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Supervisor: Carmen Zamorano Llena

Examiner: Billy Gray

Women of Substance

The Aspect of Education, Career and Female Identity in

Pride and Prejudice and *Bridget Jones's Diary*

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Johanna Lindgren

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Introduction

Two women who strive for equality between men and women; two women who both fall in love with a Mr. Darcy; two women who live 250 years apart, but who are more similar than different. There have been many great changes since the eighteenth century and one of the foremost changes during these past two decades that separate us today from the Georgian era is the view on women's rights to education and work. This essay will look at two popular novels, one from each time, and analyze the differences and similarities in terms of their depiction of female education, work, and career. A complementary, and equally important aim is to discuss the role and depiction of female identity in relation to the education question. The books that make up the centre of this study are Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* published in 1813, purportedly written in 1796-1797, and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* from 1996. The main focus will lie on the protagonists Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* and Bridget Jones from *Bridget Jones's Diary* who will be analyzed from a feminist perspective, which can be generally explained by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* where the definition of feminism is: "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men [and] the struggle to achieve this aim" (565).

Before the actual study on Austen's and Fielding's works can begin it is necessary to provide a short description of what the books are about. *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel which concentrates on the Bennet family, with five daughters, where the main focus is on Elizabeth and her life. The issue of finding a suitable husband who can provide economically for his wife is vitally important in the story, and Austen depicts a society which does not focus on women making their own choices, but rather submit to the forces of their families' wishes to marry them off. Elizabeth, however, does not believe that women should be treated this way and opposes both society and her family when she declines two marriage proposals. A cousin of her father's, Mr. Collins, as well as a new man in town, Mr. Darcy, both ask her to marry

them, but she declines since she does not love them. Elizabeth's sister Jane is married to Mr. Darcy's friend Mr. Bingley and, towards the end, Elizabeth comes to understand that she loves Mr. Darcy and they are engaged and subsequently also married.

Bridget Jones is a thirty-year-old woman in the midst of her career at a publishing company but who feels that she does not make use of her full potential at work. She also complains about her love life and not having found the right man. The novel focuses on her everyday-life struggles and with her infatuation with her boss Daniel Cleaver. Moreover, her obsession with losing weight and her lack of self-confidence are central themes. A big part of the plot is centered on Bridget's problem with, and the competition between, Daniel and Mark Darcy, who is named after Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. At first, Bridget's family is trying to persuade her to start seeing Mark Darcy, but Bridget opposes their will, in the same way as Elizabeth neglects her family's wishes, and is only interested in Daniel. Bridget thinks that Darcy is an arrogant barrister, but eventually she falls in love with him, similar to Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Although Fielding writes about the society she lives in, which is a society that has changed distinctly from that of Austen's in many ways, Elizabeth Bennet and Bridget Jones meet similar obstacles in their lives and on their way to independence.

It is important to understand what society was like in Austen's time and what women were supposed to be like then compared to today's demands on women. This will be discussed with the help of treatises on how a woman should behave, which will also be connected to the struggle for women's rights by feminist movements. Important voices on this matter are Mary Wollstonecraft, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Simone de Beauvoir, whose works will be referred to throughout the essay. Maria Nilson's book on chick lit is also a vital source of information as well as Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young's collection of essays on chick lit and contemporary feminism, which both discuss parallels between *Pride and*

Prejudice and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Historical literary works, as well as contemporary analyses, together with the studies of the novels, will be presented to give some background on both Austen's and Fielding's, and subsequently also Elizabeth's and Bridget's, societies. Since Helen Fielding wrote *Bridget Jones's Diary* only thirteen years ago, the focus on background will lie on Austen and the eighteenth and nineteenth century. However, the so called new feminism of today will be discussed and a description of what has happened from the time of Austen to the time of Fielding and today will be provided.

Since the focus is on education, work and career, the questions this essay will discuss are the most important aspects with regard to the view on women's education in the time of *Pride and Prejudice*, and the question of how Austen's characters represent this, with the development of feminism in mind. The same questions are posed for *Bridget Jones's Diary* and since Fielding's book is relatively modern, contemporary feminism will be studied to see how she has portrayed the view on women's education, career and female identity. Because feminism is a current line of approach in many different fields and can help to provide new understandings of literary works, the feminist approach of this essay was partly chosen because of the popularity of both books, especially since *Pride and Prejudice* is Austen's most popular novel (Penguin Reading Guides), but also chosen for analysis since Fielding's novel is based on Austen's novel. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* are two books which are representative of their specific time and therefore suitable for a comparative reading.

