Chapter 3

Nothing is Waste: Abject Bodies in Context

I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely.

Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid’s Tale (78)

In Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation, Winfried Menninghaus notes:

In the 1980s, a new buzzword entered political and [...] critical discourse [...]. The word is “abjection,” and it represents the newest mutation in the theory of disgust. Oscillating, in its usage, between serving as a theoretical concept and precisely defying the order of conceptual language altogether, the term “abjection” also commonly appears as both adjective (“abject women,” “abject art”) and adjective turned into a substantive (“the abject”). (365-366)
The term ‘abject’ has a plethora of inherent meanings and suggestiveness. It offers a wide range of applications in various contexts in relation to feminist and post feminist critical discourses.

The concept of abject and subsequent related theories gained currency with Julia Kristeva’s publication of *Pouvoirs de l’horreur (Powers of Horror)* originally in French in 1980 and in English translation in 1982. The book inaugurated a rich corpus of Anglo-American academic scholarship on the concept. Feminist criticism, on account of it, has been able to be practised on new lines as what could justly be termed abject criticism.

Georges Bataille is cited as the forerunner to Kristeva in the conceptualisation of the abject. The term was applied within the framework of social expulsion where the ‘abject’ referred to what was rejected by mainstream society. The Bataillean concept of abject is related to the theory of the sacred, to the excluded part of a system that cannot be assimilated, but conforms, in part, to the abject. The abject is essential in the formation of sacred community and is pertinent to activities such as communion, eroticism and sacrifice. In Bataille’s notion of the sacred, the abject as the ‘rejected’ and as the ‘other’ is a necessary part of social ritual and is integral to the formation of community. Rina Arya comments:
Within the framework of the sacred, the abject can be paralleled with the impure (left) sacred. In Bataillean thought then, the abject plays an integral role in the creation of the sacred, and is not simply the excluded part that is unconnected from the workings of society. (64-65)

The ‘informe’ is another term that is relevant in the discussion of Bataille and the abject. Georges Bataille used the term in his ‘Critical Dictionary’ published in the French journal *Documents* (1929). *Informe*, according to Bataille, has no definition but is performative, like an obscene word. It performs the operation of creating taxonomic disorder and a perpetual maintenance of potentials. Bataille's *informe* is an inchoateness through which meaning briefly emerges. According to Nelson and Shriff the term implies:

not only a lack of significant form or meaning, but also a process of aesthetic, moral and physical degradation, a bringing of “things down in the world” by stripping them of all lofty references. (Bataille.1985.31). It refers not to a thing in itself but rather to an operation, a performative, analogous to the violence implicit in obscene words. In keeping with the
polemical tradition of ugliness, Bataille viewed this operation as an aggression against established, academic, and bourgeois aesthetic demands and norms. (291)

The concept of abjection was later used by feminist critics Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler who elaborated and demonstrated it through its critical application on texts. Kristeva develops the concept of the abject in *Powers of Horror*, a landmark book which discusses the psychic origins and mechanisms of revulsion and disgust. She uses the concept to describe and account for temporal and spatial disruptions within the life of the subject vis-a-vis the object or the other/s and, in particular, the moments when the subject experiences a frightening loss of distinction between itself and the object/s/other/s in its relation to them. It represents those forces, practices and things which are opposed to, and unsettle, the conscious ego, the ‘I’. It is the border zone between being and non-being, and according to Kristeva “the border of my condition as a living being” (*POH* 3). It is a zone of self-annihilation or self-extinction into which woman voluntarily casts herself. Kristeva also suggests that abjection can explain the structural and political acts of inclusion/exclusion which establish the foundations of social existence. She asserts that the abject has a double presence, it is both
within us and within culture and it is through both individual and group rituals of exclusion that abjection is acted out. Abjection thus generates the borders of the individual and the social body. Kristeva writes of encounters with the abject: “On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safe-guards. The primers of my culture” (2). For Kristeva the abject is a force which both disrupts social order and in doing so, operates as a necessary psychological ‘safe-guard.’ Abjection, as she notes, ‘settles the subject within a socially justified illusion—[it] is a security blanket’ (136-7). But this zone of self-extinction also holds possibilities for woman. It is a recycling space where all discards, reject or abject, are stored. When feminism becomes aware of its fallacies and myths, it starts gathering these attempted discards and recycles them into a new life. This could be termed the first step that feminism took in its emergence into post feminism. Abjection, therefore, is the end of feminist pessimism and activism and the beginning of post feminist optimism and life, a link between the two attitudes or conditions.
Through a series of evocative accounts of abject encounters, Kristeva demonstrates that abject experiences are common within our everyday lives: one might experience an abject response when the skin that forms on top of warm milk unexpectedly touches one’s lips, or when one sees blood, vomit or a corpse. The examples themselves are highly suggestive, for, some of them are not rejects but highly nutritious (the skin on top of warm milk) while some others, of course, are not. Kristeva theorises abjection in distinctly phenomenological terms, associating the abject with all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle singular bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Indeed, Kristeva primarily explains experiences of abjection in terms of bodily affect, moments of physical revulsion and disgust that result in “a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out” (POH 1). What most fascinates is the embodied jouissance of abject encounters, the exhilarating fall inwards into the monstrous depths of the narcissistic self. Kristeva says: “The sublime point, at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us—and “that cancels our existence” (POH 210). It is the act of writing, in particular the poetic texts of the avant-garde, which is the most productive of abject encounters. The
suggestive possibilities that arise from the employment of the Kristevan abject as a methodological approach in revisiting female characters and analysing their female inscapes by positioning them as natural and cultural texts is a major part of enquiry in this thesis.

