



Gender Equality Depoliticised: Feminist Challenges in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996)

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Abstract

A growing body of feminist scholarship is concerned with post-feminism as a contested area of critical theory since the 1990s, there has been a keen interest across the British popular media in ideas of female success taking into account a “liberal” type of feminism which takes into consideration “equal opportunities”. That period witnessed analytical unrest concerning the conditions of feminism and femininity in Britain and the United States as women were considered in danger of ending up all alone, and devoured by mental and physical illnesses due to the second-wave feminist discourse of gender equality. Thence, this paper argues that Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is a seminal text within the genre of chick lit and an archetype of “Girl power culture” through which the post-feminist “double entanglement” of feminist and anti-feminist themes in contemporary popular British and Western fiction can be examined. The themes of female subjectivity, the female body as fetish, the emphasis on individualism, empowerment, choice, and self-surveillance, as well as the resurgence of values of commodification of the female body, and consumer behaviour are explored as typical of post-feminist discourse in media texts. Moreover, the concept of feminine masquerade is applied to this study as it emphasizes the intersection of feminism with consumer culture. Such double entanglement of feminist and neoliberal consumer values leads to a conflict between feminist ideas of empowerment and emancipation, and the anti-feminist position that reinstates patriarchal values of male supremacy and propagates neoliberal consumer values.

Keywords: *post-feminism; neoliberalism; the feminist; the feminine*

Introduction

A growing body of feminist scholarship is concerned with post-feminism as a contested area of critical theory (Gill and Scharff 3). Since the 1990s there has been a keen interest across the British popular media, wishing to increase their female readers and audiences, in ideas of female success taking into account a “liberal” type of feminism which considers “equal opportunities”; at the same time “what is invoked more negatively is the radical feminism concerned with social criticism rather than with progress or improvement in the position of women in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order” (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 14). Moreover, the canonical state of feminist studies in the Anglo Saxon academia was countered by women students who refused to identify with feminist “claims to representation and power” (McRobbie *Aftermath* 14). As such, the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed analytical unrest and popular disagreements concerning the conditions of feminism and femininity in Britain and the United States as women in that period were considered in danger of ending up all alone, and devoured by mental and physical illnesses due to the Western feminist discourse of gender equality, nurtured by Left wing politics in the nineteen-sixties and the seventies. Such political and cultural transformations have left a sense of confusion about post second-wave feminism, the most important and contested term in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis (Gill, *Postfeminist Media* 147).

Studies of Helen Fielding’s seminal popular novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) have mostly focused on certain themes which link it to the genre known as chick lit as well as the intertextual relationship between the text and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. For instance, in ‘Spinster and Singletons: *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and its Cultural Reverberations’ (2012), Anthea Taylor analyses the figure of the ‘Singleton’ in this novel as a chick lit genre’s foundational text. Emi Stjernholm’s “The Contrasting Display of Emotions in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*” (2014) focuses on a film adaptation of the novel and examines the thematic and stylistic relationship between the protagonist’s voluntary and involuntary displays of emotions. This paper, however, argues that *Bridget Jones’s Diary* offers a compelling lens to examine post-feminist discourse, particularly, the post-feminist entanglement or “double entanglement” of feminist and anti-feminist themes in contemporary

popular British and Western fiction and popular culture (Gill, *Postfeminist Media* 149, McRobbie, *Aftermath* 12).

In many cases, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is contextualized as a seminal text within the genre of chick lit in the nineteen-nineties (Taylor 72). In other words, this study adopts the position that post-feminism involves a double entanglement of feminist and neoliberal consumer values leading to a conflict between feminist ideas of empowerment and emancipation, on the one hand, and the anti-feminist position that reinstates patriarchal values of male supremacy, and propagates neoliberal consumer values, on the other.

The protagonist, Bridget Jones moves through the complexities of late modern womanhood, encapsulating both the challenges and freedoms that characterize post-feminist discourse and serve as an archetype of “Girl power culture” (Gill, *Postfeminist Media* 155). Furthermore, the themes of female subjectivity, the female body as fetish or bodily property, the emphasis on individualism, empowerment, choice, self-surveillance, weight monitoring and discipline, the dominance of a ‘makeover paradigm’, as well as the resurgence of values of commodification of the female body, and consumer behaviour are explored as typical of post-feminist discourse in media texts (Gill and Scharff 4). These “themes coexist with and are structured by clear inequalities and exclusions relating to race and ethnicity” since Bridget Jones is a typical white, female protagonist of a post-feminist popular media text (Gill and Scharff 4, Tasker and Negra 3). The consequences of such entanglement of old feminist and new feminine values in the novel is the ambiguous position of the female protagonist regarding her status as a single independent woman and her incessant search for a male partner (Taylor 90). In addition, the novel proffers an ironic picture of heterosexual relationships which foster values of patriarchal hegemony.

