

## Feminism and Gender Roles in *Bridget Jones's Diary*

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**Abstract:** A cornerstone of contemporary women-centric fiction, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) continues to charm readers by playfully exploring womanhood through an emotionally resonant character – a single cosmopolite woman juggling self-expectations and socially imposed standards. A prominent exponent of the much-discussed chick-lit genre, Fielding's novel reveals its complexities by satirically addressing the feminist and gendered discourses. This paper investigates the ways in which feminist discourse is introduced and discussed in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the manner in which different female characters engage with it, and the critical interpretations that arise from their interactions with its agenda. After addressing the presence and impact of feminist discourse in Helen Fielding's novel, the focus shifts to the depiction of gender roles, exploring how the novel negotiates or reinforces traditional gender(ed) expectations.

**Keywords:** feminism, gender, discourse, identity, women-centric fiction.

### Introduction

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) remains a favourite among rom-com lovers, celebrated as one of the genre's finest. Bridget Jones's lasting popularity owes much to the successful filmic adaptation of Fielding's bestselling novel, in which Renée Zellweger plays the role of a thirty-something career woman wrestling with societal expectations, unsuccessful romantic relationships and poor career choices.

Voted as "the most inspirational" film heroine (*The Economist*, 2025), Bridget Jones also appeals to younger generations, all because of her widely relatable experiences. According to *The Economist* (2025), critics and fans alike assert that the core reason why Helen Fielding's character is still relevant today is her "familiar haplessness", extended to all aspects of life. However, Bridget Jones manages to overcome the label of a comic comfort character. She's also defined as a liberating figure, a contemporary culture icon, due to the ability to project an optimistic image of womanhood: "whenever Bridget falls over (which she does, a lot), she finds a way to pick herself up, dust herself off, have a laugh and seek her happy ending." (*The Economist*, 2025)

Besides Bridget's passionate love stories, the comic entanglements featuring the heroine and her emotional resonance, the relevance of Fielding's novel today is also ensured by the British author's ability to articulate the text in order to encourage interpretation through various theoretical lenses.

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*Bridget Jones's Diary* addresses anxieties and satisfactions of womanhood, the impact of inadequate societal expectations in women's lives, the burden of culturally prescribed gender norms and the pressure of internalised feminine standards on female youth. Within the first two volumes of the *Bridget Jones* series, the above-mentioned topics are primarily of interest. In the two sequels published, *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2013) and *Bridget Jones's Baby* (2016), Helen Fielding extends the thematic area to other anxieties of femininity, such as motherhood or ageing. These can all be understood as key themes of the feminist discourse which rearticulate a core question: "why (...) should a woman have to be a certain way because she is a woman?" (Zaretsky, 1988: 265)

Besides the feminist and gender-focused issues often debated in the novel, what interests is the strategy through which they are introduced in the text's internal logic. In many of her interviews, Helen Fielding recalls the impact of humour – which she describes as "a very powerful tool" – in communication, and especially in writing. "The whole basis of the humour (is) to bring anything too fancy down to earth", she suggests. (Fielding, 2020b) This claim may be employed to explore the author's approach to reframing the feminist and gendered discourse in *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

### **Controversial feminism in *Bridget Jones's Diary***

Feminist discourse plays a significant role in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. However, critics have signalled the contradictions between speech and action in Fielding's novel; the statements according to which *Bridget Jones's Diary* is an anti-feminist text surfaced as particularly prominent in the mainstream discourse. Because it addresses feminist and gendered issues, *Bridget Jones's Diary* has also become a text of interest for feminist criticism. Most research studies stress that Helen Fielding's novel is a postfeminist text, the conceptual frame being addressed through Bridget's character; this perspective persists as a prevailing interpretation of the novel.