Bataille and Kristeva harbour different attitudes to abjection. Bataille believes that one of the ways of salvaging the unique meaning of human life is to embrace wilfully the sacred, and the abject other. Kristeva is much more neutral in her attitude to the forbidden in the study of the abjection. Bataille, on the other hand, is more prescriptive about the sacred. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva discusses how, within the course of daily life, measures have been taken to control and purify the abject. Benjamin Noys observes:

> Although Bataille is concerned with the limits of the body, this bodily reading of abjection ties it to the body and its waste products. Kristeva has provided a matrix for art criticism and practice which allows to understand the abject as bodily waste, to confine and limit it within a meaning – no matter how ‘shocking’ the meaning is.(34)
The abject is something that is very close to you: so close to yourself that it is in fact an integral part of your self, which, however, you feel, is intimidating you and threatening your identity with its overwhelming presence and constant assertion and by causing you to continuously remember some undefined and unknown thing you do not desire to remember because its remembrance would make you inferior, forcing you, therefore, to strive to ruthlessly cast it away as undesirable since you find it difficult to live your life without an identity, yet, paradoxically, you can’t exist without. It is something you must reject in order to live, but possess in order to exist. It is that which makes it impossible for you to both live and exist together. The abject throws you into a battlefield of constant struggle between wanting to live and having to exist. It makes your being but unmakes your becoming, where becoming implies living a self-created and self-owned autonomous identity—living a subject-self. The abject occupies a space of oscillation between acceptance and rejection and is the site of existential insecurity. It is a site of love-hate relationship between being and becoming, existence and life which creates being but when it reaches a point where it threatens the very same being, becomes abject. For a woman, her body could be this site since her body-consciousness and consequent sense of want deny her the becoming act and in turn, become the source of self-defeat. This is apparent in Atwood’s novel *Lady Oracle* when Joan Foster says:
The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest: the disputed territory was my body . . . I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. (LO 67)

Life is living an identity, and for woman, life means living a female identity or the femaleness. Woman’s experience of femaleness is consequent to her body. But, at some point in social life, the very same body comes to threaten her life by interrogating her identity. Her body, which gave life to her, becomes a tool that external power uses to threaten that very life. Then, the body becomes abject. Abjection is, for her, then, a mode of escape—escape from personality, self-conceived as well as imposed. Instances of such an escape abound in the novels of Atwood. In Lady Oracle the heroine Joan Foster fakes her own death in order to escape from the undesirable life she is forced to live with her opinionated husband Arthur:

I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it… The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse, a shadow everyone would mistake for solid reality. (LO 3)
In the novels of Atwood one often encounters characters who try hitherto unprecedented experiments on their bodies making them abject bodies. While Joan Foster gorges on food and bloats up like a “beluga whale” (LO 71) in protest to her mother’s pseudo-patriarchal tyranny, the very same Joan later sheds a hundred pounds in an attempt to sculpt a socially acceptable, ‘normal’ body. Marian MacAlpin in *The Edible Woman* loses her appetite and becomes anorexic, though for a short duration when her outer body reacts to the insecurity felt by her inner self at the prospect of her impending marriage. In *The Robber Bride*, Karen, one of the four main female characters, abjects her body, by splitting herself into the watching subject and the experiencing object whenever she is subjected to abuses during her childhood and adult life. And when old enough to assume control over her own life and body, she discards the name Karen, and adopts the new name Charis, thereby abjecting an undesirable life and a horde of unpleasant memories.

A self-constructed identity could be named the subject and a self-fashioned identity the object. Then, abject is neither subject nor object. For, the distinction between subject and object is only a functional one, one which is conceptually negligible since even the subject is not a self-
regulated author, but is subject to extraneous elements, on which experience takes place. Since subject is something or someone that experiences, it is also, by the same proviso, something or someone determined and defined by the experience so that the experiencer is secondary to the experience itself. Object, on the other hand, is that which is understood as the one in relative opposition to the subject—the other of the subject. Both subject and object define each other semantically and through the channel of binary opposition. But the abject collapses meaning. In one of Kristeva’s more potent definitions, abjection is “a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes [one]” (POH 2). It creates new subjectivities or restores subjectivities subsumed in the semantic process. It is a space which, if subject and object were there, would be called the ‘in-between’ or the liminal space. It is a point, not fundamentally spatial but which also can be conceived spatially with the restoration of the body that interrogates and redefines subject and object, by abhorring or creating subjectivities. The distinction between subject and object and abject is that the former two put one in search of meaning whereas the latter collapses meaning. The unconscious contents which the abjected person finds threatening remain excluded, but according to Kristeva, "not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object"
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(POH 7). Conventional critical approaches in line with feminism have always examined female characters in terms of the subject or the object, that is, in terms of selves fashioned by being subject or by becoming object, or, at the most, as subject positions. However, the abject becomes a tool that will contextualise and examine women characters in Atwood’s novels in terms of their own subjectivities. Since these characters strive unconsciously to become something beyond both the subject and the object, they could easily position themselves in the abject space.