This essay argues that education and career are presented similarly in many respects but that Elizabeth Bennet is ahead of her time, and more similar to Bridget Jones than to other women in Austen's time, and that although many changes have taken place, much of the view on female identity is still the same and women still have similar obstacles that stand in their way to equal rights.

Elizabeth Bennet – Ahead of Her Time?

In the late eighteenth century, the British writer Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her book *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The book is partly an answer to Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* from 1762 in which he devotes a section to a discussion on how women should behave. Wollstonecraft was angry and shocked with Rousseau's depiction of women as subordinate to men and therefore not having the same rights as men, and subsequently writes: "That a proper education; or, to speak with more precision, a well stored mind, would enable a woman to support a single life with dignity, I grant..." (Wollstonecraft 99). Rousseau believed that women could be educated but that men still would be superior and that women should be around for the men to gaze upon if they would like to. Below is an excerpt from Rousseau's *Emile*, which is a comment on the fact that there are no schools for girls:

Are you [mothers] prevented from instructing them, or having them instructed according to your wishes? Is it our [men's] fault if they please us when they are beautiful, if their airs and graces seduce us, if the art they learn from you attracts and flatters us, if we like to see them tastefully attired, if we let them display at leisure the weapons with which they subjugate us? Well then, decide to raise them like men; the men will gladly agree; the more women want to resemble them, the less women will govern them, and then men will truly be the masters. (Center for History and New Media)

As already mentioned, Wollstonecraft wrote to oppose Rousseau and in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she describes how women are treated at that time, how she thinks they should be treated and finally what she thinks will happen in the future. She talks back to Rousseau and says that he and other writers have made women weaker and "more useless

members of society”, and that they in fact “degrade one half of the human species” (87). With Rousseau’s quote above in mind, Wollstonecraft also writes that he has “warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point: - to render them [men] pleasing” (93). As Wollstonecraft argues, the woman’s role at this time in history was not to be a working wife and the one who earned the money, but rather a housewife who stayed at home with the children and pleased the man.

When juxtaposing what was thought of as a proper upbringing and education of women at this time to what is portrayed in *Pride and Prejudice*, different aspects of the issue emerge. Even though, as previously stated, it was not customary that women studied at schools but rather stayed at home and took care of the domestic duties, Mr. Bingley’s sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* are described as “rather handsome, . . . educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds . . . and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others” (Austen 15). This is explained by the fact that the Bingleys, being wealthier than the Bennets, could afford to provide their daughters with this educational upbringing. However, neither Elizabeth nor Jane are interested in studies, unlike their younger sister Mary, who is described as always studying while Elizabeth is “not a great reader” (Murphy 34). Even though most of her daughters are not interested in education, Mrs. Bennet is upset when Mr. Collins asks which one of her daughters has cooked the dinner and she states “that they [are] very well able to keep a good cook, and that their daughters [have] nothing to do in the kitchen” (Austen 57). If the reason for not educating the Bennet daughters is that they are not as wealthy as the Bingleys, this can then be regarded as a class issue rather than a question of interest in education. However, the Bennets can afford to educate their children and the main problem is their daughters’ lack of interest in education. Despite Elizabeth, Jane and especially Lydia’s

disregard for education their mother will not have Mr. Collins believing that her daughters are so inferior that their place is in the kitchen.

Furthermore, Lady de Bourgh, Mr. Darcy's aunt, asks whether Elizabeth can draw whereupon she answers that she does not and neither do her sisters. Lady de Bourgh then remarks: "That is very strange. But I suppose you had no opportunity" (139) and, moreover, she is shocked that the family did not have a governess: "No governess! How was that possible? Five daughters brought up at a home without a governess! – I have never heard such a thing" (139). She is even more surprised when Elizabeth answers that their mother did not teach them either, and that "[c]ompared to other families, I believe we were [neglected]; but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might" (140).