Many voices address a possible anti-feminist approach of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and question Bridget Jones's status as "a good role-model." (Moore, 2013; Mclean-Mothian, 2020; Maddick, 2024; Gold, 2025; Strimple, 2025) The novel's filmic adaptation strongly encourages such an interpretation. The most popular arguments are that Bridget Jones cannot be a "liberating", "feminist" character because she is "so desperate to be part of a couple" (Fielding, 2020b), because she is "a consumerist" and "self-obsessed" (Moore, 2013), "toxic" character and "a dreadful and misogynistic role model". Helen Fielding has consistently opposed the views that support this position. While debating Bridget's much-discussed love life, the British author maintains that "you can't say it's anti-feminist to want to love and be loved; it's part of life". (Fielding, 2020a) Furthermore, she deems critics that label her book as anti-feminist to be

“shallow” and subtly suggests a more optimistic interpretation of the text: “I think it’s worrying in the first place that people would think a book about a woman laughing about her foibles is not feminist. It is a mark of strength to be able to laugh at yourself, not weakness.” (Fielding, 2020b) For the most part, the British author responds to critics that refer to her stance as “anti-feminist” in a humorous, light-hearted manner. Along these lines, Fielding (2020a) states that “feminist criticism of her ‘defeatist view of womanhood,’ upsets her.”

One of the aspects that give rise to the anti-feminist interpretation is that Fielding “plays” with feminist concepts, effectively introducing or commenting on them throughout her novels. Confident in challenging convention, the author also engages her audience playfully when it comes to “debating feminism” and proposes humour as a reading grid: “I did deliberately put the line in *Bridget Jones* ‘There is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism’, in the knowledge that it might annoy some people.” (Fielding, 2020a)

Numerous studies on *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Guenther, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Harzewski, 2011) focus on the postfeminist context in which Bridget’s character must perform; broadly, the research works aim at the impact of postfeminism in women-centric literature advance the notion that the protagonist’s attitude towards femininity is conditioned by the cultural moment she is part of.

Arguments seeking to show the text’s connection to postfeminism target Bridget Jones’s position towards romantic relationships and commitment: “despite feminism, Bridget wants to pursue dreams of romance, find a suitable husband, get married and have children”, – her career choices and setbacks; “she makes schoolgirl errors in her publishing house, (...) she delivers an incoherent speech at a book launch, her head seems to be full of frivolous thoughts”, promoting “a kind of scatterbrain and endearing femininity” (McRobbie, 2009: 12); her focus on self-empowerment through consumerist tendencies and her need for self-gratification. Following the above-mentioned perspectives, most studies state Bridget Jones best exemplifies the new, “postfeminist” female identity, which manifests itself through “a backlash against or a dismissal of the desirability for equality between women and men, in the workforce and in the family” and through hostility via the goals and gains of second-wave feminism.” (Holmlund, 2005: 116)

The characteristic features of female individuals living in a postfeminist context, as Chris Holmlund identifies them, are the following: their young age, the preference for partying, dressing up, stepping up and taking breaks for work in order to date or to shop – behaviours which demonstrate how the new, postfeminist generations take the second-wave feminism’s gains “for granted”. The main clauses of postfeminism stress that the newer generations of women

perceive feminism as a movement that has passed and that no longer shows relevance (Hall and Rodriguez, 2003; McRobbie, 2009), a fact that determines a decrease in support for the women's empowerment movement, alongside the anti-feminist attitude prevalent among the generation's representatives. The core features of postfeminism begin to take shape from here: the ongoing obsession over appearance, the sense of empowerment through sexuality (and sexual disinhibition), the consumerist behaviour seen as a backlash towards feminist prescriptions, the rejection of collective action, determining the focus on personal fulfilment. These are complemented by the paradox of embracing the traditional, "domestic" femininity rejected by the women's rights movement. (2009: 20)

### **Bridget Jones and the challenge of feminism**

For both the protagonist and the other female characters in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, feminism stands for an ideal. Bridget and her girlfriends perceive feminism as a set of pre-established, rigorous rules which, if followed accurately, can liberate women from societal pressures and empower them, especially in their relationship with men. (2009: 20) Despite being familiar with feminist ideas and language, Helen Fielding's female characters fail to transform feminist discourse into a lifestyle. Their personal desires often conflict with the expectations within the women's movement they desire to uphold.