The transformations in Western contemporary culture in the last two decades of the twentieth-century are described as a new post-feminist sensibility, and a new gender modality (Gill and Scharff 5). According to Rosalind Gill, post-feminism should be defined as a “sensibility” rather than a coherent epistemological position, a historical movement, or a backlash against feminism (*Postfeminist Media* 148). Nonetheless, this paper adopts the argument that post-feminism is an epistemological position that carries within itself a backlash and a disarticulation of

feminism (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 24,25). As McRobbie puts it, post-feminist discourse can be explored through what would be outlined as a “double entanglement” (*Aftermath* 12). This involves the co-existence of neo-conservative values (due to the rise of the new Right) in relation to gender, sexuality and family life on the one hand, and the processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations , such as gay couples who can adopt children on the other (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 21) In this sense, the “field of popular culture” becomes “a privileged terrain for the implementation of “new forms of gender power” as the old hardcore feminist values are substituted (although not completely rejected) by a discourse of female individualism (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 28).

Explaining the shift from hardcore, second-wave feminism accepted by women before the 1960s and 70s, Rebecca Walker observes in the introduction to the anthology *To Be Real*

Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (1995), that the feminism of the “foremothers” of contemporary young women would deprive the latter of a complex, individual gender identity (xxxiii). In addition, post-feminism is an object of critical study which is manifested in different pieces of contemporary Anglo-American media texts as “debates about nothing less than the transformations in feminism, and Media culture-and their mutual relationships” (Gill, *Postfeminist Media* 147). As such, Edward Said’s view of culture as “a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another” which considers cultural productions as the outcome of their ideological, political and economic context bears relevance to the cultural dominance of post-feminist discourse during the period of late modernity (xiii).

Angela McRobbie’s concept of feminine masquerade (based on Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity) is also applied in this study since feminine masquerade emphasizes the intersection of feminism, gender identity, and societal expectations with consumer culture which utilizes and stresses the idea of femininity as a form of body-oriented gender power central to the reproduction of patriarchal hegemony. Such masquerade is the guise that hides “female anger which underpins the I of excessive feminine adornment” of the professional woman “who perceives her own subjugation in the behaviour of her male peers” (McRobbie,

Aftermath 67). Even the addition of the prefix *post-* to *feminism* is said to undermine the strides that feminism has realized in achieving equality for everyone, including women; post-feminism suggests that equality has been realized and feminists could address other female issues (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 255). Thereupon, post-feminist discourse is, foremostly, criticized for its stance which depoliticizes gender equality since it is characterized by a diminished interest in institutional politics and activism. (MartInescu 121). Moreover, this stance explicates the most notable post-feminist themes which display the “double entanglement” of and contradictions between feminist and feminine values in American and British popular culture and media texts as exemplified by *Bridget Jones's Diary*. In this novel, as in other chick lit fiction, feminism is “taken into account” yet “repudiated” (Gill “The Affective” 607).

Bridget Jones's Character as an Embodiment of Post-feminist Masquerade

As the central character of a post-feminist popular novel, Bridget Jones is a “white”, “middle- class ” thirty something , heterosexual woman (Tasker and Negra 3). In “Re-writing the romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?”, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff write that

“[chick] lit as a genre was inaugurated by Helen Fielding's (1996) *Bridget Jones Diary*. Starting life as a column in the British newspaper, *The Independent*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* stayed on bestseller list of the 90s for many months and to date has sold more than 5 million copies and been translated into 30 languages” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). The publication of the novel has also led to a revival of interest in romance novels in the nineteen-nineties. (Gill and Herdieckerhoff)

Recording a year in Bridget Jones's life, a single working woman in her thirties living in London, the novel opens with a self-conscious comedic record by Bridget featuring her New year resolutions and embodying her ceaseless quest for self-improvement. She is resolved to stop smoking, start a relationship with a man, and lose weight in which she resolves to: drink less alcohol, smoke less, reduce the circumference of each thigh by 1.5 inches, visit the gym three times a week not just to buy a sandwich , learn how to programme the VCR, and form a functional relationship with a responsible adult (Fielding 2,3). Similarly, the novel ends with Bridget recounting the only achieved resolution of the year, having “finally realized

the secret of happiness with men” as she has won Mark Darcy’s heart (Fielding 267). Through such record and Bridget’s self-conscious diary entries, the reader gains insight into her insecurities, desires, and struggles, allowing the latter to empathize with her as a subject rather than just an object of observation. Bridget asserts her agency by reflecting on, and engaging with her own desires, fears, and aspirations intensifying the entanglement between values of feminism and femininity in the novel. She writes about her career, self-image, vices, family, friends, and her love affair with Daniel Cleaver and her relationship with Mark Darcy. Besides, Bridget’s struggles with weight management, love relationships, and societal expectations resonate with many female readers of late modernity making her an empathetic character.

