do not want to rape women. Most men do not feel violently towards women, nor is their sex drive wrapped in brutality. Sex and violence are not equivalents. When the two things get confused, the results are disastrous (9).

In conclusion, I would claim that the character of Bella seems to be placed, together with the men she encounters, at the center of a literary peep-show in which Zahavi's perverse readers are encouraged to view her in the light of their own sexual fantasies. She is therefore throughout the novel objectified in the same way as in the beginning when Tim, himself a Peeping-Tom, looks at her from his apartment window. Nothing has changed in Zahavi's portrayal of the situation of women as sexual objects, despite the apparent radical reversal of gender roles which the text seems to suggest.

Violence and Irony

In Zahavi's narrative, the theme of violence is closely linked to the issue of pornography discussed above. Indeed, the major part of violence described in the text is primarily sexual and is directed against Bella. However, the tone of voice that the author uses is seemingly ironic, sometimes even poetic, something which gives the text its particularly elusive quality. The effect of such obvious literariness in this revenge fantasy seems to me to be to diminish the violent reality of everything that happens, with respect both to Bella's killings and to the sexist behaviour of her victims. The question remains however—what is the function of such language? The lack of differentiation in narrative tone, which moves only slightly between the overtly comic and the ironic, leads in fact to a relativisation of the element of violence so that Bella's actions are placed on the same level as that of the rapes—verbal and physical—that she herself is the victim of. As Helen West points out, "Zahavi's deadpan humour transforms the most horrible situations into ironic reflections on the woman's lot" (West 1999). There is no moral condemnation of either sexual abuse, violence or retribution—everything is turned into an ironic joke—a play on words. Thus once again the whole feminist pretension of Zahavi's text is fundamentally

undermined.

Furthermore, this apparently careless and non-judgemental tone that Zahavi uses in her story brings us to the question of the relation between gender and violence in writing. Zahavi attempts a reversal of the gender roles in her narrative, that is clear. However, if we were to apply the same critical strategy to her own text, what would happen? What would have been the feminists' reaction to such a novel as *Dirty Weekend* if, say, it had been written by a man? Would the defenders of her book still feel the same about the story? There is clearly an argument here that the violence Bella uses could be condemned because it is a woman who does it and that violence is unwomanly. It seems however, on the contrary, that those feminists who defend Zahavi's novel do so only because of her gender and not what she really writes about. Thus, such critical blindness only reflects the idea that to act or write like men, if you are not allowed to by society, is in itself a feminist move. In my view, however, this boils down to a form of sexism since, as I have said above, there is no real difference here, except in the theme of female revenge—between what some men do and what Zahavi does in her story. She adopts the same male images of pornography and the same way of portraying them. Once again, the conclusion is that the text falters on its own ideological contradictions and Zahavi's feminist reputation as a writer must be seriously thrown into doubt.

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