

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones* as a Modern Day Elizabeth Bennet: an Intertextual Reading of Jane Austen

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Abstract:

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed the outcome of a new kind of fiction dealing with the young urban contemporary women who are unmarried but trying to find out their life partners and want to make a perfect balance between their professional life and personal life, called chick lit fiction. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) heralded the whole genre of chick lit. Fielding's acknowledgement of her indebtedness to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1817) for the plot construction of her novel shows chick lit fiction's literary origin and its intertextuality. In this article I try to focus on the function of Austen's novel as an intertext for chick lit fictions, especially Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its sequel *The Edge of Reason* (1999).

Keywords: Jane Austen, intertextuality, chick lit, Helen Fielding, literary status, contemporary young women.

In the last half of the 1990s, emerged a new genre of writing, featuring a generation of urban, single women in their twenties and thirties trying to balance their demanding careers and personal relationships. These newly appeared novels got their popularity in the new generation women both in Britain and the United States and became known as chick lit fictions. Though she used the very term "chick-lit" for the first time in print with her coeditor Jeffrey Deshell in their anthology, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (FC2,1995), Cris Mazza demanded that there is a huge gap between the purpose of her mocking use of the term "chick-lit" and the meaning it achieved in the publishing industry. The origin of the entire genre of chick fictions can be traced back to Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), providing formulas and guidance for the following writers of chick fictions of the later decade.

The huge popularity and commercial success of these chick fictions may lie in their presentation of the picture of everyday life of new generation of working women who want to have power and emancipation and at the same time romance in personal life. They deal with many contemporary issues like identity, gender, feminism, femininity, consumerism, race and others. Reflecting the realities of contemporary young single women's lifestyle, it focuses on the so-called trivial and lighthearted things of individual life which have long been neglected by canonical literary works. Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which has been considered the inaugural text for feminist literary criticism, boldly argued that "the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes" have been trivialized in the mainstream canon and the books which deal with the feelings of women are considered "insignificant" (74). Some critics raise their eyebrows at these fictions for not having any literary ancestry and literary merit also. In this article my area of focus is how the novels of Jane Austen (1775-1817) act as an intertext for the contemporary chick lit fictions specially Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and its sequel, *The Edge of Reason* (1999). Here I endeavour to highlight how Austen influences the whole genre of chick lit and thus helps it to achieve a literary history and a high literary status in the intelligentsia.

According to the French theorist Laurent Jenny there are some texts with explicit intertextuality and some others which do not show their intertextuality. Considering the distinction

made by Jenny in “The Strategy of Forms”, it can be opined that Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* falls at the first category as Fielding unabashedly acknowledged her indebtedness to Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. The famous French feminist Julia Kristeva employed the term to assert that meaning of a text relies on various contextual information and intertextuality is a process that shows that making meaning cannot be reduced to single and fixed units. Here, I think the statement made by Sarah Gamble is very important as there it is stated that “In practice this means that every text is always understood in relation to a range of other texts” (253). So, to understand Bridget we can hark back to Austen’s Elizabeth but of course remembering the fact that Fielding’s Bridget lives in the last decade of twentieth century while Austen’s Elizabeth is almost two centuries earlier.

One of the essential characteristics of chick lit is love plot but with a variable nature according to the age and marital status of the chick heroines. Centering on the love plot the narrative which is in first person goes on towards the conclusion sometimes indicating their marriage and sometimes their happily united love life. Sometimes at the beginning the heroine remains single and unmarried and she attempts many relationships among which only one will prove appropriate and worthy – perhaps that very man who seems least attractive at first meeting. This twist of love plot can be examined here because it is directly borrowed from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Fielding’s Bridget Jones falls at the same category of the above mentioned single and unmarried heroine and also attempting many relationships ultimately settles with Mark Darcy and this twisting love plot has similarity with Austen’s heroines because to Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet also Darcy was not so attractive at first meeting but at last she united with that very man.

It is generally claimed that chick lit fictions mirrors the everyday lives of contemporary young women. Like every ordinary woman having so many faults, the chick heroines are also not perfect but trying to get perfection gathering experiences from their faults. Their endearing flawed nature makes them very likeable to its readers. Chick lit is indebted to Jane Austen in its process of gaining experience and attaining maturation of the chick heroines. In Austen’s novels the heroines are humiliated and embarrassed in the presence of the hero and these incidents help them to achieve proper understanding of her and a proper maturation. When Austen’s Elizabeth realizes that she has trusted a wrong man, she feels “absolutely ashamed of herself” (156). Likewise when Fielding’s Bridget faces any unfavourable situation in her life she does not hesitate to express her humiliation which makes her in return matured enough. She frankly states that she has “never been so humiliated in life” (222).