The lack of proper education and connections is evident in the issue of marriage where Jane, for example, has "such a father and a mother, and such low connections" (33), and because of that she is not likely to be married. Similarly, Elizabeth is told by Mr. Collins to think carefully about his proposal, since "it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made" (94) to her, where Mr. Collins's remark can both concern the Bennet family's lower status in relation to himself, but can also regard Elizabeth as a woman who no one else but himself would want to marry. Women of Elizabeth's social class were supposed to see to the family's needs and assist in everyday chores, but nevertheless, they were expected to be accomplished in some fields, irrespective of how wealthy the family was. Their accomplishments differed depending on their family's social status, but as Miss Bingley and Mr. Darcy claim when talking to Elizabeth, preferably "[a] woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of

walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved” (35). The importance of being accomplished is distinct in *Pride and Prejudice*, and if a woman did not possess these characteristics she could not afford to neglect, for example, a proposal from a man on the grounds that she did not like him. Elizabeth, however, is not satisfied with these social rules and believes that a woman should never marry a man out of anything but love and tries to persuade her sister that their friend Charlotte should not marry Mr. Collins since he “is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man” and she continues to tell her sister that “you must feel, as well as I do; that the woman who marries him cannot have a proper way of thinking” (116). It is important to remember, though, that this was the proper way of thinking at this time. In this respect, Austen created Elizabeth as a young woman ahead of her time, rebelling against her social conventions, which becomes even clearer when continuing on the study with regard to the protofeminist¹ movement of the nineteenth century.

Approximately at the time of Jane Austen’s writing of *Pride and Prejudice* the movement for women’s rights started its struggle for equal rights, and this was much thanks to the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. Many different aspects of women’s lives were brought up to discussion and one of them was the issue of education and work. As Peter Barry writes in his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002), “[f]eminists [in the 1960s] pointed out . . . that in the nineteenth-century fiction very few women work[ed] for a living, unless they [were] driven to it by dire desire” (122). The difficulty in Austen’s time was that women were raised to become wives and mothers, not to be workers outside the home, and as Wollstonecraft argues, “if they have natural sagacity it is turned too soon on life and manners” (Wollstonecraft 88). Wollstonecraft continues by asking what the upbringing of children will be like if the mothers have not been educated properly and also admits that

¹ Protofeminist is a compound of “proto” and “feminist”, where “proto” is defined as “from which others develop” by Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (1214). This expression can be used in contemporary history when describing feminists at a time in history where the term “feminist” did not exist.

perhaps women do not have the knowledge that is required at first, but to make them “sensible mothers” society has to involve them and give them the education they need. Considering Mrs. Bennet, she raises her daughters to find the wealthiest man to marry so that they do not need to worry about money and from this the daughters learn that to work hard is to find a man that can take care of them financially. This can be explained by Mrs. Bennet’s own lack of education, her upbringing in a specific social milieu, and the fact that she has “a weak understanding and [an] illiberal mind”, and that her “ignorance and folly” give her husband a good laugh (201). Another example of the unequal society of Austen’s time is when Elizabeth’s sister Lydia elopes with a man who is not intending to marry her. She is later on forced to marry him to save her family from disgrace. When Lydia returns home as a married woman, she states: “Ah! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman” (263), which shows how the status of women at that time disregards possible intelligence and good manners in favor of marriage.

In an attempt to change the constructs of femininity to which women like Mrs. Bennet are subject, Wollstonecraft claims that it would be a good idea to put girls and boys in school together and there women can learn, since “[t]o become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say that they must only bow to the authority of reason” (119). Furthermore, her anxiety for the future is evident, and she asks: “if women [are] educated for dependence; that is, to act according to the will of another fallible being and submit, right or wrong, to power, where are we to stop?” (115). With Wollstonecraft’s question in mind, it is possible to analyze how the issues of education and career have changed, and are treated in contemporary feminism and today’s society, with the help of Helen Fielding and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*.

Bridget Jones – The Austen Heroine of Today

Much of today's feminism is involved in the literature genre called chick lit and *Bridget Jones's Diary* is said to have been the blueprint for the genre (Mabry 193). In Maria Nilson's book *Chick lit. Från glamour till vardagsrealism* (2008), chick lit is described as centering on a woman, typically in her thirties, and her everyday life with problems regarding love and career (11), which is also a suitable description of Helen Fielding's novel about Bridget Jones. Nilson also notes Fielding's many references to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and that "several chick-lit writers mention Austen as a role model" (15).² Furthermore, she describes that Austen's importance in chick lit is because of her depiction of everyday life, often with an ironic tone, which can also often be found in chick lit (15). However, several critiques of the chick lit genre are discussed in Nilson's book, and one of them is that the genre provides and reinforces old, traditional values, in contrast to what feminists would want to foster. However, Helen Fielding defends her writing and claims that: "it is good to be able to represent women as they actually are in the age in which you are living" (Ferriss and Young 9).