Abject is what is thrown away or rejected, but which never gets totally banished from consciousness in spite of its rejection. In some sense, abjected persons are always borderlines because their psyches constantly dance on the boundary between what they have and have not excluded. Describing the ineluctable appeal and appallingness of what is thrown away, Kristeva writes, “the jettisoned object is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses . . . And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (POH 2). The abject signifies the overwhelming presence of a forced absence. It is an unconscious assertion in consciousness that creates an illusory feeling of separateness, breeding forever alterable and variable notions or experiences...
of the I, the self as separate from the other, creating tenuous selfhoods. It is a slippage that lingers as a potential threat to one’s own self. The border between the subject and the abject is imaginary in the sense that however hard we try to exclude the abject, it still exists and also in the sense that the abject triggers the subject and object. The subject hates the maternal body because it loves it so much that it realises its impossible separation from it forcing us to place the abject somewhere in the realm of the love-hate relationship. In the novel *Lady Oracle*, Joan’s is unable to come to terms with her fat body since it is an archetypal maternal body. Later when she slims down into a normal body, she finds it difficult to identify herself with it. She hates her thin body since it unconsciously breeds frustrations in her for forcing her to reject her maternal function which she quite loves, though she is unaware of the fact. In hating her mother she is not in fact hating the person, but hating a part of her own self. This is clearly revealed in the relationship we see between Joan Foster and her mother in *Lady Oracle*. On one occasion Joan’s deliberate disobedience and unwieldiness makes her mother cry. Joan was dismayed, but also felt strangely “elated too at this evidence of my power, my only power. I had defeated her: I wouldn’t let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful”(*LO* 86). Here the Kristevan notion that female children simultaneously reject, and identify with the
mother comes to play. After abjecting the mother, subjects retain an unconscious fascination with the semiotic desiring to reunite with the mother.

The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place ‘where I am not.’ As Barbara Creed observes:

> Since the abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (65)

Language is a universal law which conditions society in the Lacanian Symbolic order and through which woman imbibes the norms of patriarchy and is lulled into believing that she is a subject. She is therefore incapable of waking up to the reality that she is only a subject position. Feminism was, in effect, a shock dealt to the slumbering woman intended to wake her—the subject position—into being the subject. In *Desire in Language* (1980), Kristeva defines the symbolic as the space in which the development of language allows the child to become a “speaking subject,” (238) and imbibe
a sense of identity as separate from the mother. This process of separation could also be taken as abjection, whereby the child must reject and move away from the mother in order to enter into the world of language, culture, and meaning. It is designated as the symbolic in contrast with the semiotic which is associated with the masculine, the law and the social structure. Ironically, the woman who rises up to become subject never becomes the speaking subject but, instead, loses her sex and becomes mere gender. The only solution that occurred to her is to abject whatever is, or, more correctly, is not, hers and to escape into invisibility and self-exile.

Abjection as revolt is first experienced at the point of separation from the mother, an idea proposed and enunciated by Lacan. In the mirror stage, the child begins turn towards that formative figure in her life that represents the symbolic order, which Lacan and Kristeva both associate with the Law of the Father. The source and model of becoming real in the world is understood as the father, in contrast to the receptacle within which early dependence takes place, which is the mother. Thus the sensual and maternal semiotic world is largely supplanted by the symbolic world, which involves turning towards the rules of language, of expression, of codified behavior, of rules and regulations and of conventions. The mother is left behind as
abjected, and with her all elements of the self that threaten or violate codes of behavior and discursive expression. The mother is thus separated from “the clean and proper subject,” (POH 3) whose body is regulated by codes of good social behavior, and repressed in and through language.

In the Lacanian model, abjection is a revolt—a revolt against that which gives us our own existence or state of being in order to avoid self-subsumption. It is the point where we are made to enter the sphere of the law of the father. So our fearful identification with the abject is in fact our fearful confrontation with patriarchy. It reminds us of the state of being or existence before the separation from mother. Kristeva’s theory of abjection is concerned with figures that are in a state of transition or transformation. The abject is located in a liminal state on the margins of the two positions. This state is particularly interesting to Kristeva because of the link between psychoanalysis and the subconscious mind. She says:

the abject is perverse because it neither gives up, nor assumes, a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the to deny them. (15)
Abjection is more than just a depth of experience, it is a theory of grossness, of confusion, of what we must reject in order to live. The abject performs the role of building both society and the individual psyche. Abjection includes that which is dirty, but also that which crosses borders and confuses. For instance, the Judaic tribes of the Hebrew Bible created laws concerning what was, and wasn’t, abject so that they wouldn’t die out. People naturally wanted to do things like have sex with their wives when the wives were on their periods, but when you’re living in the desert, as these Judaic tribes were, you just can’t get yourself clean enough. Accessing the abject would be to risk disease and, ultimately, death. So the woman’s menstrual cycle was made into something dirty and shameful; laws were written that send that woman to a hut while menstruating. Eating pork was made abject because pigs were likely to pass along diseases and kill off the tribe. Incest was made abject because sleeping with your family members could result in genetically deformed children and eventually kill off the tribe. Homosexuality was made abject, because if you didn’t have sex that could make babies, you’d kill off the tribe. By labelling certain things as gross, the tribe was able to survive.
For Kristeva, the abject applies to that which makes one retch. The abject, is something that disgusts us, evoking a bodily reaction of nausea. These responses are a reaction to aspects of the world which threaten our sense of boundaries, boundaries between ourselves and the world, or between ourselves and others; to what “disturbs identity, what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (POH 4). The response to what we experience as abject is, again, for Kristeva, the eruption of the bodily into our lives; an eruption which has its origin in our relations with the maternal body. The original relation to the maternal body is one in which there is no sense of a separate self. Such a sense of self only becomes fully achieved when we enter into the symbolic and learn language. This entry requires a prior phase, a process by which a sense of bodily boundaries is tentatively achieved. It needs a rejection, an abjection, a pushing away of that which is ‘not me’. Initially this is the maternal body, and from there on, all other aspects of the world which need to be eliminated if a discrete sense of self is to emerge. However, more than just that, it is also, on a deeper level, “what disturbs identity, system, order; what does not respect borders, positions, rules; the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”( POH 4). These abjects disrupt the symbolic level which Lacan talks about. A thing is what
its sign—and the way our culture understands that sign—says it should be. The abject, being the other, disrupts the way that language works.

The abject is at once an object of fascination and repugnance. It is fascinating since it is repugnant, for, repugnance holds the prospect of escape and liberation. It draws in as it repels, seduces as it disgusts. It fascinates desire, but must, ultimately, be rejected. We want to see a corpse, not because we’re weird, but because a body should mean life—and the dead body doesn’t have it. It is gross and engrossing, and, in order to make sure that no one will succumb to the temptation of hanging out with corpses, one has got to label corpses, and people who are fascinated by them, as disgusting and weird. Atwood’s narrative contains an overabundance of images that corporealise the repugnance of the abject.

Lacan’s psychoanalysis posits a resistance to the ‘ego psychology’ practised by Heinz Hartman and his followers. Ego psychology holds that psychoanalysis is meant to cure and believes that the curing is done by bringing the ego to dominate and control the id and the superego based on the premise that ego is something like a self—an innate self. Lacan, on the contrary, rejects the possibility of existence of such a self—the self as a substantive entity—and the innateness of such a solid self or a solid identity.
in the nature of a well-defined and structured self-awareness. To him, any such self, which logically pre-necessitates a unity to it is illusory. There is of course a self, an awareness of the nature of an identity-consciousness, always, but that self is a tenuous self, always provisional and variable. It is neither an autonomous ego nor an author-subject but a subjectivity constructed differently in different contexts by culture and language and sub- or unconscious desires. It is a self subject to so many extraneous determinant factors. The debates are usually always over the question of ego (I/self). Freud’s explanation of the ego in terms of psychology is re-explained by Lacan in terms of linguistics. The connections conveyed by metaphors and metonyms become effective because such analogies and connections operate in the unconscious but they can only be manifested through language. That is why Lacan says: “the unconscious is structured like a language, and manifests itself in the language as spoken by the mother” (167).

Language, unconscious, identity, self, subject, subjectivity and gender are all interrelated. Feminists have adopted the theorisations of Lacanian psychoanalysis to explain the mysteries of the female self. The feminist rejection of the biological desire for a child is rooted in a sense of
deficiency and incompleteness and an attempt to fill that gap of absence by wanting something from the male. Since woman is wanting in the biological organ the penis, she ‘wants’ it and seeks it from man by a biologically available process to complete herself. This urge for completion is iconised in the phallus, a patriarchal symbol, a signifier exchanged in the symbolic realm of discourse, one that constitutes sexual difference and the consequent gender trouble.

It was said earlier that while the object puts one in search of meaning, the abject collapses meaning. Abjection is a rejection through repugnance, a repugnance that gives protection and instills a kind of complacency in the form of a sense of security in the subject now become object. Abject is that which captures and confronts the condition where body as subject gets mutated into body as object, threatening, dominating and subsuming the subjectivity of the erstwhile subject. As Kristeva puts it in psychoanalytic terms, "to each ego its object, to each superego its abject" (230).

It is natural for the mind to recall and remember what it labours to reject. This is born of its undefined fear of the abject, which can, in turn, be routed back to a fear of the challenge it may cause to the subject. It is,
therefore, a form of existential angst. It could be argued that it is that which the mind constantly attaches itself to that it seeks to reject. The abject is this reject while abjection is not rejection. The abject is the objectification of the subject’s fear of itself. It is the body’s fear of itself, the body’s fear of its own corporeality. As Kristeva puts it:

That word ‘fear’—a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess—no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with non-existence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer. Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and ultimate: the abject. (6)

Abjection is not rejection as rejection is easy and final. Abjection is a strong attempt at, but failure in, rejection. Something is rejected because it is not needed anymore. But something is abjected because it is needed all the more and because one loves it and cherishes it so much that one can never have it the way one wants to have it and so have to ease oneself out of the pressure it is causing. It is a process of trying to liberate oneself from the pressure
rather than from that which causes the pressure. In a way, it is even akin to suicide. Further, that which is abjected is abjected not because of a realisation that it is some extraneous thing. In fact, it isn’t. Only, its experience is unnatural to the experiencer—so unnatural that it totally consumes him/her, his/her selfhood, his/her subjectivity. It is stuck inside, determines and manipulates the individual, causing discomfort and pain much like a foreign body beneath the skin. The thing, if it were foreign, could be easily removed and rejected. But since the abject is not an extraneous thing, abjection does not solve the problem. Indeed, a fresh spate of problems confronts the individual. What is abjected is part of one’s selfhood, a part manipulated by external factors and made to be experienced as alien. To cite Kristeva: “Abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you. (POH 13)

