Chapter 1

Body Trouble: the Female Body Down the Ages

“The woman’s body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected”

Adrienne Rich (Of Woman Born 55).

Femininity and the female body are inextricably interconnected and the body continues to be the centre of feminism-related discourses. As Bryan S. Turner states, “The human body has been a potent and persistent metaphor for social and political relations throughout human history” (4). The body is a site of inscriptions, but the female body, however, is more than that. It is also the locus of a complex power struggle. As a sexual entity and a gender icon at once, the body is foundational to all feminist discourses and ideological premises. It has long since outgrown its conceptualization as a biological organism with an intrinsic biological nature and has also exceeded its subsequent exposé as an instrument of power, to be directed, controlled, manipulated, disciplined and made to fit into social moulds which are largely patriarchal in nature. The body had been a problem for
feminism—a problem that could only be solved by its voluntary riddance because it allowed itself to be metamorphosed into a female model of the male standard. Post feminist discourses take the body as a problematic which triggers an enquiry into the meaning of femininity in purely corporeal and material terms, and attempts a reconciliation of femininity and identity, the individual and the social self.

Elizabeth Grosz says: “Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men” (14). It is a reflection on the binary equation: ‘mind: body :: man: woman’. Obviously, this equation exposes the male prejudice that the female is enmeshed with the body, and is consequently grosser, earthy and inferior. It reinforces the Cartesian binary model of mind and body which privileges the mind over the body, the mind being the kernel and the body its shell. The essence of the fruit is in its kernel, not in the shell, and by analogy, the selfhood of the human is in its mind, not in its body; making the human a disembodied subjectivity. The Cartesian dictum “Cogito ergo sum” implies that one is human by virtue of one’s mind. The mind determines ‘humanness’ and ‘maleness’, making both the indices of human subjectivity. By this willful sleight of the hand, woman came to be subordinated to man and the foundations of the
essentializations of femininity came to be laid. This binary thought process centralized masculinity by marginalizing femininity, and subsequently valorised the former by denigrating the latter. Shoshana Felman writes: “Theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by the man as his opposite, that is to say, as his other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, Otherness itself.” (43)

Consequently, woman had to ‘buy’ a space within society; and the price she paid for it was her identity, subjectivity and selfhood vis-à-vis her body. The space she bought, instead of being a female space, came to be the space for sub-males, that is, sub-humans. Women could inhabit this space by only being either saints or as embodiments of temptation — the either/or conundrum. She has been present in textual representations down the ages as the adulterous lover, the chaste maiden, the dutiful wife or the devoted mother. Woman was stereotyped into an artifact to be showcased in the archives curated by the patriarchal man. Occasionally, when a female protagonist attempts to live her life on her own terms she is pulled back, away from her autonomy, tied down to her body— the normative, gendered and standardized body—and is forced to realize the futility of her
endeavour. The individual woman is forcibly embodied and forcefully reduced to the social body. The woman represented thus dissolved into invisibility, absence and non-existence. These sculpted bodies, presences that constantly reaffirm female absences, came to affirm that women have no life and soul and are mere appendages to masculinity. Femininity became equated with bodies and the female existence came to be centered on corporeality. Susan Bordo says: “Our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of masculinity and femininity” (91). Women came to be perpetually engaged in a love-hate relationship with their bodies in an often desperate attempt to meet an unattainable ideal. In The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf bemoans the fact that society “never gives girls the message that their bodies are valuable simply because they are inside them” (205).

Woman is gendered body and the gendered body is not particular, it is generic. It is a condition where the typical body represents the typical social class called woman. Men, on the contrary, exist as particular individuals. They are individualised entities with distinct personalities possessing unique spiritual identities. Man is represented as an individual and woman is often standardised as member of a class.
The male body is undefined as it refuses to subscribe to nomenclature. The female body, on the contrary, is an essentialised body. Man’s body is unstable and unpredictable, it cannot be pinned down to a location, whereas woman’s body is stable. While there is no characteristic meaning to the male body and each body has its individual meaning and self, there is an essentialised, totalising, universal meaning ascribed to the female body. The femaleness has only a universal and typical meaning and does not carry an individual self, selfhood or subjectivity with it. The male body is not taken as a social product or a construct; the female body, instead, is deemed as a social product, a product of social convention—defined, cited and stable. As Simone de Beauvoir succinctly puts it, “Woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself” (61). In fact, the task of feminism throughout its history has been to grapple with this otherness of the body vis-à-vis the self. This task finds endorsement in Monique Wittig’s vehement indictment:

Thus it is our historical task, and only ours, to define what we call oppression in materialist terms, to make it evident that women are a class, which is to say that the category “woman” as well as the category “man” are political and
economic categories not eternal ones. Our fight aims to suppress men as a class, not through a genocidal, but a political struggle. (105)

This thesis purports to go ‘back to the body’. It attempts to destabilise the essentialised female body. To destabilise the body means to re-cite the body and to redefine femininity in terms of the abject body. The abject body is engaged to come to terms with all that was rejected along with it and to enter into a fresh dimension in the conceptualisation of femininity.

The story of gender politics is the story of body politics too. Heike Wrenn observes that, “gender issues have always been a topic in society as well as in literature; so, naturally, gender became a major focus of the modernist movement” (9). To Dora Marsden “women, their intelligence and their judgment, had always been regarded with contempt by a male-oriented society” (3). Women are treated as complementary to men, with no individual identities. They are not spiritual entities—they have been depicted in literature as inferior to men—womanly, weak, stupid, but dutiful. For centuries, women have been narrated by the male and by the female indoctrinated by the patriarchal world. Since women did not naturally belong to humanity, they became the excluded other, incorporated
artfully as also forcibly and mechanically into the male world. Ellen Glasgow quotes James Branch Cabell: “Women were nothing more than conveniences; they were useful for keeping a household as well as for copulation and pleasure” (656). Glasgow goes on to cite patriarchal examples from intellectual history. To Hegel, womankind is the “eternal irony of the community” (656) and Freud defines woman as “the implacable enemy of civilization” (656). In “Feminism,” Glasgow states that “in the past men have confidently asserted that woman exists not as an active agent of life but merely as a passive guardian of the life force and that it is nature’s purpose that woman sit and watch” (657). Schopenhauer felt that one need only to look at a woman in order to realise that she is not intended for great mental or physical labour. He goes as far as to state that women are childish, silly, and short-sighted; he does not acknowledge women as human, but instead implies that men are the only complete human beings and that women exist on a plane somewhere between them and children (657). The biblical representation of Eve as the temptress who doomed man attributed the quality of evil to women. Until the early twentieth-century, such vile traits and gross characteristics were all considered feminine and women were portrayed and treated accordingly.
In 1912, Mary Coolidge questioned the conventional social habits behind such textual representations. She observed that in the so-called primitive societies, men and women were equal in status, with only differences existing between them instead of hierarchies. Civilisation misrepresented these natural differences as given inequalities and constructed hierarchies. Inherent function-based biological characteristics gave way to role-based value systems. The ‘feminine’ came to be constructed in place of ‘woman’. Coolidge suggests that, “it is civilised man who has moulded woman according to his standards and desires” (85).

The natural woman gave way to the stereotypical womanly woman. Coolidge postulates:

it is because women are never given the opportunity to act as they feel, because all traits and characteristics not in line with the feminine are suppressed and perverted from infancy, that the womanly woman stereotype was created with its excessive dependence on men for support and guidance. (90)

For woman, ‘to be’ meant to be seen; to be seen meant to be gendered; to be gendered meant to have been reduced to the objectified body, thus making the body a problematic for feminism. In the feminist perspective the
solution lay in the body’s abjection. But in post feminist stance, ‘to be’ means to live; to live means to be of the female sex, and thereby to be able to be unsighted from power equations. Here the female body becomes re-cited in its own terms whereas in the feminist conception of the body as a social, gendered product it gets trapped in sex-citation. The re-citation of the body brings on the individuation of the female. It could be argued that hitherto man claimed ownership on the same by exposing, and then displacing, male hegemony, social convention, biological essentialisation and binary equations. In post feminism the female bodies are no more the conventional self-less bodies within the binary spaces of patriarchy, they become new bodies with their own individual selves creating their own new spaces outside of patriarchal domains where sex is retained but gender rejected. Halberg observes that the feminist view of knowledge and reason as ‘male’ emerges from the feminist view that the fundamental dichotomy of Enlightenment thought is rooted in the mind/body, male/female dichotomy. She asserts that feminism:

    tends to see every idea (in, for example, philosophy or meta-
theory) about everything as male biased, as if the hegemony of dominant conceptions were complete. Patriarchy appears free of conflicts and contradictions, totally dominated by a unified masculinity. (5)
In the postmodernist reclamation of the abjected sexed body, the abject itself acquires a new meaning, dimension and function. All abject bodies—fat bodies, lean bodies, perverted bodies, sick bodies, queer bodies, anorexic bodies and bulimic bodies—are reclaimed to reconstruct femaleness. They might be unsightly for male gaze, but are no more cited bodies or sites of patriarchal oppression. They are presented as bodies with real female selves, as individualised female entities, and are perceived as individuations of the female self. This enables women to become people with sex, the female sex in lieu of the second sex; they become sexed people called women alongside sexed people called men. In place of gendered objects that they had so far been, they emerge as sexed subjects—bodies that matter.

Not just the body but the concept of embodiment, too, has been crucial to feminist/post feminist thought and discourse. Woman has been represented as an inert body, manufactured, modelled by man for man. Robin Morgan laments that “we have no bodies either because they are defined, possessed, abused, veiled, exposed, air-brushed or metaphorized by men.” (Anatomy of Freedom 121). This body is the surface on which man inscribes and represents his models of beauty and need. It is the physical surface on which man stamps his signature to use it for himself. As de
Beauvoir observes, right from childhood the young girl experiences her body in a way different from that of the young boy. She is encouraged to treat her whole person as something like a doll, “a passive object … an inert given object” (306). The female body is as much a gender object for the patriarchal man as it is just a sex-object for the self-gratification of the rapist. In the male is vested the power to maintain this object attractively, which he so effortlessly and effectively does. He maintains this reified femininity as a cultural artifact of his own making and woman assists man in this process by acting as a more or less passive agent. Cixous corroborates this notion when she laments:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women.
Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs.

(349)

In this conundrum, woman has only two choices— either be this right surface or refuse to be it. Not to possess the right body leaves woman with the abject body and subsequently, she is shunned by man. Both these choices will only lead to self-abnegation; to be’ written’ and be ‘read’ by
man who does so by citing the presence or the absence of the body's sexuality. At the same time, this normative representation by man for his own consumption is culturally variable. In this patriarchal embodiment of woman, the female is represented sans the female self. Miriam Greenspan states, “As long as woman is essentially defined by her body and as long as her body is appropriated by men, she will always have the problem of female identity” (181).

Margaret Atwood turns the process of embodiment to woman’s advantage by using the female body to live femininity. In her hands embodiment, instead of being the cultural process that reifies and reduces woman to the body, becomes the post feminist practice of using the female body to give corporeal shape to femininity, to define woman from the female perspective, to construct a new female subjectivity beyond the male/female and sex/gender binaries. As Wittig states:

To become a class we do not have to suppress our individual selves, and since no individual can be reduced to her/his oppression we are also confronted with the historical necessity of constituting ourselves as the individual subjects of our history as well . . . For once one has acknowledged
oppression, one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become someone in spite of oppression, that one has one’s own identity. (106)

The female body is the site of woman’s alienation which is not just isolation, seclusion or separation from men but also the dehumanisation of itself. To be gendered could be interpreted in two ways: to feel, and to be made conscious of woman as the inferior other or not to feel at all that she is human. The female body is man’s object and he decides how it should appear, how it may be maintained and what role/s it is programmed for. In the process, the female body becomes an object of reference, a discourse constructed and prescribed, a citation—an unoriginal work to be referred to the original source, namely, the male-body—and a site where numerous laws and norms are branded. The embodiment of this gendered object woman is constant, continuous, and reiterative—the body becoming the material surface of reiteration. Positioned as the site of inscriptions, the biological female body is transformed into the social platform of the gendered ‘other’ body.
People experience themselves and their selves through their sensed bodies and through normative body-concepts. Mere body awareness is the awareness of the sexuality of the body. Judith Butler believes that “there is no body prior to its marking” (Performativity 98). She goes on to say that “sex is not an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms” (1-2). These normative concepts are enmeshed with language, where language stands for a variety of discourses across cultural systems. For Butler, “Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is inassocial from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment” (232). Food and eating are linked to physicality since they could make and unmake the body and are thus consequent to, and in turn evocative of, consciousness of such disciplining body concepts. Many of Atwood’s female characters can be seen as engaged with this reciprocal process. They showcase how, and in what various ways, their subjectivities are effaced and then re-created in body-terms, how they become conscious of their existence as social constructs and how they attempt to abject their bodies. Through a redemption of their bodies, they reach a fresh experience of female selfhood
outside the spaces of dualistic essentialisation. Their hitherto abject bodies now become alternative bodies which are sexed but gender-neutral bodies and belong to the ‘female-normal’ category.