There are some writers, Ferris and Young quotes Anna Weinberg (9), who argue that *Bridget Jones's Diary*, however, is almost an antifeminist novel, or at least more postfeminist than feminist in the sense that Fielding disregards the oppression that women meet in life, and according to Nilson it can also be considered postfeminist in suggesting that all the inequalities between men and women are now solved (48). This is similar to how the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* explains postfeminism, where it is defined as "relating to the ideas, attitudes, etc., which ignore or reject feminist ideas of the 1960s and subsequent decades" (1068). An example of this in *Bridget Jones's Diary* is when Daniel Cleaver sends an e-mail to Bridget saying that her skirt is so short that it almost does not exist, which Bridget happily accepts as the beginning of their sexual relationship, rather than considering it

² My own translation of the following: "Austen nämns av flera chick lit-författare som en förebild".

sexual harassment. However, *Bridget Jones's Diary* also focuses on inequalities, which will be further discussed later on in this essay. Another aspect of the development of feminism that is worth mentioning, and which can be considered as the back side or a criticism of the struggle for equality, is the notion of contemporary women having responsibilities both at work and at home and which subsequently have made women of today overwhelmed with the fact that they have to maintain both a career and a family. Also the exaggerated exploitation and focus on appearances in media contributes to giving many contemporary girls and women low self-esteem as well bad self-confidence (Page and Bright).

In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the obsession with money and finding a wealthy husband is as evident as in *Pride and Prejudice*, even though the main protagonists do not focus on this in particular as opposed to what their family and friends do. As Bridget is told at a dinner, about Mark Darcy, “[h]e’s one of these super-doooper top-notch lawyers. Divorced. Elaine says he works all the time and he’s terribly lonely”, whereon Bridget thinks: “I don’t know why she didn’t just come out with it and say, ‘Darling, do shag Mark Darcy over the turkey curry, won’t you? He’s *very* rich’” (Fielding 12). The focus lies rarely on women’s education and their accomplishments, but rather on men’s career and the opportunities women may get when marrying these men. This fact is evident when, for example, Bridget’s mother is coaxing her into coming to a party to which Mark Darcy will attend and says that “he’s very clever. Been to Cambridge. Apparently he made a fortune in America” (211). This echoes *Pride and Prejudice* and implies that he would be able to support Bridget financially, which means that the main goal in life for a woman is still to marry the “proper man”.

However, there are a few instances in *Bridget Jones's Diary* where Bridget’s career is in focus. One of these examples occurs when she meets Mark Darcy and is introduced to him with “Bridget works in publishing, don’t you Bridget?” (13). In opposition to Elizabeth Bennet, and because of the changes thanks to feminist movements, Bridget is more aware of

her possible advancement in her career and is writing her curriculum at work “in preparation for [an] improving career” (22). Another example is that Fielding often portrays female characters with attributes such as their employment, as in the case of Bridget’s friend who “excuse[s] herself from a board meeting (Jude is Head of Futures at Brightlings)” (19). The development of women’s independence is central in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and Bridget’s friend tells her to disregard people who are wondering why she has not married, and answer them that, because of “unmarriageable” men, “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” (42).

While Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters visit balls in search for suitable husbands, Bridget Jones is invited to release parties of newly published books, where she is thinking about making “interesting contacts in the publishing world, possibly even other professions in order to find [a] new career” (97). Where Austen’s characters are enjoying themselves in order to find a partner, Bridget’s main concern at this convention is to meet new people in her line of business. Although Bridget perhaps focuses more on love than on career generally speaking, it is clear that she is aware of her possibilities and she is more interested than Austen’s Elizabeth and her sisters in pursuing a career. This is evident when Bridget starts to work in the television business, on which she comments that: “I don’t know anything about television but sod it, I’m stuck in a dead-end here [at the publishing company]” (203). Furthermore, Bridget is also bothered by her relatives who comment on her not having a family and children because of all the time she spends at work, “[y]ou career girls! Can’t put it off forever you know: tick-tock-tick-tock“ (172). Compared to *Pride and Prejudice* this aspect is similar, where the older generation is concerned with marrying off their daughters, perhaps more so than their children. In Bridget Jones’s life, her parents and her older relatives are obsessed with her getting married, while her friends support her in her single life. These older

generations in Austen's and Fielding's texts are similar in the sense that they believe that it is not as important for a woman to pursue a career, as it is to find a man, get married and subsequently lead a secure life.

