

## Distorted Femininity: Challenging Gender Essentialism in Bridget Jones' Diary, The Accidental and The Stone Gods

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July 2021

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### Abstract:

While Jeanette Winterson's dystopian narrative *The Stone Gods* (2007) sees women reduced to their aesthetic value and adherence to socially accepted femininity, this seems only a stone's throw away from the female protagonists of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996) and Ali Smith's *The Accidental* (2005). All three texts present women who are at some point ruled by essentialist models of femininity, keeping Bridget within a vicious cycle of calorie counting and self-deprecation, Eve within an unhappy marriage, and Spike confined inside her male programmed femininity which is, in itself, masculinized. Socially constructed femininity is hyperbolized by Winterson in her characterization of Pink who, having been "Fixed at twenty-four" (21) so as not to "lose" (20) her husband, represents the hyper-feminine woman of Orbus. While set on a planet which has seen great technological advancement, this has only worked to entrench the social issues we see explored in both Fielding and Smith's narratives, with essentialist models of femininity still desired by men and often perpetuated by women. In making the concept of the human unstable within *The Stone Gods*, the feminine is also rendered so. It is this instability, across all three texts, which works to complicate and challenge essentialist notions of gender that rely on such models in the understanding and control of women. Smith also attempts to strip these models of their power in providing a narrative in which women are able to enact change and control over their own feminine identity. By drawing attention to the inequalities that these models produce not as unchangeable, fixed consequences but instead as something one is able to successfully challenge, all three authors present the possibility for social change, as long as we continue to oppose such reductive models of femininity.

Essentialism within feminist theory is defined by Elizabeth Grosz as “the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change” (48). Using this definition, I focus on how Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1997), Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* (2006) and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007) provide narratives which complicate and challenge essentialist models of femininity. All three texts successfully challenge essentialist models in their portrayal of female characters that are, in many ways, entirely different from one another. This works to dispute notions of a fixed “essence” (Grosz, 47) of femininity, grouping women together through shared fundamental qualities including, but not limited to “nurturance, empathy, support [...] emotional responses, concern and commitment to helping others” (Grosz, 47). These generalisations culminate in the simplification of complex notions of women’s social, sexual, and cultural positions to perpetuate existing inequalities. I argue that these texts challenge this through the presentation of complex models of femininity. Ali Smith provides an ambiguous and multifaceted portrayal of femininity through Amber, who is often hyper-feminine while also embodying what Judith Butler deems a “masculine position” (7). Bridget Jones, however, represents everything Amber dislikes through her self-proclaimed identity as a ‘non-wayward’ woman, which could be likened to the ‘girly’ feminism associated with the third-wave. While both Bridget and Amber represent a hybrid kind of femininity, Bridget does not *challenge* essentialist models in the same explicitly feminist tone as Amber, concerned with being “unattractive” (20), but does *complicate* them through many of her actions. Bridget acknowledges the ways in which these essentialist models, particularly those concerning the female body and popular culture, are oppressive towards herself and other women, while contributing to their perpetuation. Jeanette Winterson also takes a varied approach in her challenging of gender essentialism by taking this concept one step further, complicating what we think of as human on a wider scale. Through its genre and form, *The*

*Stone Gods* is able to comment on how and why these essentialist models continue to restrict femininity in a world which fails to learn from its mistakes, with these models limiting the possibility for social reconfiguration. When read together, all three texts reveal how essentialist models of femininity can oppress its female characters, who dispute such notions of a fixed female essence.

*Bridget Jones's Diary* complicates more than it challenges essentialist models of femininity. Fielding constructs a post-feminist narrative largely preoccupied with the concept of femininity, but with only occasional engagement with feminist issues. While Bridget could be seen to embody a hybrid kind of femininity, as Amber does in *The Accidental*, the levels of this hybridity are measured against her main priority – finding a partner. The other elements of Bridget's identity – her career, her friendships – are secondary to “the one glittering prize that indicates you've really ‘arrived’ – getting the man” (Whelehan, 135). With her preference for remaining within the comfort of essentialist models of femininity, Bridget is post-feminist, viewing Amber's kind of feminism as “too prudish, judgemental and unattractive” (Whelehan, 137) and choosing to leave the “drunken feminist ranting” (125) to her friend Sharon. Clare Hanson reads the text as prioritizing femininity over feminism, being “preoccupied with those characteristics that have been culturally linked with biological femininity” (23). While Bridget acknowledges the undoubtedly oppressive nature of such models of femininity, dealing with them first hand from her relatives incessant questioning “how does a woman manage to get to your age without being married?” (11), her actions often appear to perpetuate the limited understandings of womanhood that Hanson criticises. Bridget is comfortable within these models and to challenge them would mean accepting her single status with pride, going against the essentialist ideologies of her favoured *Men Are from Venus, Women Are from Mars*. Such texts present the argument that men and women are intrinsically different, which Bridget uses as reasoning for her inability to secure a long-

