

The Allusion to Women's Emancipation in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*: A Case Study

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The current paper sheds light on the allusion of women's emancipation in Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*. The novel has intertextual connections to Jane Austen's novel *Pride, and Prejudice* as both of them share identical thematic and structural principles. Fielding's novel is written in the form of a diary, and it belongs to the Chick Lit genre which has increasingly attracted the attention of several literary figures over the past few years. This genre tackles feminist issues and is targeted towards contemporary young women. It obviously considers the status of women in the contemporary society. Chick Lit writers break the restriction of the conventional literature by reinventing traditional literary works as in the case of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which resembles Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* respectfully in many aspects. Ultimately, the article falls into several viewpoints explicated profoundly to manifest such an entity.

Keywords: *Emancipation, intertextual, Chick Lit, contemporary women*

Introduction

Although the Women's Movement appeared in the late 1960s, they began to fight for their rights along time ago. Women were totally denied their share of freedom and education as men in many patriarchal societies who always oppressed them even in terms of production and marriage.

Instead, they were obliged to stay at home and take care of their families as if they were born to suffer. In other words, during history, women were obliged to fight against the locks and chains of gender dominance. In such rigid societies, marriage was bitterly considered crucial for women to uplift their social status as well as to ensure their security despite all the tough patriarchal dominance of men over them. However, after a long period of struggle to achieve their rights, women eventually succeeded to gain their equality with men, especially in the

western world. Nowadays, the situation is different, and women can participate actively in the different fields of life and entertain their rights just like men. However, they are still not convinced enough with what they have and seek to speak frankly and openly about various issues which have long been prohibited for them.

In 1990s English literature has witnessed the emergence of a popular genre, that is Chick Lit. It is a popular variation of women's writing, which differs from traditional variations of women's writing in its modern presentation of woman. Illustrations of shoes, lipstick tubes, martini glasses, and all kinds of female accessories are among the most common traits of this genre, in addition to its covers which are decorated with pastel colours. These novels are mostly marketed to the young women they depict. The literary conventions of the genre distinguish it from the other variations of women's writings. It is mainly targeted at women and it has its own literary figures such as Helen Fielding, Sophie Kinsella, Candace Bushnell and many others. As such, literary specialists and readers have occasionally appreciated Chick Lit as a modern form of women's fiction and praised its authors. Helen Fielding is regarded to be the pioneer of the original chick lit and she is named to be the new Jane Austen. Her novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* 1996 claims kinship to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and credits its subsequent clones to the way Chick Lit tapped into the spirit of the popular generation of women. It seized the issues confronting women in their twenties and thirties, and several women authors began imitating Fielding's style. *Bridget Jones's Diary* inspired the appearance of a new genre of women's writings written about the popular young woman.

The Research Problem

Despite the substantial contribution of Helen Fielding to the recent women writings, her novels have not been fully explored, and no detailed work is accomplished on her novels. In terms of research, she has remained somehow at doubt as far as her works are concerned. Therefore, this study aims to fill in the gap and also to appreciate Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* by highlighting its excellence. The research problem is represented in revealing the elements of Chick Lit and the implications of intertextuality in Fielding's novel. Such factors motivated academic researchers and literary specialists to discuss such notions in certain works and literary masterpieces.

Although the problematic issue is presented in the implicit representation of the notions of women's emancipation and the role of collective judgment on women in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, they have become vague concepts in the absence of the norms and values that they define recently. Chick Lit recently emerged as a popular kind of women's writing. Its main function is to draw the reader's attention to the modern presentation of women.

Another problematic issue is the fact that there are no stable norms and values regarding women's writing and its meanings and subject matters alter with the time changing. In Feminist activists, masculine authority and society's opinion are regarded as heavy-handed oppression against women who occupy half of the globe. These oppressions result in the non-enjoyment of women with their freedom in many societies and reveal the biased attitudes of people towards women. While the old laws were considered to be the exercise of all kinds of rights without encroachment on the rights of others, women emancipation today entered into infringement of the social right under the pretext of protecting individual rights, as many problems are not limited to the individual but to the society as a whole. Therefore, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* reflects society's opinion and its negative implications on the individual. The novel mirrors *Pride and Prejudice* in many aspects, including its characterisation, plot and thematic principles. The novel is written in the form of a personal diary and characterised by its popular women issues.

Research Questions

1. What is the definition of Chick Lit?
2. How does Helen Fielding represent the concept of woman's emancipation and the pressure of society's opinion on women in her novel *Bridget Jones' Diary*?
3. How does Helen Fielding reinvent *Pride and Prejudice* in the form of a diary?