When studying contemporary feminism, there are a number of significant changes that are noticeable from Austen's time up until now. To mention one important aspect, Simone de Beauvoir published her book *The Second Sex* in 1949, in which she describes how women are treated and how they behave at the time of her writing, which is not much different from Wollstonecraft's analysis of the same issues 150 years earlier. Simone de Beauvoir argues that a woman "can take in society only a place already made for her" (355) and by this she is referring to the role of an inferior woman, housewife and mother. Moreover, she claims that if women are not interested in education and work it is only because they know that they cannot change their destiny, not until there is equality in the working conditions. Furthermore, she continues: "[a]s long as complete economic equality is not realized in society and as long as the mores authorize woman to profit as wife or mistress from the privileges held by certain men, as long will her dream of unearned success remain and hamper her own accomplishment" (392). This also implies that women who did not have a proper education or work profited from the unequal situation with men providing for their wives. When relating this to Bridget, and in some aspects even to Elizabeth, Bridget's opinions on the subject are clear, and she feels that women should earn their success by working. In Elizabeth's family, however, work and intelligence are not valued as highly as marriage, which is clear when Lydia returns home after marrying Wickham and by this, Jane is degraded since she is not married. Education and work are not what a young woman needs to be successful; what is considered most important is the fact that a woman has a husband.

After almost two hundred years, the conditions on the behalf of women have gone through changes, but there are still great barriers between men and women. As Natasha

Walter argues in her book *The New Feminism* (1999), although women are working more than they have ever done they do not earn as much money as a man would do in their position. Therefore, women “are prevented from consolidating their power because of the glass ceiling that still stands between them and the top echelons of society” (Walter 16). This inequality in the workplace is what much of contemporary feminism focuses on. However, Walter quotes Alison Thorne, head of the City Women’s Network, who claims that women “still have an impostor syndrome . . . [and] even if they are overqualified they’re afraid they’ll fail” (66). This implies that even if women were paid the same as men, they would not dare to take certain jobs since they believe that they are not fit for them. Much of this is reflected in Bridget Jones’s life and her inferiority complex, which holds her back in many situations. This is seen when Bridget and her boss Daniel discuss education and Bridget says that “[i]t’s all right for you with your bloody Cambridge First. . . . I’ll never forget the moment when I looked at the notice board and saw a D next to French and knew that I couldn’t go to Manchester” (166). Furthermore, when Bridget is asked to a party, she hesitates and fears that “everyone will be more successful and having a better time than me” (198). Nevertheless, as Walter also emphasizes, women have never had this much power before, which means that the feminist movements’s struggle for equality has come a long way, but she also points out that “[w]hen we talk about women’s power we are still talking about potential rather than reality” (3). Consequently, women are not dependent, but they are not as independent as they should be; similarly, society today is more equal but not yet as equal as it should be. The Norwegian professor and literary critic Toril Moi writes, in her book about Simone de Beauvoir, that even though women have started working they meet prejudices that derive from class or sexual harassments (Moi 257), and, moreover, she quotes Simone de Beauvoir: “[t]he fact of being a woman today poses peculiar problems for an independent human individual“ (691). These problems that de Beauvoir identifies will be further discussed in

relation to the representation of women and female identity in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

Representation of Women and Female Identity

The view on women and female identity constitutes, together with the previously discussed issues, the core of feminism and it is a crucial issue in both of the time periods discussed in this essay. Much of the representation of women can be recognized in the already mentioned works of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft, and as Barry contends, the women's movement in the 1960s "realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature" (Barry 121), and it was then that the struggle for a more modern female identity began. When characters in books are thought of as the norm and the representation of women and female identity is condescending and inferior to that of men, it can be a reflection of the prevailing society or, if it is not already the existing situation, it can influence society to conform to these ideas. Feminists work with the question of constructed female identities, an identity constructed by society forming them to be something they may not be. As Jonathan Culler says in his chapter on feminism, "[t]he question of the subject is 'what am 'I'?' Am I made what I am by circumstances?" (Culler 109), and furthermore he asks if "discourse represent[s] identities that already exist or does it produce them?" (113). This is the difficulty in literature where the protagonists are becoming role models, and their behavior and how they are treated is recognized as the norm. Culler also mentions the fact that many women get their identity through love and not in connection with reality. That is, women do not have individual identities but are rather identified, or defined, via their husbands, as suggested in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Simone de Beauvoir also considers the question of female identity and states that "[t]o be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile" (359). Here the choice of the word "appear" shows

the relation to the construction and not the actual identity of the woman in question. This is perhaps clearest in her famous statement that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (295). Reflecting this onto *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is not weak, futile or docile which is clearly shown when she walks to Mr. Bingley’s manor to visit her ill sister. However, when Elizabeth arrives she is decried by Miss Bingley who exclaims, “[t]o walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence” (Austen 33). Here the opposition to female independence is evident and Miss Bingley is afraid that Elizabeth will attract Mr. Darcy by showing her independence and consequently, Miss Bingley tries to convince Mr. Darcy to depreciate her because of it. Miss Bingley’s statement is ironic, since it was also she who told Elizabeth how an “accomplished woman” should behave, but this did clearly not include being independent, which is what Elizabeth is.