term relationship. In treating the opposite sex as inherently unknowable and alien, it becomes easy to revert to essentialist models in order to understand and simplify complex notions of gender. While it could be argued that Bridget's sexual freedom, reminiscent of the 'laddette', does interrogate the parameters of essentialist femininity, Bridget's sexual adventures are had with the hope of securing a more permanent, meaningful relationship in mind. This perpetuates essentialist models of female sexuality that view women as incapable of enjoying sex without attaching sentimentality to the act ("Oh God. Why hasn't Daniel rung?") (60) as men are able to do.

Bridget's confused relationship with feminism and determination to find a man has arguably led to the internalisation of an "unconscious backlash against feminist ideas" (Whelehan, 36). Ironically, pretending to have read Susan Faludi's *Backlash* in the hopes of impressing Mark Darcy, Bridget's view that "there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (20) coincides with how "the backlash works by reassuring the people that the 'old' values hold sway because they are undeniably true...By aping men, feminists, it is implied, have proved repellent to them" (Whelehan, 18). While Bridget, and her relatives, view her single status as essentially 'unfeminine', her calorie counting and fantasies of white weddings are classic examples of how essentialism defines the feminine. Indeed, throughout the novel Bridget sets out to change what is 'unfeminine' about her, with no such desire to alter the damaging effects of calorie counting and dieting, which is deemed as 'feminine' and thus desirable to men. While Bridget is also portrayed as a "career girl" (20), the text falls victim to the way that "female power is celebrated through the depiction of professional success, but this is often undercut by showing the same women spinning out of control emotionally" (Whelehan, 139). Bridget's career goals are not placed at the forefront of the novel, but instead fall short behind her chaotic endeavours to lose weight and secure a husband.

Fielding's text also explores the issue of popular culture in the context of the late 1990s, and how this ties in with ideas of post-feminism. Bridget is conscious of her positionality within the system that oppresses her, making no effort to break away from this; after preparing for sex with Daniel by shaving her entire body and exercising in a last-minute bid to lose weight, she proclaims, "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 type is up to it" (59). Magazine culture becomes yet another form of controlling what women consume that goes beyond counting calories. By doing this, Fielding critiques the kind of 'commodity feminism' employed by such magazines during this period of neoliberalism. This elicits the kind of post-feminism Angela McRobbie describes as "commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings" (260), returning women to a system of femininity based in gender essentialism. The discourse of fake empowerment that runs throughout the media "pretends to reassure the spectator that there is no ideal type of femininity, yet visually they refuse to offer what most would consider to be the full range of female norms in terms of age, colour, size and physical ability" (Whelehan, 145). This mirrors how Bridget, "as a feminist" (54), contradicts this status in many of her actions already discussed, implying her embodiment of the empty feminism reflected in the pages of her *Cosmopolitan*. Bridget therefore confuses essentialist models of femininity in her acknowledgement of their ability to make women "insecure, appearance-obsessed and borderline anorexic" (258), yet seems to find comfort in her position within these models.

Ali Smith's *The Accidental* is also concerned with post-modern culture and representation, and how this perpetuates essentialist models of femininity. Smith critiques postmodern culture through an exploration of representation, with Astrid viewing the world

primarily through the lens of her camera, and Eve through the narratives of other people's lives. Amber, however, refuses representation through these disconnected mediums, critiquing the postmodern concern with fragmenting representations of the 'real' world. The disconnect between postmodernism and its representations of femininity can be seen as Astrid tries to film Amber, but "the camera viewer floods with light so bright that she can't see... There is the shape of someone on the sofa by the window" (18). Amber's complex femininity cannot be registered here, defying representation in this fragmented form. This culminates in a moment of literal destruction of the postmodernist obsession with representation as Amber destroys Astrid's camera— her way of deconstructing the world around her. Amber's femininity is considered somewhat of an anomaly, both for the reader and the other characters within the novel. Astrid pointedly observes how "she isn't wearing any make-up. It is weird. Her underarms aren't shaved. There is hair there, quite a lot." (21). The fragmented structuring of this sentence highlights how Amber's femininity cannot be neatly defined through the essentialist models Astrid has grown up using to define her own femininity. Amber prides herself on her challenging of essentialism and her ability to encourage the women around her to cause this same "trouble" (Butler, 7). Judith Butler's describes how

