

Obsessions with the Myth of Beauty in Chick Lit: A Study of Bridget Jones's Diary

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Any “woman who desires to be beautiful is trapped in the confines of the structured definition of what beauty should comprise,” states Weissman in *Barbie: The Icon, The Image, The Ideal: An Analytical Interpretation of the Barbie Doll in Popular*. The idea of “the beauty myth” remains ever present not only in the cultural trends of society but also in literature. It has been discussed by several writers especially by the writers of Chick Lit. A new genre of popular fiction, Chick Lit, focuses on several important concepts such as consumerism, marriage, love, and fashion. However, one concept that has a larger impact, making it worthy of exploration, is that of beauty and how it affects women. The concept of beauty can be broken down into several related issues. Some of those issues include identity, self-image, self-esteem, body-image and empowerment. These issues of beauty appear throughout the Chick Lit genre. The focus of this paper is to delineate the concept of beauty in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. This research paper analyses the beauty myth and discusses how the beauty myth influences women's minds.

Key words: Chick Lit# British Chick Lit# Beauty Myth# Feminism# Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth

The concept of beauty has conventionally been calculated among the definitive values, with goodness, genuineness, as well as justice. It has been a very pertinent theme among ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and medieval philosophers, and was dominating in eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought, as represented in treatments by thinkers like Shaftesbury, Hume, Hegel, Kant, Hutcheson, Schiller, Burke, Schopenhauer and Santayana. As a subject of philosophical inquiry, and also as a primary goal of the arts, the concept was in decline by the beginning of the twentieth century. However, 20th century exhibited signs of revived interest. Beauty is often distorted, misunderstood and shadowed by a wide amount of conflicting pressures. The topic of women's beauty and how it affects them has experienced discussion for a longer period of time. The idea of beauty has been so extensively received by people that it has turned into a myth. Conventionally, myth stands for a story of Greek gods and goddesses having supernatural powers. Etymologically the word “myth” has been derived from a classical Greek word “mythos” which means an invented or true story or plot. Here, myth doesn't imply a traditional story including supernatural characters. Instead it implies a belief which has been approved without any doubts by the entire nation and people. It believes that any value or belief is noteworthy and long-lasting. In this way, myth is commonly believed as true and generally delivered by the previous generation to next one. The myth of beauty is based on the idea how women

desire to be stunning and attractive. They are influenced by advertisements, fashion industry and movies. Thus they are imprisoned in the boundaries of the well-organized definition of beauty. The concept of beauty is created because fashion magazines often use skinny and glamorous woman as their model for beauty products.

The notion of ‘The Beauty Myth’ has also been discussed in Naomi Wolf’s 1991 book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* which explores several realms of life, such as work, hunger, and sex. Wolf investigates how images of beauty can negatively trap women in each one. Women are very much anxious about their appearance and this has been endorsed to what Naomi Wolf termed the “beauty myth.” (12) Weismann also denotes: “The beauty myth is centered on how any ‘woman who desires to be beautiful is trapped in the confines of the structured definition of what beauty should comprise” (24). Naomi Wolf delineates how the beauty myth works in the following extract:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called ‘beauty’ objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women’s beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. None of this is true. (12)

More specifically, as Wolf states, the beauty myth came about in full force because “when women came enmasse into male spheres, that pleasure had to be overridden by an urgent social expedient that would make women’s bodies into the prisons that their homes no longer were” (184). Thus, the concept of the beauty myth began and has been widely discussed theme in Literature.

Many Chick Lit writers handle the beauty issue and this concept of beauty also appears throughout the Chick Lit novels. Chick Lit novels discuss the concept of beauty and the dimensions to which one will go to attain such excellence. Chick Lit’s association with the themes of shopping, fashion as well as consumerism highlights its focus on deep physical beauty. In her article *Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History* in Chick Lit, Wells explains that “[m]any chick-lit authors handle the beauty issue by providing their essentially good-looking though anxious heroine with a more gorgeous foil who is also much more irritating on the subject of beauty maintenance and makes the heroine seem appealingly normal by contrast.”(59) Juliette Wells expresses views about “beautification” of characters that is the great interest in how beauty is shaped and sustained, by which the Chick Lit novels ally themselves to women’s magazines.⁴⁹³ In the never-ending pursuit of beauty, the heroines “frankly admit to the drain of energy and resources demanded by this pursuit, even as they persist in it.”(61).

The genre characterizes modern women and how they deal with unremarkable encounters such as their struggle with beauty. Chick Lit focuses on several important concepts such as consumerism, love, and fashion. However, one concept that has a larger impact, making it worthy of exploration, is that of beauty and how it affects

women. Chick Lit novels idealistically emphasize beauty. While Beauty is a common leitmotif in such novels, writers handle the concept of beauty by providing their essentially good-looking and beautiful though anxious protagonists with a more gorgeous foil and make the heroine seem appealing normal by contrast. The opponents criticize Chick Lit for the genre's obsession with beauty. Beauty is a concept that some Chick Lit heroines have to confront. The protagonists in Chick Lit novels worry about their weight. Their attention to beauty is an additional significant constituent that paradigms the Chick Lit. These novels basically adopt two diverse approaches to beauty. In one the protagonist is beautiful but, captivatingly, is often described as having been transformed from 'ugly duckling', maybe to refute readers' potential envy or hostility. The other type of Chick Lit Protagonist is having either less physical beauty or she does not demand it at all. The Protagonists are usually very concerned about their appearance as it pertains to facial beauty, weight, a toned body and fashionable clothes. Most Chick Lit Protagonists love talking to their friends about their interests in fashion, their beauty routines, and any weight problems they might have. Wells asserts that a "heroine who is completely free of care about her looks and happily self-accepting is nowhere to be found in Chick Lit" (59). Helen Fielding's creation Bridget is the best example of such heroine.