Atwood’s female bodies are engaged in undoing this sex-citation to become uncited bodies. Food and eating become post feminist tools in actualising the possibilities of this new female selfhood. Atwood’s female characters are abject bodies transforming themselves into their selves in real bodies. Real bodies are bodies that have overcome abjection, transcended the need of feminist liberation and voluntarily assume the roles in the society as autonomous authors in the actualisation of their selfhood.

Feminism’s contention has been that biology can never legitimise woman’s inferiority to man. Henrike Wrenn quotes Dr. Adler, a Viennese psychologist, as suggesting that that “there is absolutely no biological basis for the inferiority of women” (18). She points out how Adler holds men, instead of women, accountable for the feminine myth and sees women’s inferiority as the “fictitious invention of the male sex” and claims that women are made “to feel that they are not at the level with men from the very beginning” (18). Adler makes the valid point that this myth of feminine inferiority is so strong that it will take women a long time to truly become
free of it and declare their independence. Mordeca Jane Pollock endorses this sentiment when she says that this was “a psychologically enforced cultural myth, a set of assumptions and values concerning women that has been transmitted consciously and unconsciously for millennia” (16).

Dora Marsden also critiques the myth of women’s inferiority as a social construct in her article “Bondwomen”. It is not man who reduced woman to the rank of the second sex but woman herself. She says that “it is not possible for an outer force to give or take away freedom, it is born in the individual’s soul” (Marsden). The inferiority experienced by woman exists because some women instinctively see themselves as inferior and have accepted this sense of inferiority without question. As Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One’s Own*: “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35). These women seek comfort and protection, they long to be by the side of a man, and it is for this reason that women in male-dominated cultures have been willing to sacrifice their identity for centuries. It is difficult to de-naturalise the natural; the construct can, however, be deconstructed. Femininity is a construct rather than a natural given and feminism has been trying to deconstruct it. Feminism did
it by enforcing a sense of equality with man, stating that women can be fully independent of the men in their lives but it only served to reinforce the male/female binary. The deconstruction became a challenge because it is deep-rooted in the male-dominated culture and because women have often exhibited their willingness to conform to the ideals of men and have reshaped their minds and their bodies after the model placed before them.

Glasgow is in agreement with Coolidge when she suggests that this apparent passivity is not inherent but acquired, that it “is obliged therefore to disappear in the higher development of the race” (657). Glasgow believes that a woman’s identity is formed by her willing acceptance of society’s norms. But it would be more proper to say that a woman’s identity is lost by her unconscious subservience to society’s norms. The prospect of a career outside of the home enabled, according to Coolidge, “not a few” of these career women to assert themselves, but even they at best only “questioned and defied the traditional place of woman in western society” (85). The prospect of autonomous authorship over roles, conventional or unconventional, never occurred to the questioning woman; she found contentment in incessantly questioning and never seeking answers. ‘The new woman’ only aimed at economic and financial independence, not
completion. Such a freedom—a freedom ‘from’ something/s rather than a freedom ‘for’ something/s—only brought with it rights: to choose to marry or not, to obtain work positions, and the right of sexual expression. Rights are only the other side of duties and obligations. Besides, rights also require a superior ‘other’ from whom they have to be obtained or bought, thereby rendering these rights a mere condescension of that superior ‘giver’, something allowed and accepted by the norm. What was most important for the new woman was intellectual freedom; women thought they were on the way to self-actualisation, using their abilities and talents to find themselves and their true identity, but in fact they were misled into looking for liberation. Their focus was always on the ‘other’ from whom they needed to liberate themselves and were on the lookout for means to manage ‘them’ rather than how to manage ‘themselves’. These new women seemed to become a threat to male-dominated societies. Through their feminist struggle for liberation, quite inadvertently, they were preparing the ground for their own defeat. As a result of the new feminist movement, literature of the modernist period often depicts the female as an individual who insists on her right to have a career or a family, or both, depending on her individual choices and desires. The new woman in literature came to be depicted as one who, according to June West, ‘emphasizes the identity of interests that
West adds, “While she recognizes the diversity involved in true equality, she sees that the diversity isn’t necessarily on the sex-lines but on the lines of what each individual has to contribute to society” (59). The new woman was far from perfect and some of her aspirations and behavioral patterns were less than admirable, but much of this, according to West, was simply “a result of woman’s not being accustomed yet to freedom of choice” (61).

