Preface

The notion of femininity has been an invisible presence in the collective unconscious of humanity and the personal subconscious of individual humans since time immemorial. However, the notion became a radical concept much later in the evolutionary trajectory of human civilisation. The conceptualisation of the feminine gender dates back to organised human history. Contemporary interfaces with uncontacted primitive tribal settlements strengthen the view that in primal human societies, there were, and are, just ‘people called men and women’ who live naturally. Their social life is spontaneous and artless and ‘un-cultured’. They only have sex; not gender. Notwithstanding the fact that there is often no centralised system of governance or administration and a well-defined power structure to enforce authority, order and rule in many of these tribes, women (or men) are not discriminated against. Gender inequality and oppression are unknown to these societal formations. Division of labour exists amongst them, but it does not read as gender roles. Biological difference in terms of sex is recognised, acknowledged, instinctively exercised and put to good and productive use; but there is no ‘gender trouble’. The birth of gender and concomitant gender trouble is coeval with
the dawn of civilisation. It is in civilised societies, in which nature gives way to culture, and natural givens are ‘powerfully’ transformed into cultural norms, that femininity came to be defined with reference to its ‘other’, that is, masculinity, and in terms of imagined ideal models variously constructed; and roles ordained for men and women. Hence, femininity, gender, woman and the male/female binary have been rightly regarded as cultural constructs in civilised societies for quite a long period now.

Even though feminism recognised the mendacity of gender as a natural given long ago and addressed the issue with indisputable activist vigour, its homogenising propensities and confrontational proclivities failed to salvage the wholesomeness of the female experience. Mature feminism recognises exclusivist feminism’s self-defeat and has begun to compose a postscript to its theorisations and practice. ‘Post feminism’ is felt to be an apt open-ended umbrella term for all the multifarious features, trends and positions that characterise and constitute this eclectic postscript.

Rather than asking new questions and endeavouring to answer them, post feminism explores the possibilities of spaces in which woman can live out the fullness of femaleness, and also subverts the normalising discourses that overtly or covertly reify or oppress her live self. Operating from a third
space beyond critically contrived binaries, a space outside the unyielding and inflexible polemical paradigms of orthodox feminism, post feminism is felt to be better equipped to problematise women’s issues and enunciate woman’s self, selfhood and subjectivity. The post feminist leanings and positions adopted in this thesis are corroborated through an active critical engagement with Margaret Atwood, usually considered a feminist writer despite her own insistence otherwise, and her fictional work. To cite an instance, post feminism makes a dramatic ideological shift from feminism: while feminism asserts and argues that physical strength is the basis of gender discrimination, that man was able to oppress woman because she was weaker than he, post feminism deviates from this deceptive myth and acknowledges that it is not by virtue of woman’s weakness that man rules her, but by virtue of her strength. This can only be understood from a disinterested study of femaleness and its natural functions, which is what this thesis partly deals with. Being required to perform certain natural sex-specific functions that man is not required to, woman is naturally endowed with appropriate sex-specific characteristic features that strengthen her and enable her to accomplish those functions. It is precisely those strengths and their attendant attributes which are cultural as well as natural that resulted in her becoming a site of oppression. The real woman delves into this uniquely
female reservoir of inner strength to hold out against the patriarchal
domination of her body and self. Margaret Atwood has crafted a set of
extraordinary women who pass through situations that any ordinary woman
inhabiting a male-centered society can easily identify with, but who, in the
process, metamorphose into self-aware individuals. Atwood, in her novels,
creates situations in which women weighed down by the rules and
inequalities of their societies discover that they must reconstruct the braver,
self reliant personae in order to survive.