In a study on postfeminism and the new gender regime, Angela McRobbie points out that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is one of the texts that demonstrate the "double entanglement" of feminist and anti-feminist themes and discourses, found especially in contemporary or popular culture fiction. (2009: 12) The tension between discourses illustrates the main contradiction *Bridget Jones's Diary* signals: the one between feminism's idealised potential – mainly focused on empowerment and emancipation – and the reality of femininity, which naturally includes anti-feminist, patriarchal values and the reconsideration of domestic, traditional gender expression.

As a self-declared feminist, Bridget Jones constantly calls on prescriptions of women's movement to project the ideal behaviour of a woman who wants to achieve success in both relationships and society. Among her New Year's resolutions, which open the novel, Bridget includes:

#### **I WILL NOT**

Get upset over men, but instead be poised and cool ice-queen. (...) Have crushes on men, but instead form relationships based on mature assessment of character. (...)

Sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend. (Fielding, 1996: 7)

More than trying to measure up to feminist ideals, such as challenging the traditional power dynamics – that would enable women to avoid feeling dependent or submissive in relationships with men by gaining authority (Nahed, 2024: 131) – supporting women’s agency or exposing the dangers of the newly-popularised concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) in romantic relationships, Bridget uses feminist speech because she finds it efficient in attracting men. Postfeminist criticism relies on Bridget’s so-called “obsession” with finding a boyfriend, against her desire to feel “complete” *without* one. In reality, Fielding’s heroine is not so “obsessed” with engaging in a romantic relationship as she is conditioned to desire one by family and society. As a “singleton”, Bridget is often ambushed with outrageous commentaries from “the older generation”, if considered from a feminist perspective:

‘So you still haven’t got a feller!’

‘Bridget! What are we going to do with you!’ said Una. ‘You career girls! I don’t know! Can’t put it off for ever, you know. Tick-tock-tick-tock.’

‘Yes. How does a woman manage to get to your age without being married?’ (Fielding, 1996: 12)

Ironical comments that demonise single women are wittily introduced in key moments of the storyline, mostly when Bridget experiences loneliness or romantic deceptions. Society’s reactions – deliberately exaggerated – lead to interpreting Fielding’s novel as a satirical text aimed at the challenges that a young woman might face when trying to “enjoy all sorts of traditional feminine pleasures without apology” (2009: 21), while also searching empowerment, independence and career achievements. Furthermore, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* exposes the difficulties (and, in most cases, failures) feminist speech and its goals face when verbalised or exposed – in other words, when interacting with the lived realities of contemporary society. Helen Fielding succeeds in giving a voice to women’s struggles regarding the process of internalising feminist ideals. If Bridget Jones finds it difficult to express herself, using the diary as a confessional tool helps her reclaim a long-lost language and honestly address the contradictions between feminism and femininity that may arise.

By keeping a diary, the protagonist can share her experiences without any filtering; this aspect contributes to the strong connection readers (and audiences) feel with Bridget Jones, as they “gain insight into her insecurities, desires, and struggles”, and “empathize with her as a subject rather than just an object of observation.” (2024: 122) Both in the novel and in the filmic adaptation, Bridget Jones feels free, as Angela McRobbie asserts, to be “self-mocking, self-disparaging”, and to let “her witty observations of the social life around her create a warmth and an audience who is almost immediately on her side.” (2009: 22)

Over the span of her first diary, Bridget Jones explores challenges of womanhood that advance discussions on societal pressures concerning women's bodies:

**6 p.m.** 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. The whole performance is so highly tuned you only need to neglect it for a few days for the whole thing to go to seed. Sometimes I wonder what I would be like if left to revert to nature — with a full beard and handlebar moustache on each shin, Dennis Healey eyebrows, face a graveyard of dead skin cells, spots erupting, long curly fingernails like Struwelpeter, blind as bat and stupid runt of species as no contact lenses, flabby body flobbering around. Ugh, ugh. Is it any wonder girls have no confidence? (1996: 22)