Abject is that which had once given life—that which, even now, is the individual’s substratum. That is why one feels the void of its loss and the need to fill the void. It is made to reach a point where it threatens the individual, and his life. He knows it is his own, a part of his whole,
something always with him, something integral to his being and existence; its presence, and his inability to actualise the potential of its presence and live it fully, force him to abject it. In *The Edible Woman* Marian:

examined the women’s bodies with interest, critically, as though she had never seen them before.... What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage.( 167)

So the place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life; it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. Thus the abject, in a way, represents a spiritual vacuum too.
Anything can be abjected, body, body functions, social roles to be performed by way of female bodies, food, female sensibility and sensitivity, life (through suicide), identity, personality, career, sex, sexuality of the body, ugliness, beauty (since it is the ‘other’ of ugliness), femininity (since it is the ‘other’ of masculinity and patriarchy), system, society. Of these, food is a most significant one. Food creates the body and keeps it alive; the same food, if it threatens the life of the body, is expelled from the body which is also abjection. In the words of Kristeva:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomit that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me towards them and separates me from them. Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. (POH 11)

This is where experiments in corporeality and experiments in food and eating habits come together in working out a post feminist model of femininity in Margaret Atwood.
But it should not be surmised that abjection is all just about ugliness. Beauty, and models of beauty, also could threaten identity and anything that disturbs identity, system, and order is sure to be abject. As Kristeva expresses: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules" (232). Abjection, whether in terms of ugliness or in terms of beauty, represents a loss, a want. Kristeva says: “The subjective experience culminates in the abjection of its own self as it understands that all its objects are founded on a constitutive loss. Abjection recognizes foundational want” (POH 14). For Kristeva, abject is, irrespective of ugliness and beauty, the “edge of non-existence and hallucination, a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (15).

Selfhood is the experience of being and if notions of self threaten the actual experience of the self, they are consciously or unconsciously abjected. Abjection amounts to expelling the self, and, in the present context, the female self. Expulsion of the self is akin to death, which is not necessarily just the physical expression of loss of the body—a there are other forms of death, too. The dead self could be later redeemed and resurrected through the female body and a long lost femaleness retrieved.
'Back to the body’ would then also imply back to an inclusive femaleness in lieu of an exclusivist feminist model of femininity. Abjection is the point of an identity crisis, an ambiguity. Menninghaus states: “We may call it a border: abjection is above all ambiguity. Because while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it” (377). This crisis can be desperately used to kill oneself or intelligently used to live—‘I’ can either die or live. Atwood’s characters do both in various circumstances, seeking, in the post feminist way, to transform the feminist despondency into a post feminist celebration of the body and turns the exclusivist female-only space into an inclusive female space.

Kristeva tries to describe a subjectivity for which experience is heterogeneous. This brings the abject into focus since part of this subject's being is constituted of the ‘other’ living within as an alter ego. This ‘other’ as alter ego exists within the subject, it is identified as ‘other’ through loathing, repulsion and a pushing away. Kristeva will again assert the primacy of this concept by locating it in the primal repression, one that is constitutive of subjectivities and therefore precedes any later forms of repression. Kristeva attempts to bring the body back into discourses in the human sciences through a focus on the significance of the maternal and pre-oedipal in the constitution of subjectivity.
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Womanhood for feminism was a perpetual ‘otherness’. However, in order to understand the course of evolution of feminism and the post feminist condition and to grasp the concept of abjection in its wake, a well-marked distinction between sex and gender needs to be drawn. Post feminist too take care to establish a clear distinction between them.

It is interesting to observe how feminism abjected many things to get rid of false identities, how it lost them and, in its wake, had to assume unreal female identities. Abjection was, consequently, used to attempt a new female identity, but feminism failed in distinguishing it from what it quite often perceived as essentialisations of femininity. Post feminism reclaimed much of what was abjected so as to come to terms with, and accept, biological femaleness.