The Research Aims

The current study aims to:

- identify Chick Lit; and
- shed light on women's emancipation and the pressure of society's opinion on women in Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones' Diary*.

Methodology

The study is based on the usage of the historical method in identifying Chick Lit, woman's emancipation, the pressure of society's opinion on women and their implications in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary*.

Chick Literature: Definitions.

Two decades ago, a group of women literary figures began to identify with Chick Lit as the genre began to capture the attention of young women in the late nineties. As a popular genre, Chick Lit has its audience including women who grew up during a time in which "equal opportunity" and "feminism" were not (for the most part) popular ideologies. 1995 witnessed



the first use of the term Chick Lit by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey Deshell in the anthology *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*.

In "Who's Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre", Mazza proclaimed persuasively that Deshell and her were the pioneers in using the term "Chick Lit" in print. The second anthology, *Chick Lit: No Chick Vice*, was published in 1996 by the same editors. Since that time these two anthologies are considered as the origins of Chick Lit genre. Chronologically, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996) and Henry Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1997) are regarded to be the genuinely great boost in their popularity and the most famous literary works of Chick Lit. The big hit was in 2001 when Harlequin Enterprises founded Red Dress Ink Company which was dedicated only to publishing Chick Lit novels. Later on, other companies like Kensington and Simon and Schuster opened separate branches to publish Chick Lit. In 2005 Warner Books launched 5 Spot, a company branch dedicated only for Chick Lit. The prosperous publishing of Chick Lit proves readers' interest as well as the profitability of this literary genre. It tackles several issues including female identity (relative subjects including marriage, profession, sexuality, romance etc.) and consumerism (covering such sub-topics as a wedding, shopping, diet, fashion, plastic surgery, luxurious etc.). Generally speaking, Chick Lit is written by women authors, about popular women and for women readers. Although it remains not fully explored by academics and literary specialists in certain countries, Chick Lit has been embraced enthusiastically by the readers. It is a valid document for recognising popular women's opportunities, struggles and challenges in the modern era. According to Oxford English Dictionary, Chick Lit is defined as "(occas. depreciative), literature by, for, or about women; esp. a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of young professional women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences." Due to the unique presentation of the issues facing the present generation of young women, the genre has been well received as far as its explanations and perspectives are concerned. Wells (2005) writes: "Chick Lit is certainly one of the next generations of women's *writing* but, in spite of its capacity to invoke the questions that long swirled around women's literary writing, it is not the next generation of women's *literature*." (p.49). A major characteristic of Chick Lit is its zeitgeist which reveals the current issues shared by a huge number of women readers from all ages and varied opinions. As a popular genre, Chick Lit has its own audience including all women who grew up during a time in which "equal opportunity" and "feminism" are not (for the most part) popular ideologies (Cooke, 2006). The book covers as well as the literary conventions and formulas of the Chick Lit genre distinguishes it from the other kinds of women's writings.

Since the emergence of *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the most popular literary works continue to present the story of the traditional chick Lit heroine; the white, cultivated professional in her late twenties or early thirties. Most of Chick Lit is set in cosmopolitan cities like New York and London. It tackles contemporary women's struggles in the face of love, marriage, sexuality, profession and so on. It is characterised by the use of bright colours, feminine icons such as clothing items (high-heels, purses, bags, and dresses), accessories and makeup (sparkling jewellery, particularly wedding rings and lipsticks), female body parts, ornate fonts with curly-cues and cursive letters are more likely to be chosen as curves. They tend to be easily associated with the female body while angles with the male body. Such a cover design distinguishes Chick Lit as a female literary genre from other categories on the bookshelves. Behind the feminine, covers are stories about contemporary women (LU, 114).

Ferris and Young (2005) classify critics' reactions of Chick Lit into two groups, one being those who see it as a false representation of real life, the other being those who regard it as an inspirational portrayal of "the new woman". Many literary specialists believe that although Chick Lit has its obvious association with postfeminist literature, it manifests a new meaning with popular issues. Accordingly, it is a separate genre composed of women and meant exclusively for them. While it has a romance-centered plot, Chick Lit generally depicts the protagonist's everyday life struggles and conflicts within the society, whether at home or work. It always ends happily by fulfilling the desired goals of the heroine.