"to make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do precisely because that would get one *in* trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms... I concluded that trouble is inevitable" (Butler, 7)

Astrid, in her developing phase of adolescent femininity, is placed in the same position. Astrid comes to learn the value of "trouble" in resisting essentialist models with the same unapologetic attitude as Amber. Because of this, Astrid becomes more outspoken — "the man looked at Astrid in total surprise, like he couldn't believe anyone who was twelve could

speak” (131), gradually coming to embody the kind of unruly feminism that goes beyond essentialist, male definition.

In challenging these essentialist models of femininity, Smith also uses Amber’s relationships with the male characters to emphasize her defiance. In her multifaceted femininity Amber is at once hyper-feminine, enticing both Magnus and Michael’s male gaze, while also taking ownership of traditionally masculine characteristics. For example, she is often the initiator of sex in her relationship with Magnus, taking “his hand again. She put it on her thigh” (141). While Bridget’s embodiment of essentialist femininity forces her to carry out a strict pre-sex ritual in which she “scratched my naked body for seven minutes with a stiff brush [...] plucked my eyebrows [...] waxed my own legs” (59), Amber refuses to alter her body in order to meet the standards of acceptable femininity. The agency Amber possesses over her own female sexuality can be seen as Michael attempts to “imagine that woman, Amber, sucking him off in the train toilet. But it didn’t work. He actually couldn’t image it” (75). Amber rejects sexualisation that is not on her own terms, thus challenging the essentialist notion of women as (sexually) passive. The damaging effects of essentialist models of femininity in relation to popular culture are also highlighted through Magnus. Being a product of post-modern culture just as much as Astrid, Magnus expresses at the beginning of the novel how “all the girls look the same in this year... They all look like they’re off porn sites... After you’ve looked at sites, all girls start to look like it. Commercials on TV begin to look like it. Singers on the music channels all look like it, well, the girls anyways.” (51). Amber, in her unapologetic femininity, continues to break down the barriers between representation and reality that encompass this family. After having sex with Amber, Magnus contemplates his first encounter with female body hair – “It simply hadn’t occurred to him women would. It is of course obvious when you think about it.” (142). Magnus is “shocked” (142) by the kind of femininity he is confronted with here, unlike anything he has

seen portrayed in the media. Amber therefore comes to represent that which is unrepresented, working to reshape the family's definitions of femininity away from essentialist models of thinking. Amber disrupts their disconnected, sheltered family dynamic in which "everybody at this table is in broken pieces which won't go together" (138) through an eruption of repressed feminine principles. Smith uses such images of fragmentation to reveal the effects of gender essentialism, restricting not only one's own self-expression but also the ways one is able to connect with others. While fragmented in her indefinability, Amber becomes the force behind this family's gradual unification.

Just as Amber works to disrupt the family's preconceptions of gender and sexuality, Winterson's exploration of the post-human, regarded by Braidotti as preceding "the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and even the much-contested post-feminist" (1), decentres male individualism in place of a wider cultural theory of the human/non-human subject. In Winterson's adoption of post-humanism, which challenges the binarisms and ideas at the very basis of essentialist thought, she goes beyond the post-feminism and postmodernism employed by Fielding and Smith in her depiction of femininity. *The Stone Gods* is acutely aware of its position within the masculinised genre of science fiction, in which the phallogocentric language traditionally struggles to adequately convey the female experience, working alongside essentialist models to produce inaccurate representations of femininity. Luce Irigaray proposes that "if we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story" (210). Instead of inventing a language, Winterson appropriates this masculinised form, using it to reveal how the technological advances of Orbus have only worked to entrench the social issues we see across all three texts, with essentialist models of femininity still desired by men and embodied by women. Much like in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Winterson complicates ideas of femininity. However, while, *Bridget Jones's Diary* decentralises that which is not

essentially feminine from the narrative, society in *The Stone Gods* attempts to banish much of what is feminine.