Abject refers to anything that disturbs a system, conventional identities and cultural concepts. It exists in the liminal space between the object and the subject representing taboo elements of the self. Kristeva holds that the abject exists outside the Lacanian symbolic order. It is a realm created in an individual through the internalization of the cultural fabric and language and is identified with parental agency.
Kristeva makes a distinction between the *symbolic* and the *semiotic* dimensions of language. She accepts the Lacanian account of the symbolic as the dimension of structured public meaning, in which the phallus is given a privileged position, and which is thereby governed by the Law of the Father. But she draws attention to another dimension of language and communication, the semiotic. This originates in the body and in the infant's relationship to the mother, prior to the entry into language, that is, prior to any process of splitting or separation, which is necessary to the process of symbolic articulation. Adopting the realm of the symbolic requires the repression and repudiation of such originary interdependence with female bodies. Within such a picture she insists on the reality of bodily drives, which cannot be captured in the symbolic, but instead manifest themselves in forms of bodily expression which can disrupt the orderly world of public discourse. Poetic language, for example, is not simply concerned with codifying and reporting, but has a rhythm and pulse which manifest such bodily drives. Kristeva says “Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary . . . poetic language (for whom the word is never uniquely sign) . . . reactiv[ates] this repressed, instinctual, maternal element” (136).
We cannot regress wholly to such modes of expression without losing our sense of ourselves as individuated subjects, and falling into psychosis. In this way we are necessarily confined by the public order of the symbolic, which is phallocentric. Nonetheless by attending to the semiotic and focusing on the way the body expresses itself outside of the symbolic order, the repressed maternal body and the feelings and emotions derived from its constitutive drives, can be made manifest. The consciousness of the abject lies within the symbolic order; but that which is abjected is outside the symbolic order where it is cast off into the realm to which we have no access. Much of Atwood’s characters’ lives are stories of experiments in confronting the abject even when they don’t, as a rule, succeed in restoring long lost female identities in terms of the retrieved, redeemed and reinstated abject body. These experiments, carried out in the aftermath of the feminist saturation, are tendentiously post feminist. They assume special significance by virtue of the fact that all of them are enacted on the site of the female body, where experiments in food and eating habits become determining factors in addressing function-specific issues like pregnancy, abortion and delivery and role-specific matters like marriage, career and home making. Even eating disorders are seen to be becoming decisive factors in identity formation.
The original location of that which is abjected is in the extra-physical or psychological realm; yet, since the individuation mechanism is corporeal in nature, and since individual experience is primarily a bodily experience, the undefined abject, the abject not defined in bodily terms, needs to find a physical object, because, it needs to project itself onto an object. It is this projection that is seen in the various things which Kristeva enumerates as abjects. Women, people of colour, convicts, prostitutes, poor people, disabled people, differently-abled people, queer people, can all be brought into the ambit of the abject. “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (POH 15). Abject can be understood as something which is alive, yet not alive.

We first experience abjection at the point of separation from the mother. Abjection, therefore, involves a revolt against that which gave us our own existence or state of being. At that point we enter the sphere of the law of the father. So our fearful identification with the abject is in fact our fearful confrontation with patriarchy. It reminds us of the state of being before the separation from the mother. The border between the subject and
the abject is imaginary in the sense that however hard we try to exclude the abject, it still exists.

Women have long been a source of abjection: they’re the keepers of the menstrual blood, they’re selfish with their babies, trying to keep them from entering into subjectivity, always trying to get them to stay and hang out in the pre-symbolic, forever bound to their doting mothers. The mother responds to the child’s needs and directs both the expression and the satisfaction of those needs. The child’s experiences, hunger, alertness, and drowsiness, all of which are answered by the mother, who suckles the child, talks to her, and makes faces at her and cuddles her as she drifts into sleep. Though the child hears words spoken around her, she has not yet been initiated into formal language, but experiences the world, mainly in terms of rhythmic or sporadic movements, sounds without prescribed sense, feelings of pleasure or pain whose origin or cause is indefinite. Language is already beginning to develop in this semiotic phase of existence, since certain patterns of being in the wake of sound are imposed on the future speaking subject. She hears certain sounds, words, repeated around her, and registers a variety of tones and localizations in her surroundings, and they may gradually begin to correspond to states of bodily feeling, for instance, her
mother’s soft whisper as she enjoys the warmth of being at the breast and filling her belly. The child is thus beginning to experience correspondences of sounds, words, desires, and feelings: a world is beginning to take form, but it is still a world that is largely dependent on the mother and her body for its maintenance and definition. This imaginary phase is followed by a rupture, which Kristeva links to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. Lacan writes of a time in a young child’s development when she recognizes herself in a mirror for the first time. This introduces the child to the idea that not only is she a person separate from the mother and from objects in the world, but also that persons and objects can be reflected back to her through representation, images or figures that depict or describe persons and things, but which are not identical with those persons or things. This is the point at which the encoded words become central. Because the child had not previously been aware of the world as a representational place of persons and objects, she had no connection with naming. But now, as she begins to cross from the semiotic into the symbolic, she needs to know the names of persons and things in order to communicate with others. This moment of drift towards becoming participatory in a signifying system is what Kristeva terms as the thetic phase. The child’s early intimacy with the mother’s body is not only a kind of language in itself, defined by patterns of sound and
movement, but it is also the ground of all symbolic or social language; and which makes language acquisition possible. In tales of abjection, the abject feminine manifests as the sprawling abyss—the mother who threatens to consume, to castrate, to make others into the gaping hole that is their lack.

The feminist position is that man considers woman inferior, and woman has been tutored to feel so, since her body lacks the penis. The female self, the self that is no more than a make-believe self given her by man, develops aversion for the biological organ. As K. K. Ruthven points out: “In most systems of sexual differentiation the phallus is taken to be the principal signifier of the male . . . the possession of the phallus entails possession of power in a phallocentric society”( 1). For feminism, therefore, the phallus becomes the symbol of patriarchal authority and domination. So she has no option but to abject it, which explains the material dimension of abjection. But, paradoxically, enough, since it is the phallus that has defined femininity, when the phallus is abjected, female identity also is abjected along with it. Though male and female are mutually constitutive elements, since in the male/female binary, the male is the privileged element, the male doesn’t suffer a loss of identity whereas the female does, leaving the woman
left with nothing to herself. She can only redeem herself in terms of her body while, at the same time, discarding the vestiges of attached patriarchy.