In spite of portraying Bridget as a late modern, emancipated and empowered woman the conventional, feminine narrative form of the diary, reinforces patriarchal values (Case “Authenticity” 178-180). Additionally, her obsession with finding a male partner, her consumerist life choices such as the popular notion of weight monitoring, and her overtly feminine choice of clothes serve in the same direction. As a rich terrain for the production of neoliberal values, popular culture and media texts, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* become intelligible through the appearance of specific figures who move across and through different popular media and gain meaning, form, and value as they travel (McRobbie Aftermath 29). Bridget Jones is such a figure. The various embodiments of the concept of post-feminist masquerade in *Bridget Jones's Dairy* applies to the character of Bridget as she represents the well-educated working girl, the drinking, sexually oriented girl. Such attributes, according to Jess Butler, are “adopted freely, and self-consciously as statements of personal choice and female empowerment” which offer, conversely, a “conservative mode” of feminine “empowerment”, connecting young women as Bridget with notions of change, and emancipation, particularly sexual freedoms, and reinstating new forms of patriarchal hegemony (952). These forms of feminine empowerment serve as a mask to hide Bridget’s fear of becoming less desirable to men. In fact, Bridget pursues her romantic affair with her boss, Daniel Cleaver even though she realizes that their relationship is a temporary one driven mainly by their physical attraction to each other. Indeed, maintaining this relationship masks Bridget’s fear

of being alone. Eventually, she realizes Daniel's mistreatment and she ends their relationship.

Exploring late modern femininity and the complexities of life in the 1990s, Bridget is portrayed as a flawed yet relatable character who represents "girlie" feminism, or "the essence of what it means to be a girl" while fostering her new "feminist" self (Baumgardner and Richards 60,61). Bridget's romantic relationships play a significant role in shaping her character. Her muddled love triangle with Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy highlights her search for love and validation. Bridget's experiences with romance reflect the complexities of the dilemma between her feminine and feminist concerns and her quest for meaningful connections. Her resilience and determination to find happiness despite her vulnerabilities, insecurities, and vices render her a relatable character. Additionally, her pursuit of self-improvement, sexual freedom, personal gratification, and "happiness with a man" aligns with postfeminist discourse focusing on individual agency, choice, female empowerment, and self-surveillance, yet the narrative simultaneously highlights the persistence of patriarchal norms and societal pressures, such as the necessity of marriage, and a family life for a young woman in order to avert a long life of unhappiness, and loneliness. In these terms, Bridget expresses her fear of "dying alone and being found three weeks later half-eaten by an Alsatian" (Fielding 32).

As "singletons" Bridget and her female, single friends (with the exception of Shazar) find it impossible to avert relationships with intolerable boyfriends, such as the charming, handsome, yet deceptive Daniel Cleaver mainly because they seek romance as an ultimate goal in spite of their male partner's character. Significantly, Bridget's character transforms from a neurotic and overwhelmed individual to someone who gains confidence, self-awareness, and a better comprehension of her true life-aspirations, significantly, with the assistance of Mark Darcy underlining "the coexistence of contradictions in postfeminist discourse" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). Ironically, the reason Bridget manages to win Mark Darcy's heart at the end of the novel is not because of her exceptional intelligence or high spirit or even female independence, but because she conforms to traditional values of femininity that downplay the value of female intelligence :

Indeed, the downplaying of intelligence sometimes appears to be essential to make the dynamic between the strong hero and needy heroine work. He must save her with the chivalry, wit and expertise she may not have herself. In *Bridget Jones's Diary* there are three such rescue scenes, the most dramatic of which involves the hero Mark Darcy revealing that Julio, Bridget's mother's lover, is a conman – a rescue which works simultaneously to present Bridget and her mother as I and gullible and, in a disillusioning move familiar from earlier versions of romance, to highlight the superior white masculinity of Mark Darcy (Gill and Herdieckerhoff).

In fact, the intertextual relationship between *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice* is evident in the strong resemblance Mark Darcy bears to Fitzwilliam Darcy ; both are “white superior” masculine figures who prove to be the best male romantic partner for the female protagonist of the two novels. In spite of critiquing male partners in romantic relationships, the female procurement of an eligible male partner is unquestionable in this late modern novel as much as it has been in Jane Austen's nineteenth-century novel *Pride and Prejudice* (Taylor 76, 77). Above all, the male superior mental qualities held in comparison to the female's intelligence underscores the double entanglement of new feminine and old feminist values inherent in post-feminist discourse.

The Dairy as the Narrative Form of *Bridget Jones's Diary*

The ambivalent stance of post-feminism is clearly manifested in *Bridget Jones's Diary* in terms of the choice of the narrative form of the diary. As a mode of feminine narration, the diary lays a claim to the authenticity of the narrative (Case “Authenticity”178). Highlighting the blurred boundaries between empowerment and conformity characteristic of post-feminism and neoliberal values, the narrative intertwines traditional gender roles and the novel's conventional claim to authenticity with Bridget's pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment ; Bridget's psychological dilemma is characterized by her pressing desire and attempt to find a nice boyfriend while pursuing and preserving her professional career at the same time. Through the feminine narrative form of the diary ,“Bridget internalizes, or individualizes this postfeminist problematic as she turns her confusion inwards and “ interprets it as her personal, psychological dilemma” (Genz 139) .

By describing the narrative form of the diary as “feminine”, Case implies that this form of narration conforms to the social standards of femininity (“Authenticity” 176–81). In this sense, Fielding contextualizes *Bridget Jones's Diary* within a long tradition of novels that caters to readers’ expectations of feminine narration (Case, “Authenticity” 176-180). Nevertheless, feminine narration (as used in the 18th and 19th century novels) excludes the female narrator from plotting or controlling her future life. Consequently, Bridget is a witness rather than an authority in her own story (“Authenticity” 178-80). Using the self-confessional first- person narrative point of view, Bridget presents her impressions and descriptions of her psychological conditions coloured by her opinions, mood, past experiences, or even her perceptions of what she sees and hears in a patriarchal society. However, she is unable to gain control over the narrative.