Into Explication: Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*

Helen Fielding was born in 1959. Her father, a mill manager, descends from a region near West Yorkshire named Morley. As an English screenwriter and novelist, Fielding studied the English language at St. Anne's college, Oxford University, and graduated in 1979. She worked for ten years on various programs in the BBC including a series of films for comic relief in Mozambique, Sudan and Ethiopia, the charity of which resulted in regular campaigns ever since. After this she won a BBC traineeship and worked there for ten years on various programs, later working on a series of films in Ethiopia, Sudan and Mozambique for comic relief- the charity set up by television comedy stars and resulting in regular campaigns ever since. As a writer, Fielding's first attempt at a romance novel failed when Mills and Boon seemingly rejected her novel. Then she tried her chance in *Cause Celeb* (1994), her first novel in which Comic Relief and filming the African famine relief attempts are functionalised. The novel portrays the heroine, Rosie Richardson, working as a publicist for a London Publisher. She meets and falls in love with Oliver Marchant, the art program presenter and she later on becomes as an aid worker. After that Fielding became a freelance journalist in addition to her work at the BBC, she wrote features and food reviews which were mainly targeted towards young women, but she became widely famous after revealing

her authorship of the column "Bridget Jones's Diary" in The Independent on February 28, 1995, which as Charles Leadbeater declared derived its impulse from Dulcie Domum's diary (in the Guardian). She clarifies that the heroine Bridget Jones reflects a character she once attempted to write into a sitcom about a young girl; the diary layout was obviously inspired by her going back to her own calorie-obsessed diaries, written during her college years. The question of whether Fielding drew on her experience to produce Bridget is raised by critics and readers alike and the diary format clarifies such kinds of inquires. Although Fielding declares that Bridget is not meant to be her, she later asserts that the life of Bridget and her friends is based on her adventures and Tracey during the 1990s and for the success of the novel, Bridget stands as a representative of every woman of the 1990s. She adds that her friends Sharon Maguire, a TV director and Tracey McLeod, a TV presenter were the models for Shazzer and Jude in the novel. The tastes, trends and popular cultural medium of shiny women's magazines and contemporary television in the mid-1990s are all reflected in Bridget's life, and this is what makes Bridget very recognisable to several readers who have a similar cultural diet. While writing her second novel, Fielding wrote Bridget Jones column to support herself. The novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* was first published in 1996 in the UK, and it has since been translated into many languages around the globe. Just like J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, when it appeared *Bridget Jones's Diary* was a big hit and a success to Helen Fielding. Jane Austen was the main source of inspiration for Fielding as she openly acknowledged. Fielding's *Bridget Jones diary* is compared to many prominent literary works in its content and themes. In terms of style, structure and tone the novel has been compared to Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*(1992) and High Fidelity (1995), Sue Townsend's *Adrian Mole diaries* (1985, 1992, 1993, 1999); and in America, Armistead Maupin's *tales of the city* (1980) and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*(1996). *Bridget Jones's Diary* shares the first-person narrative technique with works such as High Fidelity and Fever Pitch. This technique is more confessional, intimate as well as suffocating and disorienting. Within the legacy of twentieth-century women writers, Fielding emerges to be in favour of the first-person narrative voice, and her writings are mixtures of whimsical romance and comic narration resulting tensions among critics, producing widely divergent readings of her novel (Whelehan, 2002).

Bridget Jones' Diary Novel

It is obvious that Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996) is composed in response to *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) a romantic novel of manners written by Jane Austen. Since its emergence *Pride and Prejudice*, the most famous among Austen's novels, it has been followed by many sequels which resemble the original version in certain aspects. Though it occurs in a different time with new crises facing popular women such as the theme of searching for a suitable man in the eighteenth- century novel, *Bridget Jones' Diary* is



essentially a comment on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. When it was published in 1996, Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* immediately became a big success (Bush 7).

The novel revolves around the life of Bridget Jones, a young woman in her thirties who is in search of love, attempting to lose weight and perfect her life. She is aiming at changing her life around for the coming of the new year by promising to promote her career, lose weight, stop smoking and eventually find a suitable boyfriend. Fielding's novel is an epistolary, the most common form of women writing. In 1999 the novel was an inspiration for a film adaptation. The novel consists of twelve chapters, each one represents a month of the year. It is opened with a list of New Years Resolutions, which includes two different lists of what the heroine will not and will do. Many things like, having more than fourteen alcoholic drinks per week, falling for certain kinds of men or spending more than she earns are included in the list "I Will Not". She desires to do things like reducing the size of her thighs, being confident and assertive, quitting smoking, and giving up some clothing. Several chapters begins with a log of Bridget's alcoholic beverages consumed, weight, caloric intake, and a number of cigarettes. Bridget sarcastically remarks on the irony that she is starting the new year in the house of her parents who are having a New Years Party and so concerned with their daughter's relationship with Mark Darcy, the wealthy, divorced lawyer. Bridget allows herself eating much and smoking by making some exceptions to her resolutions during her New Year's Day entry and beginning to date her charming but unreliable boss at work, Daniel Cleaver. After the separation of her parents, Bridget's mother elopes with a Portuguese guy called Julio. But she is quickly disappointed after finding another woman with Daniel and she decides to promote her career and consequently she finds a job in television. She later dates Mark Darcy who knocks the door of Bridget's apartment, but she does not hear him. Then she invites him over her apartment for a dinner party but they found out that Julio, her mother's boyfriend, has illegally taken money from Bridget's family to which Darcy volunteers to chase Julio and try to get it back. Ultimately Mark Darcy reveals his love for Bridget at her Christmas party to which Bridget positively responses that she is happy that she has found a charming man, despite that she does not obtain all of her New Years' resolutions. In 1998 *Bridget Jones' Diary* was chosen the book of the Year, and in 1999 it was followed by a sequel, *The Edge of Reason* (Whelehan, 2002).