Bridget does not approach a strong feminist position; though she denounces society's expectations, she nonetheless partakes in them. However, Fielding's heroine is deeply self-reflexive. Bridget Jones is aware of the social structures that limit and condition women's living, from the less hostile and subversive ones, which focus on women's appearance and bodies, to the aggressive, intrusive ones that shape and impose behaviours and life choices. The protagonist's comments on these structures would lead readers to believe that she embraces a legitimate feminist mindset, sometimes pointing towards feminist radicalism. Bridget is commonly observed to struggle with how family and society view her status as a single, unmarried woman:

Oh God. It was me, four married couples and Jeremy's brother (forget it, red braces and face. Calls girls 'fillies').

'So, bellowed Cosmo, pouring me a drink. 'How's your love-life?'

Oh no. Why do they do this? Why? Maybe the Smug Marrieds only mix with other Smug Marrieds and don't know how to relate to individuals any more. Maybe they really do want to patronize us and make us feel like failed human beings. Or maybe they are in such a sexual rut they're thinking, 'There's a whole other world out there,' and hoping for vicarious thrills by getting us to tell them the roller-coaster details of our sex lives. (1996: 26)

The heroine's speech is, as in the above example, often deeply liberating; Bridget Jones tries to defy modern society's pressures by adopting feminist principles and incorporating them in her discourse. Being aware that her behaviour is a result of the constant social constraints, Bridget uses feminism as a "coping mechanism" whenever she is defeated by circumstances in which she fails to act like "a woman of substance" should. The examples are

numerous, and they illustrate the impact of feminism on late modern women's mindset:

Wise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but I am a child of Cosmopolitan culture, have been traumatized by super-models and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices. I can't take the pressure. I am going to cancel and spend the evening eating doughnuts in a cardigan with egg on it. (1996: 36)

The discourse Bridget adopts fails to be, by itself, convincing. In numerous occasions it is followed by paradoxical actions and behaviours that in reality deny the liberating speech that precedes them. This attitude marks the focus of interpretive commentaries addressing Bridget Jones's problematic relationship with feminist ideals. The heroine's refusal to protest against the tendencies that limit women's potential confines the theory according to which feminist precepts are incompatible with the postfeminist context in which the characters perform.

Bridget Jones states that she must become a woman of substance, 'complete without boyfriend', then obsesses over the thought of loneliness, self-appearance and "the stigma of remaining single and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children." (McRobbie, 2009: 20) She admits she must achieve success in the workplace, but prioritizes being an attractive, possible love interest for her boss. Even on graver concerns addressed by feminism, she finds herself being passive and even compliant: she acknowledges, for example, Daniel Cleaver's "mild" sexual harassment but concludes that she much enjoys being sexually harassed by him. She embraces the privileges of womanhood in the late 1990s, yet she mourns the values of traditional femininity, mainly revolving around marriage and children, thus explaining the pressure of the ticking biological clock. These arguments would suffice to accuse *Bridget Jones's Diary* of adopting the anti-feminist attitude of women in a postfeminist context, if one were to overlook the protagonist's self-awareness, as well as her precision in observing society, elements often overlooked in the filmic adaptations. Bridget Jones's discourse is, in this light, both subversive and resistant, translated into a satirical commentary regarding the inconsistent progress of internalising feminist values. However, society seems to acknowledge and benefit from the gains of women's movement, females have yet to overcome limiting societal pressures.

Given the opportunity to journal her experiences, Bridget Jones can register all contradictions of the postfeminist context, including her own. The great humour of Fielding's novel lies particularly in articulating these tensions. The humorous dismissal of feminist discourse immediately after it is uttered is a recurrent element in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and represents a great comedic accomplishment:

**7 p.m.** Cannot believe this has happened. (...) On the way to the bathroom, to complete final farming touches, I noticed the answerphone light was flashing: Daniel.

'Look, Jones. I'm really sorry. I think I'm going to have give tonight a miss. I've got a presentation at ten in the morning and a pile of forty-five spreadsheets to get through.'