On the other hand, Bridget’s self- deprecating comments on her actions and faults, unlike the same quality in male or “masculine” narrators, is linked to “the restriction of the female narrator to the role of narrative witness, that is... her exclusion from the active shaping of narrative form and meaning” (Case , *Plotting* 4). Thus, in “feminine narration” “narrative confidence, competence, and control” are “explicitly disclaimed” (*Plotting* 4). Whereas women’s autobiography may subvert a reader’s expectations of it and reveal something of the truth about the autobiographer, fictional women narrators tend to be more solidly conventional, and the convention calls for their relegation to the role of witness and their exclusion from the role of conscious plotter (Stjernholm 23,24). Being a conventional mode of feminine narration, the diary form marks a “significant lack of agency” on the part of the female narrator, (Stjernholm 23). Despite her pre-eminent position in the narrative, the diary form masks Bridget’s lack of agency over her life.

Female Individuation, Work-Private life Balance, Empowerment, and Choice

The internalizing tendency of the “feminine narration” adopted in this novel individualizes Bridget’s account of her personal experiences as part of the post-feminist version of self- indulgent “contemporary feminism” which only focuses on “reclaiming personal experiences and female pleasures, usually to the exclusion of any political understanding or activism” (Braithwaite 336). Likewise, the vocabulary of choice and empowerment in post-feminist discourse replaces feminism as a result of the double entanglement of feminist legacies and neoconservative and neoliberal

values (McRobbie , *Aftermath* 12). Moreover, “the maintenance of the feminine body is steeped in the rhetoric of choice as an endless series of supposedly positive and empowering, autonomous consumer decisions for women and girls” in post-feminist discourse (Blue 665).

In such discourse, a successful romantic partnership with a man through marriage becomes a “repudiation of second-wave feminism” and an “ultimate act of postfeminist agency” (Taylor 26). Such act of female agency occasionally preoccupies Bridget in the novel. This is also evident in the social pressures exerted on Bridget by her mother and their acquaintance, Una Alconbury, to find an eligible husband. These societal pressures also drive Bridget to work on her speech and manner of communication with Daniel Cleaver besides monitoring her weight, in order to maintain their romantic relationship, and in turn Bridget’s work- private life balance.

The narrative intertwines feminine gender roles with Bridget’s pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment, highlighting the blurred boundaries between individual choice and empowerment on the one hand, and conformity, on the other. Girl power culture, which is embedded in popular culture, also merges the opposing demands of neoliberalist society with an emphasis on the physical qualities of femininity as well as male autonomy. With its subjective, individualizing logic that downplays and depoliticizes the fact that women continue to face gendered inequality, and with its constitutive imbrication with consumerist notions of “choice,” post-feminist discourse is identified with neoliberalism as with feminism (Blue 664) In “Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong,” (2004) Third-wave feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards offer “the essence of what it means to be a girl” in what they designate as “girlie” feminism . That is to say, young feminists or, “girlie” feminists should retain “the tabooed symbols of women feminine enculturation”, such as green nail polish, Hello Kitty, the Spice Girls, and Brazilian bikini waxes” as they retain a new version of feminism (60).

A. McRobbie explains that the adoption of old feminine cultural symbols into post-feminism functions “according to this logic of substitution” and that these symbols are “spectral re-workings of their feminist predecessors, now transplanted into a popular domain” (*Aftermath* 27). Thus , the “mode of feminine

‘empowerment’” advanced by the new cultural forms is a “conservative” one, “the hallmark of which is the active connecting-up of young woman with notions of change, the right to work, and with new freedoms, particularly sexual freedoms” (*Aftermath* 27).

Focusing on consumerist behaviour, Girl Power culture propagates the acquisition of goods, and female friendships as a way of life for women. Besides, the post-feminist assertion that equality has been achieved turns women’s attention to female achievement, encouraging them to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices” (Budgeon 9). In the novel, Bridget navigates the challenges of her professional life, highlighting the post-feminist notion that women can and should pursue personal or private goals and careers as a marker of choice as well as the capitalist economic necessity of earning one’s livelihood. Indeed, seeking self-improvement and professional success embodies the postfeminist emphasis on individual agency. Maintaining a career and a consistent desire for professional improvement, Bridget’s journey is centered on self-discovery. In reality, her focus on personal fulfillment serves as a guise for her romantic pursuits whose principal goal is to find a male partner. Bridget constantly attends her mother’s friends’ New year Turkey lunch parties even though she realizes that they are merely attempts to set her up with a man which she regards as “one level of humiliation” (Fielding 12).