Mary Wollstonecraft writes that “Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent” (Wollstonecraft 91), and that women “[are] made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine” (100). This shows that society did not look at women as independent human beings, but only in connection to their men, which makes Wollstonecraft argue that men have constructed women to be inferior to them so that they “are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures” (101). This can also be related to *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth does not want Mr. Collins to introduce himself to Mr. Darcy, whereupon he answers “[p]ardon me for neglecting to profit by your advice, which on every other subject shall be my constant guide, though in the case before us I consider myself more fitted by education and habitual study to decide on what is right than a young lady like yourself” (Austen 85). Mr. Collins states that her opinion is important in some cases, but whether this should be read as pure flattery or a real statement is less evident. However, from this it is also clear that Elizabeth is not afraid to

speak her mind, which is something that she has in common with Bridget Jones. They are not, and will not be perceived as, subordinate and passive women.

The history of women's passivity is sometimes difficult to discuss because people today do not know how women experienced it, since most of the literary works were written by men (Oakley 23). Rousseau, however, does not think that women's passivity is something that should be questioned since it is a "law of nature" and that "[o]ne [men] should be strong and active, the other [women] weak and passive; one must necessarily have both the power and the will, it is sufficient for the other to offer little resistance" (Center of History and New Media). Here, a reference to a previous mentioned situation in *Pride and Prejudice* is necessary. It is when Elizabeth's friend Charlotte announces that she will marry Mr. Collins, whereupon Elizabeth exclaims to her sister that if she thought that "Charlotte had any regard for him, [she] should only think worse of her understanding, than [she] now do[es] of her heart" (116). Elizabeth's modern state of mind regarding women's independence, and the importance of choosing for oneself whom to spend the rest of one's life with is evident. Although Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* in the late eighteenth century, the representation of women and female identity is similar to the contemporary views of the same considering modern chick lit and *Bridget Jones's Diary* in particular.

Maria Nilson asks what is characteristic of female identity and emphasizes the fact that media plays an important part in today's obsession with, for example, appearances. Chick lit often describes the female heroine's ambiguity when it comes to her own appearance, and the question of whether she is still thought of as a real woman and asks herself: "[w]hat happens if I do not care to shave my legs or brush my cellulite?"³ (Nilson 38). It is too hard to live up to the illusion of the perfect female, often provided by media, which makes the women in chick lit wonder if they have the strength to maintain themselves as is prescribed for today's

³ My own translation of the following: "Vad händer om jag inte gitter raka benen eller borsta celluliterna?"

women, through television and other media such as advertisements and magazines. However, Helen Fielding shows that the struggle for women's independence is not impossible, and as Bridget's friend Sharon maintains, "women are only vulnerable because we are a pioneer generation daring to refuse to compromise in love and relying on our own economic power. In twenty years' time men won't even dare to start with fuckwittage⁴ because we will *just laugh in their faces*" (Fielding 21). Despite the time difference Elizabeth Bennet and Bridget Jones are similar in the way that both of them, like the quote from *Bridget Jones's Diary* above shows, are tired of being considered as the inferior sex and they believe that they can make a change. Bridget is not afraid of speaking her mind and neither is Elizabeth, who turns down both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy before realizing that she loves Mr. Darcy.

Traditional feminism is, in Maria Nilson's book, provided with a sequel, called feminism light. Feminism light is a lighter form of feminism where the oppressed woman takes on an independent, heroine role and struggles for equality up until the point where she finds a man and lives happily ever after. When she has found what she has been looking for, she does not feel the need and urge for actively continuing the feminist struggle, and therefore "it becomes some sort of surface feminism that is easy to put aside when needed"⁵ (Nilson 47). This aspect can be related to Bridget Jones and her strong will to be an independent woman, although she cannot stand the thought of ending up an old spinster. Bridget once claims that "one must not live one's life through men but must be complete in oneself as a woman of substance" (Fielding 31). However, she only says this because she has been stood up and subsequently on the same page she wonders: "[w]hat's wrong with me?". In that respect, Bridget Jones is an example of feminism light whereas Elizabeth would perhaps be considered more traditionally feminist. Nevertheless, when considering that both Elizabeth