The Allusion of women's Emancipation

No doubt that Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones' Diary* is composed in response to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. It is a sequel, comment and a reinvention of *Pride and Prejudice*, despite that it occurs in a different time with a different focus. The novelist has skillfully borrowed her novel's plot and structure from Jane Austen's *novel*. While the plot permeates all of the novels in *Pride and Prejudice*, it is treated differently in *Bridget Jones' Diary* as it concentrates mainly on Bridget's crises and lifestyle. Both of the novels belong to

two different worlds despite that they occur in relatively small different societies and share their central love plot. Helen Fielding and Jane Austen use irony in its broadest sense when they severely criticise the fictive societies and the ill-treatment of women. Bridget Jones and Elizabeth Bennet, the heroines of the two novels, encounter lots of problems while searching for perfect men to marry. They are obviously affected by the attitudes of their communities and they behave accordingly. As central consciousness of the novels, The two are proved to be mistaken in many occasions. Bridget Jones ironically seems to lose control over her life and also her narrative. The clearest example of her inability is when she fails to prepare food for her birthday party. Therefore, the reader might sympathise with her (Marsh, 2004).

Bridget keeps a diary asserting her willingness to perfect and manipulate her life. However, she fails in everything, especially her New Year's resolutions. She wants to change her life but she cannot. Alison Case (1999) says that feminine narration "is characterised by the restriction of the female narrator to the role of narrative *witness*..." (4). She adds that "diary and epistolary narration are in fact, the most typical forms for feminine narration" (p.177).

The heroines of the two novels require to realise and release themselves from the perspectives of their communities, to manipulate themselves and their narratives. As women, they face lots of difficulties and have to strife against all kinds of atrocities inflicted upon them including the rigidity of their fictive societies. While the two live in two ages which differ considerably, Elizabeth seems smart and controlled with less freedom to choose comparatively to Bridget who appears naïve, without self-control, but with more freedom to choose. The narrative method of *Bridget Jones' Diary* offers the novel's protagonist the tantalising possibility of recording everyday life events in her diary. Although the novelist Helen Fielding concentrates mainly on the presentation of the individual to society, the novel's intertextual connections to *Pride and Prejudice* are undeniable. There is a lot of change concerning the situation of women since Jane Austen's time, and the emancipation of women floats into a horizon as prominent nowadays yet, they still have difficulty in getting rid of the oppression of society. The iterative nature of Fielding's novel comes in the form of structural resonance as well as the reader's understanding of the novel through the intertextual relationships between the characters, especially Elizabeth Bennet and Bridget Johns, plots and structures. These connections signify the novel artificiality by obtrusive reference to traditional forms of borrowing its thematic and structural principles from other narratives. In *Bridget Jones' Diary* Fielding extends her investigation to examine the relationship between women and society by revealing a woman struggling to resist enormous pressure put on her. The novel has been situated within the context of postmodernism due to its structure, form and narrative voice. The novelist frequently manifests the fictional status of the text, leading the reader to reconceptualise feminine narrative. This manifestation is a dominant element in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and seems to connect it with the postmodern aesthetic. The use of the first-person retrospective narrator is purposeful to draw the reader's attention to the feminine

narrative which appears in the form of a diary and sometimes in the form of epistolary narration which according to Alison Case (2001) "are the most typical forms for feminine narration" (p.177).