In a sense, post-feminist discourse displays an ambivalent stance associating itself with previously established forms of feminism, but at the same time attempting to substitute them with new forms of gender power (Gill and Scharff 281). Therefore, Bridget’s romantic pursuits, and her struggle for personal fulfillment are the main focus of the plot-line of the novel; it is a desire that drives Bridget to focus on doing whatever she can to improve her body and mind. This occasional obsession even leads Bridget to develop unhealthy habits regarding food, cigarettes, and alcohol in her daily life. Indeed, consumer and popular culture impinge on the sphere of female “emancipation” and gender equality in post-feminism as well as in the genre of chick lit represented by Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*.

The Body as Fetish: Commodification and Consumerism

According to Judith Bultler’s concept of gender performativity, gender or sex is a cultural construct created by a repetitive act of imitation which “materializes

the body's sex" and serves to consolidate "the heterosexual imperative" or heterosexual hegemony, and also entails "the displacement of human agency" (xii, xviii). In spite of the post-feminist emphasis on individual agency and choice, Western beauty standards have a tyrannical effect on women. The heterosexual imperative is apparent in the social pressures placed upon Bridget by her mother and her acquaintances to get married. Hence, Bridget develops a neurotic obsession with her body image and an occasional obsession with finding a male partner. Therefore, the constraints the ideology of femininity imposes on women are both physical and mental (Whelehan, *Modern Feminist* 216).

Pinpointing the intersection of feminism, gender identity, and societal expectations with consumer culture which utilizes and stresses the idea of femininity, the concept of post-feminist masquerade comprises a re-ordering of femininity so that old-fashioned styles (rules about hats, bags, shoes, etc. signal submission to, and reinforcement of some invisible authority or an opaque set of instructions (*Aftermath* 66). Feminine masquerade is illustrated by the figure of the "so-called fashionista" which is all relevant to the character of Bridget and the themes of the novel (*Aftermath* 67). In practice, Bridget's overtly flirtatious behaviour in the workplace is an embodiment of McRobbie's concept of post-feminist masquerade she assumes to hide her desire to compete with her male colleagues on the labour market (*Aftermath* 66). "The post-feminist (anti-feminist) masquerade" comes to the young woman's rescue as "a throwback from the past" while hiding her nervous state as a person who is unused to power, and is afraid that competing with men will make her unfeminine and detract from her desirability (*Aftermath* 66). Consequently, women are encouraged to show their feminine selves in order to actually get ahead faster (Flaudi 196). Furthermore, women become preoccupied with their body shape and appearance supporting the growth of consumer economy while directing their attention inwardly as they strive to take more care of their individuality and become oblivious of political or public matters.

In the novel, Bridget wears make-up, accessories, and a mini-skirt to "mask" her desire to maintain the romance with Daniel Cleaver by the guise of excessive femininity which can insure a preservation of her sexual desirability (*Aftermath* 67). In her case, she is mainly afraid to become less desirable to Daniel Cleaver. Basically, post-feminist masquerade, does not imperil patriarchal hegemony;

underneath the young woman wearing a mini-skirt and enjoying sexual freedoms, is a “provocation to feminism,” a “triumphant gesture on the part of resurgent patriarchy” (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 85).

Closely related to “personal choice” in Girl power culture is the idea of self-surveillance and self-monitoring in post-feminist media culture, an idea which has also long stood as an important requirement of femininity (Gill, *Postfeminist Media* 155). This is evident in Bridget self-surveillance and weight management practices which frequently, and drastically fail. Through Bridget’s failure, Fielding satirizes the consumerist behaviour of contemporary women, and also subverts neoliberal ideals of women’s bodily control and self-development. Indeed, the disciplinary technique of dieting negatively affects the female body as constraining to women’s sexuality and eating behaviour. According to the Butlerian concept of performativity, self-surveillance practices and beauty rituals are a masquerade rather than as a natural tendency of women (Gunalan xi, 9).

In one opinion, the constant disciplining of the body through weight counting and dieting in chick lit novels, “can be read as offering an insight into the disciplinary matrix of neoliberal society”, since “the body in chick lit novels is constructed in a highly specific way: it is a body that is always already unruly and which requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling” in order to conform to judgments of social norm of femininity (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). In fact, the normative practice of beautification in post-feminist discourse is linked with an emancipated identity. (Lazar, “The Right” 37). In addition, considering “the emancipated new femininity” as a consequence of “a broader, global neoliberal postfeminist discourse” generates certain themes associated with post-feminism which have acquired common currency in the mainstream, such as personal empowerment, entrepreneurship, sexual agency, entitlement to pleasure and emancipation (Lazar, “The Right” 37,38).

The theme of emancipation in beauty advertising, which is a construction of women’s right to be beautiful, is explored in two ways in chick-lit novels. First, the beauty project is signified as an extension of women’s right to freedom and liberation. Second, beauty practices are represented as offering women self-determined choices (Lazar, “The Right” 38). The female beauty project in neoliberal consumer culture becomes a project of female empowerment, when in fact it

positions women as commodity selves posed for an absent male spectator-owner (Goldman 10). One aspect of the fetishization of the female body in the novel is evident is Bridget's own struggles with weight, appearance, and societal standards of beauty. Through Bridget's reflections and self-deprecating comments, the relentless scrutiny and unrealistic expectations placed on women's bodies are highlighted. Indeed, Bridget's constant calorie counting, obsession with weight loss, and failing efforts to conform to societal beauty ideals reflect the pervasive influence of body fetishization in contemporary consumerist popular culture which has a negative psychological impact on females. As Bridget prepares herself and her body for a date, she satirizes the rituals of grooming herself for her date in the following metaphor:

Completely exhausted by entire day of date-preparation. Being a woman is worse than being a farmer — there is so much harvesting and crop spraying to be done: legs to be waxed, underarms shaved, eyebrows plucked, feet pumiced, skin exfoliated and moisturized, spots cleansed, roots dyed, eyelashes tinted, nails filed, cellulite massaged, stomach muscles exercised. (Fielding 27)

In this metaphor, Bridget compares herself to a farmer working on a farm to represent how women are obliged to go through a continuous process of grooming their bodies and image; the “harvest” is the burden of patriarchal expectations concerning beauty and female desirability which commodify women and treat their bodies as fetish.

Living in a Western Cosmopolitan culture, Bridget is caught between sexist double standards and pressures to which she has to conform in order to find a man. Such culture is also heavily impacted by neoliberal consumer values based on the trope of the “perfect” in terms of her personal life and her body image. The trope of the “perfect” is relegated to the emergence of “neoliberal feminism” with its emphasis on individualism and “equating of female success with the illusion of control over one's personal life and body image and “the idea of the ‘perfect’” (McRobbie, “Notes” 4). In the novel, Bridget states: “I am a child of Cosmopolitan culture, have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices” (Fielding 52). As such, the strategies of self-surveillance seem normal and even humorous, but

they contribute to consumer culture that places undue pressure on women to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Significantly, the strategies of self-surveillance and their linkage to beauty and the body image reinforce the heterosexual matrix by connecting heterosexuality with the promise of love for females and the reassurance of patriarchal authority -all of which detract from the values of hardcore feminism.

In *Bridget Jones's Diary* the portrayal of the female body encompasses both instances of objectification and moments of agency. While the novel, in some instances, satirizes societal expectations and pressures regarding female appearance, it also highlights the complexities of body image and self-perception. At the same time, the “body” reflects the character’s psyche or interior life. When Bridget Jones smokes a large number of cigarettes, drinks or consumes large amounts of food, this is indicative of an emotional breakdown caused by a man, notably, Daniel Cleaver. In the same vein, Bridget’s statement that her homosexual friend, Tom’s participation in a beauty contest which makes “him crack under the pressures we women have long been subjected to” and leads him to become “insecure, appearance obsessed and borderline anorexic” support the argument (Fielding 225). This emphasis constructs women as bodies, and “makes them morally responsible for disciplining the body/self as postfeminist, neoliberal subjects” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). In this sense, the emphasis on women as bodies serves to consolidate the heterosexual principle on the basis of consumer culture and the patriarchal social construct of the male gaze.

The Shift from Objectification to Subjectification

The sphere of leisure and consumer culture is a site for “hedonism, fantasy; personal gratification, and entertainment” (McRobbie 66). Such a sphere is also linked to the new form of Girl power culture which relates female emancipation to sexual gratification. This has entailed a shift in female sexual representation in mainstream culture from objectification to subjectification (Gill, *Postfeminist Media* 151). Such “sexual subjectification” implies the presentation of women’s sexuality as autonomous and empowering despite appearing much like previous representations of women as the objects of male sexual desire (Gill, “Sexual Objectification” 100-106).

The ambivalent manner in which feminist ideas are treated within *Bridget Jones's Diary* is closely linked to this neoliberal construction of power, the body and

subjectivity. Thus, “prefeminist ideals “are represented as post-feminist freedoms in ways that do nothing to question normative heterosexual femininity (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). Bridget’s interactions with the male characters in the novel, notably Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy, highlight her as an active desiring subject. Although Bridget realizes that her relationship with Cleaver is purely physical, she maintains the affair as long as she could, reiterating that he is so handsome and “attractive” (Fielding 41). According to A. Cranny-Francis, the objectification of the male as handsome and attractive is an articulation of female desire in romance fiction (187). In spite of the fact that Bridget’s depiction as a “feisty and empowered sexual subject, able to enter into union entirely on her own terms and for her own pleasure”, what is interesting is the way in which she frequently uses her empowered post-feminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many second-wave feminists as problematic, located as they are in “normative notions of femininity” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). This is especially evident in her sexual relationship with Daniel as it focuses on desire and is maintained only through her body image and his good looks and charm. Moreover, it is a relationship not founded on gender equality in which Daniel is figured as a manipulative playboy with whom Bridget acts only on his own terms.

In fact, the representation of women in contemporary media, such as ads of cosmetics, is that of an active desiring subject who is indirectly objectified as a result of being persuaded that they can attain social power by willingly engaging in self-fetishization, that is to say, by presenting themselves as objects of male desire, women reproduce the patriarchal male gaze that foregrounds a picture of women as sexual objects (Goldman 116-119). Additionally, the constant disciplining of the body through weight counting and dieting in chick lit novels, “can be read as offering an insight into the disciplinary matrix of neoliberal society”, since “the body in chick lit novels is constructed in a highly specific way: it is a body that is always already unruly and which requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling” in order to conform to judgments of the social norm of femininity (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). Even though Bridget’s journey of self-discovery and personal growth throughout the novel emphasizes her agency as a desiring subject, such journey is unable in many cases to circumvent societal pressures concerning

femininity. Indeed, Bridget's journey of self-discovery indicates conformity to and assertion of patriarchal values.