The abject is usually described as that which represents a threat, a threat to meaning and a signal of the breakdown of meaning. The post feminist position could accept the abject and divest it of the phobia and trouble invested on it. Meaning is a social construct, so is gender and its meaning. It is precisely this social construct and the patriarchal operations beneath such constructions that feminism sought to deconstruct. The abject is unconsciously articulating what feminism consciously wanted to do but failed. Atwood’s female characters happily bring these unconscious practices into the realm of conscious praxis.

The abject serves to disturb identity. Identity is nothing but a finite experience of the infinite, a reductionist experience of the unclassifiable and the unnameable. Female identities are limited selfhoods, which needs to be subverted. The abject could be used to disturb identities created by oppressive systems, power structures and social norms, and to demolish arbitrary discriminative borderlines. Atwood’s women characters abject their female identity itself, some characters do it unconsciously and others consciously. What woman seeks is her identity—identity as person, identity
in gender, identity in terms of sex, an identity not defined by binaries. Consciousness of the suppression of this identity by a patriarchal society unsettles her and creates pressure in her. She wishes to forget, rather negate it, believing that she can achieve it by shunning her identity altogether and she abjacts it. But this abjection generates an inner conflict in her because she, as a woman, has her individual ideas of selfhood-actualisation, mothering, a sex-function and not a patriarchy-imposed gender role being one. She may want to actualise her self through motherhood and wouldn’t want to shun it. Marriage is necessary for her to actualise it, but it may not be acceptable to her since it entails subjection and subordination. She would want to become a mother, but not in the conventional way through institutionalised marriage. That is why she doesn’t want to be a wife but just be a mother. Ainsley in The Edible Woman is one character who denounces marriage but embraces motherhood. In marital relation there is also the body-interaction, which is repulsive for her. For the sight of the male body reminds her of her own inferiority and the lack of the equivalency in her own body. She shuns, abjacts, her own body since she can’t abject the male body over which she has no power. She achieves this by manipulating food and eating habits to fit in with various stages of her phobias, feelings and experiences of abjection.
All that can be included in discussions of the concept of abject can be embodied in the mother. She gives life—both natural life and social life, sex and gender. She performs the function of giving birth/life and then performs the role of threatening the same life. She reminds the daughter of the given and the norm, the beautiful and the ugly, life and death and nature and culture. Nature and nurture thus come to be perceived as the enemy of woman making mother and motherhood alike become abjects. The infant’s physical and psychic attachment to its mother must be successfully and violently abjected in order for an independent and cogent speaking human subject to ‘be born’. The immanence of her mother within her and the imminence of her own motherhood—the maternal echo inside her—unsettles her, smothers her individuation and threatens her female life. She intuitively knows that mother is the core of her being and the actualisation of her female experience but has been conditioned by patriarchy and feminist resistance to patriarchy alike to discard this core of her being and becoming which, ironically, cannot be discarded without her having to cease to exist. This is the kind of identity crisis, a sex/gender crisis, that the social woman must encounter. One possible solution to this is that this abject-core of womanness needs to be regained and reformulated into a living, speaking woman subject, which could be attainable since, in Kristevan terms,
“abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be (POH 10)”. Retrieving the abject womanness in terms of the body, precisely, is the task of post feminism and the behavioural patterns of the female characters in Atwood’s novels can be explained in post feminist terms. Matricide is a fundamental biological and psychic prerequisite for female autonomy in the Kristevan scheme. In post feminism, on the contrary, the maternal abject is reinstated and the maternal glorified for its female synergy and planted in a new space outside and beyond the male/female binary space as the perennial source of female existential angst attached to maternity. Post feminism is thus striving to make possible an individuation of the female and the maternal independent of patriarchal models.

Though deeply influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis Kristeva also challenges the increasing predominance of Jacques Lacan’s work in the post-war period. Kristeva’s work on the semiotic and the pre-symbolic stages of psycho-sexual development sets out to correct Lacanian accounts by forcing attention on the role of the maternal in the development of subjectivity. Kristeva’s introduction of the abject can be read as an attempt
to problematise Lacan’s famous mirror-stage theory—a bizarrely mother-free account of the subject’s birth into the symbolic domain. For Kristeva, the abjection of the maternal is the precondition of the narcissism of the mirror-stage. Moreover, like the mirror-stage, abjection is not a stage passed through, but a perpetual process that plays a central role within the project of subjectivity. Just as within a Lacanian ontology all subjects are fundamentally narcissistic, so in Kristeva’s account all subjects are fundamentally and formatively abjecting subjects. For Kristeva, this memory of maternal dependency is deeply etched within the bodily and psychic lives of each of us. If Kristeva mobilises the abject to enact the return of the maternal in psychoanalysis, post feminism mobilises the abject to enact the return of the maternal also in the female experience. Indeed this focus on the role of the maternal in the formation of subjectivity is one of the reasons why the abject has such a strong conceptual draw for post feminist theory. This thesis, enunciates the elusive shadows of the abject in corporeal terms and with reference to the female characters in Atwood’s novels.
Even though Kristeva takes on the aspect of the maternal abject and deals extensively with it, it is not the major concern of the present thesis since it does not purport to define and determine femininity in terms of the mother alone or in terms of the maternal body alone. The maternal body is just one aspect of the physicality of femaleness that this project addresses, its thrust being on how that which has been abjected in feminism may be restored in post feminist ethos in order that a new female experience be actualised in terms of what could be called post-discursive body, or, better still, an extra-discursive body. The grounding premise of the Kristevan abject—that there is no maternal subject—validates the argument that feminism is yet to find the speaking woman subject leaving post feminism to seek it. Since Kristeva’s account of abjection does not account for what it might mean ‘to be’ that maternal abject, new implications and insights could be gathered in the course of its application in Atwood’s women characters.