This research paper analyses the myth of beauty in context of British Chick Lit novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* which presents the concept of beauty myth and female body. Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is a perfect embodiment of myth of beauty reflected through its central character Bridget. From the very beginning of the novel, we identify Bridget's quandary. She is suffering from unembellished inferior complexity. She is not satisfied with her looks as she states, "Oh, why am I so unattractive? Why? Even a man who wears bumblebee socks thinks I am horrible. Hate the New Year. Hate everyone"(16-17). Juliette Wells denotes in her article *The Mothers of Chick Lit*, "If the heroine is too stunning, readers may resent her; if she is too ordinary looking, she gives readers nothing to admire. If she is utterly obsessed with her looks, she risks turning off readers, although Bridget Jones demonstrates the comic and satiric potential of excessive preoccupation with weight gain and appearance" (59). Through the character of Bridget, Helen Fielding has highlighted on females' appearances and definitely on weight. The numerous references such as waxing, shaving, plucking, pumicing, exfoliating, moisturizing, cleaning, dying, tinting, filing, massaging, exercising have been discussed that Bridget undergoes seem ridiculous. As Bridget states:

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. (27-30)

Bridget represents the beauty myth by the way she is extremely worried about her weight. Her efforts to lose her weight have never become the source of her lack of confidence. She admits that her longings to lose weight and to care for her body are the result of her failure to separate herself from the universal discourse of beauty and it is to satisfy herself rather than to satisfy other people. In order to gain this ideal beauty, there is the acceptance that a

woman must always take care of her complete body accurately. She need to go on a diet to lose weight and make efforts to remove the wrinkles on her body so that she can look young. Bridget's daily entries in her diary show her concern for her body weight and her physical beauty.

Bridget manifests the idea of beauty when she continuously works to look attractive. She acknowledges that her perception on her body is profoundly a result of her cultural associations wherewith she grew up. She says "I am a child of Cosmopolitan culture" (52). She labors on her body continuously to achieve the ideal image and she writes it in her diary as a hard work. The perception, that the body should be properly maintained, is directly associated with the idea of femininity as presented by the consumer culture. A woman who makes use of various beauty products to take care of her body is considered to have a beautiful body. The ideology of consumerism refers to continuous consumption to maintain the idea physical beauty. Bridget knows very well about this construction, but as a *Cosmopolitan* generation, she is not able to think of any other form of beauty except the one represented by its cover girls. The cosmopolitan culture succeeds in putting pressure on women to undergo arduous beauty treatments and cares to achieve the constructed image of beauty which will guarantee their success in their respective careers. Everywhere in the market, woman is portrayed as an object, not a human being. The bill boards, television commercials, movies, etc. are the examples of objectification of women. Though, women are also responsible for this status quo, yet the media is playing the biggest role in constructing such images. Bridget struggles with her physical beauty throughout her diary because she is not able to possess her body. Two of the biggest burdens in Bridget's life are her singlehood and her failure to achieve the existing standards of physical beauty. Her fear of being fat is a real which she confronts.

The manifestations of myth can be seen in the constant efforts of Bridget to look attractive. Bridget performs a series of beauty routines to fit in the social standards of physical appearance. We are reminded of Bridget's efforts to look attractive for her co-worker Daniel Cleaver, which result in tardiness and awake in her a wish to undergo plastic surgery. The beauty myth is also strengthened by the advertisements of beauty industry which have great influence on women. The trailers and ads make the female spectators discontented and feel worse about their appearances. These ads present a narrow definition of beauty and carefully maintain the misleading stereotypes of beauty. Advertisements of beauty industry frequently take benefit of the collective desires or hopes of women consumers by constructing beauty fantasies. Bridget is greatly influenced by movies. Her beauty icon is American actress Michelle Pfeiffer, whose slender and sinuous figure she aims to conquer through a Spartan health and beauty regime that would regenerate her like a phoenix. Here the reference to ancient Sparta's extreme fitness and to the mythological bird that symbolizes spiritual renewal are reframed in a popular culture context that underscores both the impracticality and the hilariousness of Bridget's plan to attain the type of feminine beauty that embodies in media culture. Bridget believes that a beautiful face is a face without wrinkles, so it needs to have constant treatment to slow down or stop. Her references to Jane Seymour, Susan Saradon and Lumley are her effort to persuade herself that the ageing process can be slowed down with the right treatment. The fact, that age does not seem to affect their careers or

beautiful face and body, does not calm Bridget's panic. Tom's comment on her make-up expresses that Bridget's fear is only in her imagination and at the same time it shows us that the natural ageing process is undesirable.

Bridget is burdened not only by the beauty industry but also by the societal beauty standards. Bridget's funds are adversely affected specifically because of the beauty industry. Bridget is the fictional representative of a multitude of women who not only experience the need to look beautiful but who feel the pressure to excel at it, to perfectly perform all the rituals related to emphasized femininity. The dairy entries for January 15th and February 23rd exemplify the nervousness and anxiety that beauty rituals bring to Bridget. Thus, we can find endless descriptions of the myth of beauty, and the poise that is expected from a woman. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, represents the concept of beauty through Bridget and proves best embodiment of the myth of beauty. Though Bridget is much influenced by the cultural expectation, yet, she proves herself to be an independent woman who does not let her weight to affect her career, friendships, relationships and sexual life.

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