The "pernicious" result of this representational shift is a production of "a deeper form of exploitation than objectification one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime" which is imposed internally rather than externally resulting into a "self-policing, narcissistic gaze" (Gill, *Postfeminist Media* 151, 152). Bridget actively pursues the romantic connection with Daniel Cleaver based on her own sexual desires through an internally self-imposed disciplinary strategy reflecting her neurotic obsession with her body image as well as her submission to patriarchal standards of feminine beauty. Furthermore, Bridget's old-fashioned feminine attire and her adoption of the "fashionista" style is a feminine masquerade and not a natural feminine practice which illustrates Bridget's submission to a set of social instructions that reinforce patriarchal authority (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 67).

Rather than suggesting a substitution of feminist values by regressive feminine ones, Bridget's behaviour pinpoints a conflict between these two opposite sets of values. In *Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary: A Reader's Guide*, Imelda Whelehan contends that "the romance element of the novel seems retroactive, reflecting a wish-fulfilment fantasy that love can sweep away all other obstacles"(28). This is especially evident in the gradual development of Bridget's romantic liaison with Mark Darcy. According to Whelehan contemporary postfeminist discourses are often characterized by 'retrosexism', premised on real fears about the collapse of masculine hegemony (*Overloaded* 11)..Furthermore, much contemporary media is characterized by the nostalgic quality which harks back to a time and place peopled by real women and humorous 'cheeky chappies', thus, the representations of women 'from the banal to the downright offensive' are being 'defensively reinvented against cultural changes in women's lives' (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 11)..

In its engagement with the shifting "subject position" of "feminist identity" of post-feminism, chick lit novels such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* "can work as an important site of ideological struggle, intervening in the complex process of "renegotiating female subjectivity" especially in connection with heterosexual relationships which are pivotal in such narratives (Taylor 73,74). Being "singletons"

Bridget and her female friends face exclusion from the community of married couples Bridget calls the “Smug Marrieds” (Fielding 250). The term “Singleton” is invented by Bridget’s feminist friend, Shazar to replace the outdated term “spinster”. In addition to the intertextual relation between *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the recurrence of the term “spinster” in the coined word “ singleton” in the novel underlines the endurance of the social stigma associated with a woman who stays single in her thirties reducing her to the state of insanity even in the 1990s:

The existence of the term “spinster” tells us much about the function of marriage in Austen’s day and explains our pleasure in reading about a heroine with outstanding personal qualities who does manage to marry above her station, like Elizabeth Bennet. What Fielding reminds us is that while Bridget, Jude, and Sharon try to redefine their status by inventing the term ‘singleton,’ it only serves to throw the enduring stigma attached to this state into even sharper relief. One is reminded of the 1987 film *Fatal Attraction* and the demonization of the successful professional single woman into neurotic psychopath ..., and one can only wonder at the audacity of Hollywood in repeatedly portraying single women as inhabiting the borderland of madness. (Whelehan, *A Reader's Guide* 28)

In fact, Bridget demonstrates an ambiguous stance on the issue of female singleness. She constantly oscillates in her diary keeping between being a “satisfied Singleton”, and being desperate and man-obsessed. As such, Bridget displays the “process of a shifting and mobile subjectivity” which the narrative form of the diary allows to be foregrounded (Taylor 82). It is Bridget’s constant movement between” these competing selves and ways of being that make it difficult to argue that the novel performs an overt pathologization – or, conversely, celebration – of singleness in any uncomplicated way”(Taylor 82).

As a terrain of post-feminist popular culture, movies, and media texts and popular romance novels, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, represent an ambiguous backlash against feminism which depoliticizes gender equality. Consequently, the portrayal of strong and complex women in Hollywood movies and media texts of that period is eschewed as also evident in Fielding’s novel (Flaudi 126). Beset by the conflict or psychological dilemma between second-wave feminist and old-fashioned feminine values, Bridget is a neurotic woman who ironically makes a plan for self-

improvement which mainly centers around seeking a man by following the advice of popular beauty magazines to improve her physical appearance. The impact of consumer behaviour on the protagonist's life is satirized in the novel because Bridget is presented as someone who could conceivably be women's magazines' "ideal" reader since she blindly follows the advice of these popular magazines. In so doing, she often faces a conflict and is unable to conform to the conventional standards of femininity (Martinescu 126).

Such portrayal discloses the commodification and sexualization of women embedded in consumer culture which emphasizes outdated notions about beauty and self-worth. *Bridget Jones's Diary* also offers moments of resistance and empowerment against the fetishization of the female body in Bridget's unapologetic embrace of her imperfection and her witty retorts to societal expectations. Even though Bridget moves beyond mere objectification, asserting her agency and individuation as a desiring subject, she still oscillates between the two previous states confirming that chick lit is a site of ideological struggle involving the complex process of "renegotiating female subjectivity" even though it reinstates patriarchal discourse (Cranny-Fancis 187).