Producing the text in this way is significant to the process of interpretation, making the reader working hard in order to produce his own meanings from the text and thereby focusing on the reader's counselling as well as that of the characters to sympathise with the protagonist. *Pride and Prejudice* reveals that The characters behave according to their society's perspective. Due to the pressure of the society put on her, Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to get married to "a single man in possession of a good fortune" (5) which is regarded as a universal truth according to Austen. The community's opinions and conventions are reflected on her own thinking and become the driving force concerning the marriage of her daughters. She believes that her daughters should get married from wealthy men as the only way to a successful social status and good reputation in the eighteenth century English society. In the beginning, Elizabeth appears blind behind her prejudice, but step by step, she undergoes considerable self-realisation as she moves from one community to another. For instance, Elizabeth has a wrong perspective about Mr. Darcy and she gets confused after hearing everyone of her acquaintance despises him. She cannot have independent opinion about what is going on around her despite all that might be said about her creativity. Elizabeth and her mother share the same opinions and both of them are driven by the "universal truth." Her previous prejudice, keeps Elizabeth ignorant to understand Mr. Darcy even when she comes closer to him. Later on she will easily believe Wickham's story about Mr. Darcy's pride and her feelings of dislike increase despite her interest towards him. In order to know his real character, she begins to oblige him into communication with disturbing topics. She discovers that Mr. Darcy has no defects and he is totally different from what she has already heard about him. The personal opinion is not effective in front of the collective judgments of the society and this is what brings the two characters closer to each other. When she begins to have a deep insight into the core of things, Elizabeth realises that she has been trapped by her mistaken prejudice without being sure about all the information. This is why she changes her mind about him and begins to see him in a different light. Even her meeting with him takes place outside her community, and she eventually comes to realise the negative force of her community, and she laments herself for rejecting Mr Darcy.

Concerning Fielding's novel Kelly A. Marsh (2004) declares that "Bridget's diary reveals the external pressure she feels to be better than she is, the pressure that exists without reference to her qualities and qualifications- improvement for its own sake." (p.57) The requirements of the twentieth-century society regarding woman are the same as those of Elizabeth's society with a partial difference. The ideal woman in the twentieth century is supposed to be young, athlete, thin, fashioned etc. Successful social status is also an obsession with the twentieth-century society. The society's pressure forces Bridget to feel that she needs to change herself

to be accepted. Due to the same pressure put on her, Bridget does not believe that she can be loved as she is. Thus, people are mocking Bridget for being single, saying things like: "how's your love-life?" (p.40), and asking whether or not she has got any Valentine cards, only to respond, "I *knew* you didn't get any" (p.50). Mrs Jones wants her daughter to get married to "one of those top-notch barristers. Masses of money. Divorced" (p.9) according to the society measurements. As in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, the personal opinion of the individual is not important in front of the collective judgments of society. Living in the urban society, Mrs Jones and her daughter are obsessed with the society's perspective about a single life which is regarded as a failure and a disappointment to the parents. Such opinions and conventions are the driving force concerning the marriage of Bridget Jones, and she behaves accordingly. The mother is not convinced by her daughter's lifestyle, and she wants to bring some change into it. She is looking for her daughter's best as she believes without any consideration of what her daughter feels and wants. According to Mrs Bennet Mark Darcy, the son of her old friends, is the most suitable husband to Bridget and she plans for a meeting between the two at the New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet where she and aunt Una can keep an eye on them. Bridget's meeting with Darcy is a failure because she hides behind her prejudice towards him, and he is acting proudly and coldly towards her. She has a wrong opinion about him because of the negative influence of her family and her friends who dislike him. All these factors play a major part in Bridget's decision. She remains ignorant and blind to the truth until the end of the novel when she eventually changes her perspectives as a result of self-development and maturity. Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jones are eager to see their daughters well married. Unwilling to trap herself in a loveless marriage just like the marriage of her parents, Elizabeth proves her independence in rejecting Mr Collins, the most suitable choice according to Mrs Bennet. However, this rejection may prevent her from receiving a second proposal to the rest of her life. The mothers of the heroines share many similarities, and they affect their daughters negatively and positively without considering their daughters' feelings and needs. They want to compensate what has been missing in their life, and they do not want to see their daughters committing their mothers' mistakes. Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jones forget that they cannot change their daughters to be exact as they want and eventually they have to accept them as they are.

Conclusions

To sum up the whole findings, Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a reinvention of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* as the two novels mirror each other. Although it criticises the role of the society's opinion on the individual, the novel shows how the fictive society affects the heroine into a state of prejudice, and it instigates her to free herself and be aware of what is going on around her. The novel asserts the limitation of women's choices under the pressure of collective judgment. The feminine discourse of the novel reveals the conservative values of the society which are legitimised under the guise of normality.



Through the course of the novel, Bridget goes through a significant transformation in which she gets to know more about herself in progress. She struggles against her mind and her societies' rigidity. Therefore, when she culminates into self-realisation, she becomes in control of her narrative and can eventually get her own marriage choice.



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