⁴ Definition from Urban Dictionary, "[u]sed first in *Bridget Jones's* [sic] *Diary*, it has now become a synonym for the mindgames men play when dating. It can also be applied to women in rare cases"

⁵ My own translation of the following: "Det blir en slags feminism på ytan som är lätt att lägga åt sidan vid behov".

and Bridget are married and live happily ever after in the end of the novels, this would indicate that both of them put these feminist issues aside when they have found love. This is also discussed further in Maria Nilson's book, where she claims that "Bridget all the time tries to become the 'ideal' woman, a real woman with a natural femininity"⁶ (42), which includes being "thin, well dressed", and balancing a career and family. Nevertheless, Bridget is far from this ideal of femininity which is the reason why her efforts to become this ideal woman seem absurd (42).

With Bridget Jones's struggles to be perceived as a modern, confident woman, Fielding is, according to herself, depicting a contemporary society that makes it difficult for women to maintain an independent image without worrying that they are not attractive and not appreciated when they are single. As Bridget is trying to persuade herself, she cannot live through men but has to create her own identity and remember that she is "a woman of substance and do not need men in order to be complete" (Fielding 43). The influence of society's views on women is also reflected when Bridget states that "[w]ise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but 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" (59). In these examples from Fielding's world of Bridget Jones, the fears of not being attractive and not being good enough play an important part. This refers back to the discussion on the consequences of feminism where today's women are overwhelmed with the responsibilities that the feminist movement placed upon women, such as being a career woman as well as being a housewife, in the sense that she still needs to take care of the domestic chores when coming home after work. Maria Nilson claims that some writers, for example Glasburgh and Whelehan, argue that much of the chick lit genre is more postfeminist than traditionally feminist (47). However, the women protagonists

⁶ My own translation of the following: "Bridget hela tiden försöker bli den 'ideala' kvinnan, en riktig kvinna med en naturlig kvinnlighet".

in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* do not perceive society as equal, which is how Nilson explains postfeminism, and they often find it difficult to maintain both a career and family, especially being the perfect mother, and in a way they blame the feminist movement for this. It is feminism's fault that contemporary women are faced with so many opportunities and demands, and therefore many women today are finding it hard to balance family life with a career. Also Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young discuss this as follows:

generations of women coming of age after the women's movement of the 1960s find themselves in an ambiguous position: they have indubitably benefited from feminism's push for education and access to the professions, but they still experience pressures from without and desires from within for romance and family. In short, they are caught between competing demands to be strong and independent while retaining their femininity. (9)

Regarding the discussion of feminist critiques of chick lit and especially *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget and other similar characters are regarded to "present an image of contemporary women that contradicts all that feminists have worked to achieve" (Marsh 1). However, Helen Fielding claims, "if we can't laugh at ourselves without having a panic attack over what it [*Bridget Jones's Diary*] says about women, we haven't got very far with our equality" (Ferriss and Young 9). In this respect, Fielding claims that a contemporary writer cannot be criticized for being antifeminist when "it is good to be able to represent women as they actually are in the age in which you are living" (Ferriss and Young 9), since depicting them as something they are not would be degrading. Furthermore, considering that Bridget Jones shows how difficult it can still be to be a woman in the twenty-first century, the notion of

Bridget being a postfeminist character must be negated since a postfeminist, according to Maria Nilson (48), would perceive the world without inequalities between men and women.

Even though the representation of women differs from Jane Austen's time to the time of Helen Fielding, the goal is still for women to be treated equally and perceived as individuals rather than defined through their husbands. However, this does not mean that women's main goal in life is to become totally independent and not wanting to build a family, which is something important especially in Bridget's life. Bridget believes, as well as Elizabeth also does to a certain extent, that women should not be treated as subordinate and when working they should be paid equally as much as men are paid. Even though the emphasis in this essay has been on independence, many women today also need men, but perhaps in a different way than women in Elizabeth Bennet's time, who first and foremost needed to be economically provided for. Therefore it is suitable to quote Bridget Jones's sarcastic remark: "[t]he only thing a woman needs in this day and age is herself. Hurrah!" (286), which emphasizes her disappointment in not having a man by her side.