Conclusion

As a popular romance novel and a chick lit novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, presents a complex depiction of gender equality and feminism in post-feminist media culture. The protagonist, Bridget Jones, embodies the double entanglement of feminist legacies and neoliberal values, as she navigates her personal and professional life, seeking self-improvement, empowerment, and choice. The narrative intertwines traditional gender roles with Bridget's pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment, highlighting the blurred boundaries between individual choice and empowerment on the one hand, and conformity on the other. Moreover, the novel explores the influence of neoliberal consumerist pressures on women to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, as seen in Bridget's self-surveillance and weight management practices. As a conventional mode of feminine narration, the diary form employed by Fielding marks a significant lack of agency on the part of the female narrator, despite her pre-eminent position in the narrative. This individualizes Bridget's account of her personal experiences, aligning with the post-feminist version of self-indulgent contemporary feminism that focuses on reclaiming

personal experiences and female pleasures, usually to the exclusion of any political understanding or activism.

Underscoring the complexities of body image and self-perception, *Bridget Jones's Diary* portrays the female body encompassing both instances of objectification and moments of agency. In addition, the character's psyche or interior life is reflected in her body, and women are made morally responsible for disciplining the body/self as post-feminist, neoliberal subjects contributing to the treatment of the female body as a fetish. The representation of women in contemporary media texts and popular fiction positions them as active desiring subjects who are indirectly objectified, reproducing the patriarchal male gaze. Thereupon, *Bridget Jones's Diary* manifests an ambivalent attitude concerning feminism and femininity in post-feminist popular culture, highlighting the influence of neoliberal consumerist pressures on women's self-perception, and the representation of women in contemporary popular romance novels and chick lit texts. Overall, discriminatory gender forms are re-established as consumer and popular culture impinge on the domain of female freedom, appearing supportive of female success, yet confining women to new post-feminist neurotic dependencies and body anxiety experienced by women confronted by such choices (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 33, 57,64). Such cultural phenomena and popular chick lit texts ultimately depoliticise or negate the political influence of gender equality and reinforce traditional forms of gender power.

Note

¹ Chick-lit is a literary genre that consists of fiction that is typically written by female authors, centered around female protagonists. The term developed in the 1990s and early 2000s and the genre itself focuses on problems of modern womanhood, such as coming of age, female friendship circles, workplace struggles, issues of appearance and body image, consumerism and most often, romantic entanglements with men.

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نزع الطابع السياسي عن المساواة بين الجنسين: الليبرالية الجديدة ومعضلة ما بعد النسوية بين
النسوي والأنثوي في رواية مذكرات بريدجيت جونز

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المستخلص:

هناك إهتمام متزايد بما يعرف في الدراسات النسوية بإسم «ما بعد الحركة النسوية» كمجال متنازع عليه في النظرية النقدية منذ التسعينيات من القرن العشرين، كذلك كان هناك اهتمام كبير في الثقافة الشعبية والإعلام البريطاني بأفكار مثل نجاح المرأة مع الأخذ في الاعتبار النوع «الليبرالي» من النسوية الذي يهتم بأفكار مثل «تكافؤ الفرص». وقد شهدت تلك الفترة تنازع الدراسات فيما يتعلق بأفكار النسوية والأنوثة في بريطانيا والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية حيث تعتبر النساء في خطر أن ينتهي بهن الأمر للعيش بمفردهن فيقعن فريسة للأمراض العقلية والجسدية بسبب الخطاب النسوي عن المساواة بين الجنسين في الغرب. تركت مثل هذه التحولات السياسية والثقافية إحساسًا بالارتباك حول ما بعد الموجة الثانية للحركة النسوية. على ذلك تتناول هذه الدراسة رواية مذكرات بريدجيت جونز (1996) لهلن فيلدنج باعتبارها نص بريطاني أساسي ونموذج أصلي يعبر عن «ثقافة قوة الفتاة» يمكن من خلاله فحص «التشابك المزدوج» للمواضيع النسوية وما بعد النسوية و المناهضة للنسوية في الرواية البريطانية الشعبية المعاصرة بشكل خاص والثقافة الشعبية بشكل عام. وذلك من خلال دراسة مواضيع الذاتية الأنثوية، وإمتلاك الجسد الأنثوي أو تشييء الجسد الأنثوي والتركيز على الفردية والتمكين والاختيار، والمراقبة الذاتية ومراقبة المرأة لوزنها ، فضلاً عن عودة ظهور قيم تسليع جسد الأنثى والسلوك الأستهلاكي باعتبارهما نموذجًا لخطاب ما بعد النسوية في النصوص الروائية الشعبية. يؤدي هذا التشابك المزدوج بين القيم الاستهلاكية في حركة ما بعد النسوية والليبرالية الجديدة إلى صراع بين الأفكار النسوية للتمكين المرأة وتحررها وكذلك إلى الموقف المناهض للنسوية الذي يعيد تثبيت القيم الأبوية للتفوق الذكوري ويروج للقيم الإستهلاكية في الليبرالية الجديدة

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد النسوية ، الليبرالية الجديدة، النسوي، الأنثوي