Cannot believe it. Am stood up. Entire waste of whole day's bloody effort and hydroelectric body-generated power. However, one must not live one's life through men but must be complete in oneself as a woman of substance.

**9 p.m.** Still, he is in top-level job. Maybe he didn't want to ruin first date with underlying work panic.

**11 p.m.** Humph. He might have bloody well rung again, though. Is probably out with someone thinner.

**5 a.m.** What's wrong with me? I'm completely alone. Hate Daniel Cleaver. Am going to have nothing more to do with him. Am going to get weighed. (1996: 22)

A strong feminist discourse is adopted by other female characters as well: feminist ideas play a crucial role within Bridget Jones's group of friends. The intimacy fostered within a community of female confidants enables the development of a language specific to femininity – another mechanism through which women record and control challenges of womanhood. Bridget Jones names this discourse "feminist ranting" – the phrase is not selected randomly; it describes a certain type of speech, only accessible to and intelligible for women.

Out of all Bridget's friends, Shazzer (Sharon) is the most articulate in feminist discourse. Throughout the novel, she assumes the role of recording and explaining various feminine anxieties, such as the concern over social and emotional isolation, the emphasis of body image and the burden of emotional labour. Shazzer understands and internalizes the postfeminist context in which women like Jude and Bridget herself have to perform, she acknowledges the changing power dynamics and the pressure of a rising consumerist culture. She is symbolic of the feminist upheaval Bridget aspires to adopt, yet frequently rejects; her speech also represents the translation of feminist precepts into mainstream discourse. For the *Bridget Jones* series, the terms Shazzer popularised remain relevant, as do her uplifting reactions to the various emotional crises her girlfriends face:

**Midnight.** Har har. Just called Sharon.

'You should have said "I'm not married because I'm a Singleton, you smug, prematurely ageing, narrow-minded morons,"' Shazzer ranted. "'And because there's more than one bloody way to live: one in four households are single, most of the royal family are single, the nation's young men have been proved by surveys to be completely unmarriageable, and as a result there's a



whole generation of single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don't need to wash anyone else's socks. We'd be as happy as sandboys if people like you didn't conspire to make us feel stupid just because you're jealous."

'Singletons!' I shouted happily. 'Hurrah for the Singletons!' (1996: 27)

If Sharon is symbolic for the empowering, often contradictory "feminist ranting" that dominates female interaction, Jude and Bridget are often "subjects" under her radical analysis. All three women contribute to the process of constructing and deconstructing femininity; their discourses are representative for the manner in which feminist speech permanently changes and adapts itself according to the cultural context that activates it. Helen Fielding's intention is not, however, focused on exalting this type of speech; it equally empowers the three women, it gives them the opportunity of reclaiming both a language and a voice, but it may as well be denied. The character who repeatedly does this is Bridget:

**5 p.m.** Har har. Am marvellous. Feeling v. pleased with self. Had top-level post-works crisis meeting in Café Rouge with Sharon, Jude and Tom, who were all delighted with, the Daniel outcome, each convinced it was because I had followed their advice. Also Jude had heard survey on the radio that by the turn of the millennium a third of all households will be single, therefore proving that at last we are no longer tragic freaks. Shazzer guffawed and said, 'One in three? Nine out of ten, more like.' Sharon maintains men — present company (i.e. Tom) excepted, obviously — are so catastrophically unevolved that soon they will just be kept by women as pets for sex, therefore presumably these will not count as shared households as the men will be kept outside in kennels. Anyway, feeling v. empowered. Tremendous. Think might read bit of Susan Faludi's *Backlash*.

**5 a.m.** Oh God, am so unhappy about Daniel. I love him. (1996: 43)

For Bridget Jones and her friends, feminism cannot be reduced to a sole definition. In certain circumstances, it serves as a means of attracting men. In others, especially in its "strident" version, it is a self-sabotaging attitude that scares and alienates possible partners. In the small circle of friends, "feminist ranting" is a way for women to escape societal pressures, criticise patriarchy and regain their voices. Feminism is often an attitude females may adopt in order to become "poised and cool ice-queens" or "women of substance". In every case, the prescriptions of women's movement become a tool.