There is no end to debates on whether post feminism signifies the end of feminism, whether it is the continuation of feminism, whether it is in opposition to feminism or whether it is ‘the other’ of feminism. Quite interestingly, the abject is not in itself a feminist tool. It is a poststructuralist tool and came to be used in feminism, too. Furthermore, Kristeva, who developed the concept of the abject to such an extent as is being perceived
today, asserts that she has nothing to do with feminism even when, paradoxically, she is being discussed as a feminist critic and that too as a pioneer of French feminism. It is indeed a mistake which came to stay in the Anglo-American scholarship on feminist literary criticism. Christine Delphy quite rightly argues that it is Anglo-American feminist theorists who invented “French feminism” (196). It is possible to depart from conventional typologies, to define post feminism independently of the discussions on feminism, to expand and readjust the domain of the abject and to use the abject like a trope that could hold possibilities of liberation for woman, thus transforming the abject that abnegates to the abject that affirms. This can be done through a post feminist abject reading of Atwood and her characters which will develop a fresh experience of femaleness and paint a different portrait of woman. The abject-paradigm is used to interrogate and challenge, dominant gender representations and also to enunciate the female gender afresh in terms of the behavioural patterns of the characters in Atwood. This will destabilise and subvert the hegemonic representational codes in orthodox feminism and deliver it from its obsession with the mortification at the turn of female corporeal self into non-binary spaces of non-activism. This will also restore woman to the centrestage as a living, speaking woman subject who inhabits her own body and space.
In the feminist scheme, abjection is an attempt at resisting and escaping normalisation. The abject body is the objectification of a sense of failure and defeat, an attempt at eluding the problematic of being woman, an attempt to escape discourse, an attempt at forging an invisible body outside the domain of normalisation and is a fundamental site of self-alienation. That is why the abject space becomes, to Butler, the “unlivable and uninhabitable” (*BTM* 4) zone of social life, densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject. In the post feminist scheme, however, these same unlivable and uninhabitable zones are transformed into livable and inhabitable zones. This holds a better prospect for the abject bodies, which were abjected for fear that they would become normative bodies, whereby they become non-normalised natural bodies that individuate femininity in corporeal terms independently of exclusivist social spaces by becoming post-discursive bodies so that the norm, gender, is recycled into the given, sex. The fluidity of gender could be profitably used to subvert gender and, the performativity of gender, the gendering process, could be expanded into the pure and non-normative materiality of the sexed body. Once these redeemed abject bodies are restored into bodies that matter, which lie beyond discursive spaces, the need for an écriture feminine, verbal or non-verbal, can be transcended. The abject can then be liberated from
even the domain of the liminal space so that binary equations will no more be operative. The body is thus divested of the superimposed regulatory norms that governs it, inscribes and manipulates its identities. The discursive practices, that idealised sex into a regulatory norm, are subverted in the post feminist model. The regulatory process is stalled and the immediate moment of materiality is enunciated through the body, the ideal giving way to the real.

The normative or normalised body is the socially reified woman. Even though it was the attempt of feminism to resist this reification, it ended up offering no possibilities of self-rediscovery for woman in a society divided, by feminist extremism, into two groups, namely, men and women. Woman trying to free herself from patriarchy has only one alternative, to embrace the other—masculinity. This alternative is not one of escape but of self-annihilation. This suicidal way out was effected in abjection, and abjection was executed in terms of the body, objectifying and corporealising all that was detestable in woman like spit, vomit, menstrual blood, and other body fluids. Feminism rejects the pseudo-identities ordained on women by male hegemony, but made the mistake of reinstating a cultural system in its stead—the very same thing it sought to expel. Instead of attempting to
In Butler’s theorisations, it is not sex that produces gender; it is sex as a category and its discursive practices centered on the platform of the body that generate gender. Gender is not related to material body facts, but is solely and completely, a social construction, a fiction.

Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires: because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender, is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (Performative 273).

Post feminism fixes much of its theory and praxis on this recognition. Sex is a substantive entity, a natural given, a reality, but gender is a performativity. It is the social experience of sex. As Butler postulates, “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that
it is performed” (Performative 278). It is on the basis of this awareness that the body is restored to the centrestage.

Rather than perceiving as de Beauvoir does, that a woman is not born but becomes woman, post feminism would enquire into how the woman born becomes the woman become. The female body needs to be reclaimed to subvert the normalization processes of the patriarchal society and to subsume the presence of male hegemony built into it.

Post feminism is not about destroying male hegemony and constructing female hegemony in its stead. It need not necessarily be about succeeding in constructing a platform of equality of the genders though it believes in gender equality. Post feminism is about deconstructing the gender politics, just as it is certainly about acknowledging and living the autonomy of sex as a natural given outside the spaces of gender construction.