Margaret Atwood is one novelist and writer who can provide one
with creative insights while attempting a critical comprehension of the shifts
of perspectives in the conceptualisations and experience of femininity over
the ages in Western socio-cultural discourses and in the course of mature
evolution of feminism into post feminism which runs parallel to the shift. A
writer noticed for her strong convictions, lucid expression, unique points of
view, careful craftsmanship and independent positions with special regard to
women’s issues, Margaret Atwood is also a prominent figure in the world of
Canadian and international literature. A prolific writer, she has created her
own definite space as an author of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and literary
criticism and speaks in a voice that is perceptibly strong, clear and different.
A keen observer of life, she keeps herself informed of the happenings around her, and events of contemporary relevance often find their way into her writings, thus fetching her a widespread appeal that transcends gender barriers. She champions the rights of artists and freedom of expression and holds membership in the Amnesty International and writers’ organisations such as P.E.N. and Canada’s Writers’ Union, of which she is a founding member. Though Atwood’s writing has been variously labelled as feminism, human rights activism, nationalism and anti-Americanism, she effortlessly incorporates and transcends all attempts at classification. In her books she focusses on issues predominantly affecting women but she persistently refuses to confine her thoughts within the narrow constraints of a feminist. In an interview given to the Paris Review she clarifies her stance: “There is no single, simple, static ‘women’s point of view’. Let’s just say that good writing of any kind by anyone is surprising, intricate, strong, sinuous”.

Chapter One of this thesis serves as a comprehensive introduction to the body of work that follows. It deals with the conceptualisation and treatment of the body down the ages in the background of the general shift from feminism to post feminism. It discusses how body was represented
earlier on and the subsequent changes in the concept and the meanings and connotations of the term ‘body’ and explores its problematic nature and its consequent invisibility in feminism which strived to conceal the body, and the mature attempts of post feminism to redeem and retrieve the same. The Chapter also seeks to discover the impact of these movements on womanhood and womanness and explores the implied significance of the idea of going back to the body as suggested in the title “Back to the Body: Margaret Atwood and the Reaffirmation of the Female Physicality.”

Chapter Two charts the course of the evolution from feminism to post feminism and states the relevance of fixing Margaret Atwood within the broad spectrum of post feminism and analyses her works to situate and elucidate the theoretical underpinnings and practice of the umbrella term post feminism.

Chapter Three is exclusively dedicated to the explication of the concept of abjection central to post feminism, especially the writings of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. It discusses and explores what abjection means for feminist and post feminist discourses, its ramifications and its potent influence on female life.
Chapter Four focusses on Atwood as a post feminist, rather than as a feminist, writer and thinker. It examines, in terms of the abject, how her works pertinently espouse post feminist concerns and how her characters, through their post feminist tendencies, evidenced by their various experiments in femininity, generate comprehensive and diverse post feminist discourses. The notion of the abject, the theorisations thereof, and the differences in the practice of abjection in the feminist and the post feminist critical models are emphasised here. The corporeal dimension of the abject is brought into prominence so as to make an effective use of the concept while trying to explain the reclamation of femininity in terms of the female body.

The thesis derives the conclusion that post feminism cannot be rigorously defined because any attempt at trying to define post feminism would make it not post feminism any more. The conclusion highlights the open-endedness and characteristic flexibility of post feminist theory. It attempts to open up the seamless possibilities that feminism had inadvertently sealed up in its rigorous struggle to preserve the interests of femininity. The Chapter also serves to relocate Margaret Atwood as a writer endowed with great foresight, who successfully anticipated the evolution of
feminism to post feminism even while living in the midst of raging feminist activism. Re-reading Atwood as a post feminist would demonstrate the potential of feminism to mature into post feminism in corporeal terms.

Though instances to demonstrate the shift from feminism to post feminism can be picked out from most novels of Atwood, this thesis does not propose to make an in-depth study of all her works. Since the study concentrates on the ideological shift from the rigid and narrow paradigms of feminism to the more expansive and broad sites of post feminism, in main focus are three novels *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride* which have been labelled as definitively feminist works. Excerpts from other novels and short stories of Atwood have been cited to augment the central argument of the thesis.