Almost every chick lit heroine is not stunningly beautiful and so does not have gorgeous appearance. They are very much concerned about their weight, calorie intake and diet chart. For their extreme image-consciousness the chick lit heroines are always in a pursuit of beauty. Before going to a date with Daniel Bridget has “scratched my[her] naked body for seven minutes with a stiff brush...plucked my[her] eyebrows...waxed my[her] own legs” (59). In this occasion we can remember the statements of Juliette Wells:

In being beautiful but not too beautiful, chick lit’s heroines are the direct descendants of Austen’s. Nearly every Austen novel features a very attractive heroine whose wit and good temper more than elevate her above her more glamorous but less likeable romantic rivals. Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, might have been outshone by the Bingley sisters’ flashy looks and dress, if those women were less catty and grasping. (59)

Bridget gets a sudden shock when she arrived at Darcy’s gorgeous home and her shock mirrors Austen’s Elizabeth’s same kind of shocking feeling seeing Pemberley for the first time. A minute observation also reveals that Bridget’s boss and one time boyfriend, Daniel Cleaver resembles Austen’s Wickham. Wickham becomes surprised enough as he finds no cause why he and

Elizabeth could not be good friends. Like Wickham, Daniel Cleaver also finds no cause why he and Bridget can't sleep whenever he wishes to sleep with her. Not only Bridget and Mark Darcy are equivalent to Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy of Austen, Bridget's mother (Pamela) has some resemblances with Mrs. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. As we all know Mrs. Bennet was always in a quest for searching a good son-in-law and she helped her daughters to find out a perfect partner. Likewise, Bridget's mother endeavours to make a good pair between Bridget and Mark Darcy when they attend the Turkey curry buffet of a family friend's New Year day's party. The relationship of Pamela, Bridget's mother and Julio, her criminal admirer helps us to remember the elopement of Lydia and Wickham. Pamela's lack of capacity to judge a character makes her a mixture of Lydia and Mrs. Bennet.

Like Elizabeth, Bridget is fearful about the class difference between her and Mark Darcy. She is thoughtful because their class difference may prevent their union. But a detailed examination would reveal the truth that Austen's heroine is more secured in her feelings than that of Fielding's. When Elizabeth comes to know that Darcy has bribed Wickham to marry her younger sister, Lydia, she feels that he has done all these only for her love. But when Mark Darcy has helped to arrest Julio, by contrast, Bridget is unable to realize the reason behind it and so she asks "Why did you bother doing all this?" (306). Her genuine surprise comes out listening to his reply, "Isn't it rather obvious?" (306) with the expression "Oh my God" (306).

Bridget may be treated as the modern day Elizabeth and this affiliation of chick fictions with *Pride and Prejudice* helps it tie its anchor with the classical respectable literary origin. Fielding unabashedly mentions that her favourite book is always *Pride and Prejudice*. Not only Fielding has stolen the plot from *Pride and Prejudice* but she creates her hero Mark Darcy by stealing his surname from Austen's hero Mr. Darcy. The observation of Imelda Whelehan in her famous critical book *The Feminist Bestseller* is worthy to be referred to: "What made *Bridget Jones's Diary* particularly successful and different from other examples of young urban women's literature around at the time was its loving homage to Jane Austen in a decade when Austen was receiving a great deal of attention from film and television adaptors in Britain and the US" (181).

Fielding wrote a sequel to her famous *Bridget Jones's Diary* in 1999 giving the title *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. This sequel is the story of adventure of Bridget when she starts to suspect her boyfriend Mark Darcy's relationship with his colleague, Rebecca. Like the original its time span is also a calendar year and this time frame is same as the average time span of Austen's novel's main action. Harzewski has mentioned the intertextuality of this sequel in this way:

Like the original diary, *The Edge of Reason* uses *Pride and Prejudice* as an intertext. The characters watch the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* on video, and Bridget succeeds in interviewing Colin Firth, the adaptation's Darcy.... The sequel, however, re-opens the tidy ending of *Pride and Prejudice* by focusing on the misunderstandings and self-doubt that accompany Bridget's relationship with Mark Darcy. (70)

It can also be argued that this sequel is written not only based on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but it has a close affinity with Austen's another important novel *Persuasion* (1817). For her sequel Fielding borrows the name Giles Benwick from Captain Benwick of *Persuasion*. Both in *Edge of Reason* and *Persuasion*, the protagonists Bridget and Anne overhear their lovers praising their rivals Rebecca and Louisa respectably as "resolute". Here, again it is very much worthy to quote Wells: "Rather than being the daughters of these authors, chick lit's writers are their youngest sisters, inclined to take a more lighthearted and complex approach to fiction, even as they benefit from changes in social mores and less conflicted attitudes towards women's professional success" (68).

From this discussion it becomes understood that chick lit fictions are the literary descendants of one of the bestselling authors, Jane Austen. Though Fielding has created her titular protagonists of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and also of its sequel using deliberate intertextuality with Austen, she carefully retains her own individuality and artistry in the field of fiction. That Austen even after her two hundredth death anniversary still exists as a living entity in the pages of her own writings and undoubtedly also in the pages of these chick lit fictions can easily be opined. Chick lit fictions specially these Bridget Jones novels has achieved its own place in the intelligentsia for its direct connection with Austen which provides a literary origin and merit and ofcourse for its own growing popularity. Like its predecessor Austen, not only the Bridget Jones novels but the whole genre of chick lit fictions gains praiseworthy commercial success and also critical attention of the contemporary readers and researchers.

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