Drawing on feminist theory is also proof of women's interest in contemporary literature and culture. Bridget and her girlfriends are familiar with feminist literature – *Backlash* by Susan Faludi and *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* by John Gray are works often cited in their small circle. The detail is not to be neglected, given that the much-discussed anti-feminist

attitude of Helen Fielding's novel may find here favourable arguments. Despite not having read the mentioned feminist works, Bridget utilises them with precise purposes in her speech: to impress and attract potential partners.

In every case, feminist discourse becomes an instrument used by female characters in order to detach themselves from desires that women's rights movement would qualify as superficial or frivolous. Angela McRobbie stresses that feminism has stripped women off "conventional desires", translated into "traditional forms of happiness and fulfilment." (2009: 20) In a postfeminist context, women often dissociate themselves from the "censorious politics" of feminism and start to re-embrace traditional femininity. However, they do not give up on the discourse that promotes feminist prescription, as its utterance represents the sole means of feeling empowered in a social context that imposes unceasing expectations on females.

When answering to critics that define her novel as anti-feminist, Helen Fielding underlines the exact contradiction that dominates Bridget's character: "you can't neatly fit the idea of feminism with the idea of being a woman. That's what Bridget is struggling with." (Fielding, 2020b) In other words, what leads to condemning *Bridget Jones's Diary* for backlashing women's movement is the heroine's dilemma when confronting the "feminist" ideals, the socially accepted or imposed femininity and the realities of womanhood. *Bridget Jones's Diary* is not an explicit anti-feminist text, but a daring novel that underlines – through Bridget's romantic and social experiences (which make the novel's covert metafictional remarks palatable) – the contradictions of feminism in the late 1990s.

### **Negotiating gender roles**

In close connection with its witty manner of addressing certain challenges of feminism, *Bridget Jones's Diary* also discusses the evolution of gender roles and expectations in a postfeminist context. The novel mainly addresses patriarchy, heteronormative relationships, as well as contrasting depictions of femininity.

Most studies on the postfeminist nature of *Bridget Jones's Diary* state that the novel addresses patriarchal norms by suggesting that women's bodies must be continuously monitored and disciplined, in order for females to attract men and therefore, to engage in a relationship that ensures social success and personal fulfilment. In support of this argument, Eissa Nahed posits that Bridget Jones Bridget "develops a neurotic obsession with her body image and an occasional obsession with finding a male partner." (2024: 128) Bridget Jones is, in fact, conditioned to obsess over weighting, fashion and aging, preoccupations imposed by a culturally promoted and idealised image of the appealing career woman on one side, and by the socially praised image of the attractive housewife and mother, on the other.

Besides Bridget's daily reports regarding her body image and the unceasing commentaries on her impending aging, what provides the most insight into gender perception is the mother-daughter relationship between Bridget and Pamela (Pam) Jones.

Throughout the novel, Bridget's relationship with her mother is dominated by the generational conflict caused by contrasting perspectives on femininity and women's place in society or in their interactions with men. From a feminist perspective, Pamela Jones is "guilty" of internalising patriarchal values, as she constantly obsesses over her appearance, as well as her daughter's, constantly tries to find Bridget a suitable husband and reinforces sexist precepts by projecting them onto her daughter. Alongside Una Alconbury and Uncle Geoffrey, Pam Jones is symbolic of the apparently innocent and well-intended manners in which society pressures women to be a certain way in their interaction with men.