Winterson focuses on motherhood in her exploration of how femininity has come to be located in the body, with Orbus confirming what is described by Rosalind Gill as an “obsessional preoccupation with the body...presented simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always already unruly” (Gill, 255). No longer required for reproduction, the “future of women is uncertain” (26) in Orbus; motherhood, a female “power” traditionally out of the realm of masculine control, is appropriated in an attempt to rid society of female agency in all forms. This takes the predominantly psychological forms of control used against the female characters in both *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *The Accidental*, such as calorie counting and the pressures to enter the institution of marriage, to another level of control over the female body itself. Motherhood is also explored in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *The Accidental*: Eve is enclosed in her role as a mother, succumbing to essentialist models of femininity unknowingly, which she attempts to break away from at the end in a realisation that “she had been refusing real happiness for years and she had been avoiding real endings for just as long” (295). Bridget’s mother experiences a similar sort of awakening, divorcing her husband after realising that “you only get one life” (54). Motherhood, therefore, appears significant in women’s attitudes towards gender essentialism; only when one is trapped within the model of motherhood does the need to reject it arise. Thus, Orbus strips women of motherhood, not in an effort to encourage the kind of liberation we see within the other two texts, but to create a society in which the feminine is no longer an “unruly” (Gill, 255) concept outside of masculine comprehension. In making men and women ‘equal’ through artificial reproduction, Shulamith Firestone argues, would put an end to “the tyranny of the biological family” (18). Yet Winterson demonstrates the dangers behind this in her depiction of a future in which women are stripped of their only “power” within a society that maintains,

or even transcends, the patriarchal frameworks seen in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Accidental*.

This concept of femininity as a threat is also seen through the “state-approved mass illiteracy” (15) within the novel. When considered alongside the idea of poetry and the realm of feelings as being associated with the feminine, this reveals how it is femininity that this new society wishes to banish. Orbus, in its mission to control all aspects of femininity, relies on essentialist models that align with masculine definitions of femininity, and are thus easily controlled. Winterson takes her challenging of essentialist models of femininity beyond that of Fielding and Smith through a construction of hyper-femininity that becomes a “parody of normalized femininity” (Dolazel, 6) when looked at alongside Amber and Bridget. Pink exemplifies this socially constructed hyper-femininity, not least in her name, encouraged by the rise of biotechnologies used to “fix” (10) women in a society that bases female worth on their aesthetic value and male understandings of womanhood. Pink takes Bridget Jones’s passive acceptance of these essentialist models to an extreme level, despite Billie’s efforts to educate her on her own oppression and “getting nowhere” (20). At the same time, the creation of a robot who is “[h]eartless” and “[g]orgeous” (18) allows Spike to embody the only kind of femininity that matters on Orbus – the aesthetic. Spike’s femininity is initially based in her sexualisation, having been purged of all other aspects of femininity that do not also serve the male gaze. Spike becomes humanised only once she is exposed to poetry, a form associated with feminine emotion, through which she describes how “[f]or the first time I was able to feel” (81). Winterson is therefore able to construct a social critique through this dystopian portrayal of femininity, with the infantilization and sexualisation of women reaching a disturbing peak.

In analysing depictions of essentialist models of femininity within Fielding and Smith’s post-modernist texts as well as Winterson’s dystopian text, the development from

postmodernism and post-feminism to post-humanism reveals the ever-present, all-encompassing nature of these oppressive models. In Fielding's portrayal of post-feminism, she reveals the possibility for the internalisation of essentialist models. While Bridget herself does not take on the responsibility of challenging these models within Fielding's text, *The Accidental* responds to this through Amber's overtly wayward femininity, which she utilises in her liberation of Astrid and Eve. It becomes clear, then, that while Spike arguably represents the most advanced (in the technological sense of the word) 'female' character of all three texts, in the creation of *The Stone Gods* as a post-humanist text Winterson is able to showcase a future in which essentialist models not only remain intact but have become much worse. The focus on female representation reveals how essentialist models of femininity permeate the everyday across all three novels, with Fielding's popular culture references aligning closely with Smith's exploration of postmodern presentations of women. The reader is thus able to recognise, as well as be taken beyond, their own experiences not only through Winterson's dystopian portrayal of a society in which women are reduced to their aesthetic value and ability to appease male individualism, but also through the authors' portrayal of the ever-present threat of misrepresentation for their female characters.

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