Conclusion

Although two hundred years separate Jane Austen and Helen Fielding and, subsequently, also their portrayals of society, the similarities outweigh the differences. When juxtaposing *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the light of feminism it is evident that both books provide clear examples of the prevailing situation of women in each time and place. The aspects of the study, which are especially important today, show both the development and some degree of stagnation of women's rights and identities.

Elizabeth is not portrayed as interested in education, but on the other hand she is not described as unintelligent either. Perhaps her intelligence does not come from conventional, formal education but it is rather based on experience, as her intelligence mostly regards what

she personally believes is a correct way to treat women. The demands on women were high in Elizabeth's society and even though women were not educated and did not work in the sense that women do today, they had to possess qualities in many different fields. However, to Elizabeth's sisters and mother marriage is of utmost importance, regardless of intelligence or education. The fact that a woman's main goal in life is, or should be, marriage is also maintained in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, where Bridget's family is obsessed over the fact that she has not married yet or even found a suitable boyfriend. The difference between Elizabeth and Bridget, however, is that thanks to the development of women's rights, Bridget has the advantage of being able to pursue a career. Nevertheless, while she is trying to improve her career, she is also caught in the tightly woven and suffocating net of traditional constructs of femininity as represented by her family. Her relatives are worried about her not getting married and are trying to persuade her to marry a rich man, with the ulterior motive, also found in *Pride and Prejudice*, that the husband will be able to provide for his wife economically, with the consequence that she does not have to work at all.

Also, when considering the representation of women and female identity in these novels it is clear that there have not been any distinct changes, at least that is the message conveyed in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which Fielding claims portrays "women as they actually are" (Ferriss and Young 9). The view on the accomplished woman is still central, even though demands on women today have increased because of the difficulties of carrying out a career while being a loving wife and caring mother. In Elizabeth's time as well as in Bridget's, to a great extent, women are not perceived as independent individuals but rather get their identity through men. Elizabeth's independence is met with fear from society, instead of encouragement, which is shown by Miss Bingley's repulsion towards Elizabeth. Two hundred years further on, the view on women's independence is still the same. Bridget is met with accusations from her family, but not from her friends, for not taking time to create a family and the focus is still on

women finding men who can provide for them so that their own independence is undermined and the men's reinforced. Even though society did not support women on speaking their minds, but rather prescribed them to succumb to men's wishes, Elizabeth is similar to Bridget and says what she thinks and does not let anyone decide for her.

The exaggerated demands on women and the perception of female identity in contemporary society have made it difficult for many women to achieve what they believe is expected from them. The struggle of being accepted as an independent person with one's own identity is still as evident in *Bridget Jones's Diary* as in *Pride and Prejudice*, which suggests that the view on women and women's identity has not changed dramatically. However, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the view on women's rights, or lack thereof, was historically incorporated in society, whereas today, as Helen Fielding suggests, the focus has shifted onto balancing both career and family and the fear of not being enough. Furthermore, a great part of Bridget Jones's, and other contemporary women's, insecurities are to a great extent due to the description of women in the media.

The modern demands on women have developed through the work of the feminist movements and with this in consideration, the claim that Bridget Jones portrays a postfeminist character in a postfeminist society has to be rejected. This is based upon the discussion of the inequalities between men and women that are described in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which show that the novel is more feminist than postfeminist. The fact that Bridget comes across more demands and different struggles than Elizabeth cannot be fairly compared, since society has changed in some ways, despite the similarities. Nevertheless, it is not justified to claim that *Pride and Prejudice* is a feminist work of literature whereas *Bridget Jones's Diary* portrays the feminist struggles as something that belongs to the past and that there is nowadays total equality. In Austen's time, women were supposed to be weak and subordinate, whereas today one could claim that women are expected to be strong and subordinate. Women are working

more than ever, wanting to prove their independence and full potential, but they are still paid less than men. Society today is more understanding towards female independence but yet reluctant towards it.

In conclusion, much may have happened during the years between the publishing of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, but when studying the novels it is clear that Helen Fielding does not want her reader to believe that society today is equal and that the society that Elizabeth Bennet lived in only belongs to the past. Fielding shows the similarities between her own novel and Austen's and one of the more humorous ways in which she shows this is by, not only borrowing the plot, but also letting one of her main characters be Mark Darcy, obviously borrowed from Austen's Mr. Darcy. By this, Fielding carefully suggests to the reader that society has not changed much. The focus in this essay has been on Bridget Jones and Elizabeth Bennet and this study clearly establishes that, with the two hundred years and the small differences set aside, the greatest and most important similarity between Elizabeth and Bridget is that both of them show that they really are women of substance.

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