Similar to Bridget's, Pam Jones's attitude towards femininity is imposed by the cultural context which she experiences. She equates women's empowerment with marital success – as she frequently tries to set Bridget up with Mark Darcy, a financially stable and socially successful barrister – and female's emancipation with self-image and appearance. Throughout the novel, Pamela Jones constantly reminds Bridget of how a woman in her position should act. Her interventions are not aggressive, however; Pam Jones delights the audience with commentaries placed at critical moments of Bridget's romantic experiences:

**2 p.m.** Humph. Just what I needed. My mother burst into my flat (...).  
'My godfathers, darling!' she said breathily, steaming through my flat and heading for the kitchen. 'Have you had a bad week or something? You took dreadful. You look about ninety.' (1996: 45)

At one point, Pamela Jones's speech reveals a transition regarding the way she perceives female emancipation. Her discourse resembles the same feminist sensibility as Bridget's. Pam Jones appears to reevaluate her entire existence through a feminist lens. By devoting her life to her husband, children and housework, she sacrificed the opportunity of building a career and therefore, failed at completing herself as a woman. Moreover, Bridget's mother leaves her husband and demands to be paid for managing domestic responsibilities, challenging traditional gender roles:

'So why are you being so mean to Dad?' I said.  
'Darling, it's merely a question of realizing, when your father retired, that I had spent thirty-five years without a break running his home and bringing up his children –'  
'Jamie and I are your children too,' I interjected, hurt.

‘ – and that as far as he was concerned his lifetime’s work was over and mine was still carrying on, which is exactly how I used to feel when You were little and it got to the weekends. You only get one life. I’ve just made a decision to change things a bit and spend what’s left of mine looking after me for a change.’

As I went to the till to pay, I was thinking it all over and trying, as a feminist, to see Mum’s point of view. (...) (1996: 33)

Assuming the role of translating her mother’s behaviour through a feminist perspective, Bridget states that Pamela discovered power, becoming “a force she no longer recognizes.” (1996: 38) The fact that the protagonist recognises the discovery of power as the primary source of her mother’s revolt against traditional gender norms is not accidental. Feminism often challenges socially imposed power structures, in order for women to gain agency and reject limiting circumstances. In reality, Pamela, as Bridget Jones herself, adheres to feminism only through discourse. She abandons her secure and socially accepted marital status only to engage in a new, liberating relationship with a man named Julio. Bridget’s mother experiences a newly discovered sexual freedom, specific to the postfeminist context dominated by women’s power of choosing individual pleasure over collective revolt and normative social structures. (2009: 16)

Pam Jones is not revolting over traditional gender norms, as she immediately engages in another heteronormative relationship after renouncing her domestic duties. Instead, she is using the feminist discourse to motivate her choice, as not being capable of publicly assuming her sexual and social liberation. Moreover, when her new relationship fails, Bridget’s mother does not continue on her path to emancipation, but she returns to her socially secure position as a wife and mother. Pam Jones embodies the postfeminist contradiction that becomes strident even for her daughter:

‘Sometimes I think my mother is part of the modern world and sometimes she seems a million miles away.’ (1996: 86)

As mentioned before, Fielding’s female characters dream of re-embracing the traditional values feminism denies. Angela McRobbie argues that the phenomenon is encouraged in a specific postfeminist context by “the new popularity once again, massively promoted by consumer culture, of weddings, including gay and lesbian weddings and all the paraphernalia that goes with them.” (2009: 21) To this, one might add the idealized depiction of motherhood popular culture promotes through gendered consumerism that Bridget addresses multiple times:

Oh dear. Am starting to get carried away with idea of self as Calvin Klein-style mother figure, poss. wearing crop-top or throwing baby in the air, laughing

fulfilledly in advert for designer gas cooker, feel-good movie or similar. (1996: 63)

As McRobbie stresses in the mentioned study, the fact that women are now able to become financially stable in the city, to explore their sexuality and to expand their social interactions does not mean that they reject traditional gender roles; to the contrary, it appears that they constantly try to recover them. Helen Fielding herself addresses the phenomenon through explaining Bridget's position: "she doesn't just straightforwardly want a man, she wants the whole works – her independence, her life, her moral view, and she wants somebody who matches that to be her partner." The statement aligns once again with postfeminist standards: "the dominant popular postfeminist ideal" is that in which 'women can have it all' (as long as they work hard and make the right choices)." (Isbister, 2009: 3)

Regarding the contrasting masculinities *Bridget Jones's Diary* depicts, it cannot be stated that they are outside of conventional representation patterns; both Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy – Bridget's love interests in the first novel of the series – are representative of certain male stereotypes popular fiction promotes.

Daniel Cleaver – Bridget's boss – is a charismatic, daring and successful man that seduces Bridget and repeatedly betrays her in order to affirm his masculinity while undermining her femininity. The masculine archetype Cleaver represents is no stranger to women-centric fiction and rom-coms – the influent, attractive but "toxic" male character is introduced in the heroine's story as a main love interest whom she must detach from emotionally, in order to find true love. From a gender-focused perspective, Cleaver's character is one that reinforces patriarchal values and male entitlement, embodying conventional masculine traits such as dominance, emotional detachment and confidence. Daniel Cleaver is obviously cross-referencing *Pride and Prejudice's* Mr. Wickham. [1] As Natalija Gulei states in an analysis on Fielding's approach in deconstructing gender stereotypes in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Cleaver's character is "constructed for the sake of remaking a romantic plot in which Mr. Darcy evokes the idea of a chivalrous knight and Mr. Wickham, in contrast, alludes to a romantic antihero." (2017: 27)

The male character who ultimately reveals himself as the perfect partner for Bridget Jones is Mark Darcy. Being the complete opposite of Daniel Cleaver – given that the two dominant male characters must embody competing masculinities – Mark Darcy is the stereotypical ideal romantic partner: Bridget Jones's decision regarding her love is predictable. Despite enjoying excitement and desiring an adventurous love life with Cleaver, Bridget chooses an emotionally mature, stable and reserved partner, a modern Fitzwilliam Darcy who redefines Bridget's perspective on masculine ideals. In order to win Mark Darcy's heart, Bridget betrays once again the feminist cause,

renouncing her powerful, independent self – as she has to be “saved” by a 21<sup>st</sup>-century knight in shining armour: “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.” (2024: 123) If certain gendered expectations are transformed in the postfeminist context, such as beauty and language standards (2017: 44), *Bridget Jones’s Diary* reaffirms that patriarchal gender dynamics still pressure modern women, despite the societal changes and the gains of feminism.

### Conclusions

Helen Fielding uses feminist issues as a tool for shaping perspectives and exposing the context which her characters experience. Her approach is to observe and sanction with great humour the inconsistencies of the feminist discourse in a postfeminist context, advancing a subtle meta component while offering readers an enjoyable experience. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is a daring, subversive novel which explores, through Bridget’s unmediated speech, the contradictions of femininity and gender expectations after the women’s rights movement. Bridget Jones thus becomes a postfeminist icon, a widely relatable and sympathetic ordinary woman of her times, caught between her personal desires and societal expectations.

The feminist and gendered discourses are addressed without being criticised or explicitly backlashed, to present an honest overview of the modern world, highly influenced by popular culture, the echoes of women’s movement and the return to a long-lost domestic femininity and to traditional gender norms. The great success of Fielding’s novel is largely due to the selection of relatable and emotionally appealing characters who activate discussions which can be explored from feminist and gender-focused perspectives. Although humour plays a pivotal role in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and the comic misadventures featuring the heroine contribute to the text’s lasting impact, Fielding’s characters are not mere comic figures destined to support the heroine’s evolution. Through their discourses, interactions and positions within the social context in which they perform, the characters reveal perspectives that help develop the nuanced satirical commentary the text articulates.

As previously outlined, Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* provides more than a humorous exploration of a woman’s romantic and social experiences, inviting the readers to consider the characters’ reflections and interactions as means through which the feminist and gendered discourses are negotiated or validated. Through diary entries, intense and enjoyable conversations between women or unfiltered commentaries concerning women’s (and men’s) socially assigned roles, Helen Fielding encourages a

reflective, open discussion on womanhood, societal challenges and gender stereotypes.

### Notes

[1] Helen Fielding states that she “shamelessly stole the plot” from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, implying that Bridget Jones’s Diary can be defined as a modern rewriting of Austen’s novel, the characters and their evolution being proof of the statement.

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