It is only natural for any movement to first pass through a phase of experimentation before it actualises its vision. Feminism underwent a gradual but decisive mutation which culminated in the post feminist condition. Though this process of mutation cannot be compartmentalised into watertight canonical zones, certain marked paradigm shifts are perceptible. Initially the feminist movement expressed an orchestrated protest. In its search for an identity divorced from the stereotyped images dictated by the patriarchal society, it made the mistake of renouncing womanhood in exchange for the surrogate manhood. The female body was perceived as a site of male oppression and as a commodified object. Gradually, the movement became conscious of the trap which it had been tricked into. It divested itself of explicit protest and began making amends
by glorifying the female body. Here, too, a pronounced self-consciousness in the form of an exaggerated sex-consciousness and body-consciousness in tandem with a tacit acknowledgement of the male as the superior ‘other’ can be seen, which, again, is not in tune with what feminism originally set out to realise. Post feminism outgrew these fallacies and plainly accepts the woman for what she is. There is no competition with man, and the gender trouble gives way to gender acknowledgement and from this point on, post feminist thought seeks to approximate a lived female identity.

Post feminism began to appear as a term in critical terminology by the mid-1980s. But as a full-fledged concept, it made its assertive appearance in 1991 when Susan Faludi published a polemic titled *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* against it. Faludi, from a feminist point of view, tried to dismiss the general feeling that feminism was passé because women had arrived at their goals as a media-inspired attitude. What were perceived as the highly anti-feminist positions of post feminism weren’t actually so, for, they were attempts at interrogating the experimental phase of feminism where it had made unwarranted mistakes. Women like Camille Paglia, Rene Denfeld, and Katie Roiphe, in the early 1990s, attacked feminism and proclaimed post feminism as appropriate and
as already established. Naomi Wolf in her book *Fire With Fire* calls for a “power feminism” that rejects an old bad feminist “hard-line” for a kind of “seize the day” (138) programme which claims that equality and economic empowerment are attainable for women with enough drive and self-confidence. Wolf challenges women to take control of their own lives, to adopt the agenda of power feminism in contrast to the unprofitable preoccupation with obstacles that characterises victim feminism. Colin Grant comments on Wolf’s concept of power feminism: “Power feminism is decidedly proto-feminist, but it allows women to decide for themselves what they want rather than offering doctrinaire prescriptions” (121). Post feminism is conceptually different from power feminism, it could be better expressed as a kind of ‘do feminism’ where feminism is not activism but is about ‘doing’ itself

According to Ann Brooks: “Post feminism, as in the case of postcolonialism and postmodernism, is often used to signal a complete break with previous range of ‘oppressive’ relations” (1). She suggests that the excessive focus on these relations “have been overcome and replaced and in this context the emphasis is now on a new range of temporal, political and cultural relations” (1). The prefix ‘post’ is semantically defined as ‘after in
time or order’, and need not denote any sort of rejection. So the accusation that post feminism betrays the history of feminist struggle, rejecting all it has gained, could be unfounded.

Brooks takes it that the concept of post feminism implies a process of ongoing transformation and change. She alludes to Yeatman who claims that post feminism represents feminism’s “coming of age” (1). It signifies a maturing into a confident body of theory and politics, representing pluralism and difference and reflecting on its position in relation to other philosophical and political movements demanding similar changes. It does not assume that either patriarchal or modernist discourses or frames of reference have been replaced or superseded. According to Brooks, post feminism “is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference” (4). It engenders a political shift in the conceptual and theoretical agenda of feminism and is a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialistic frameworks. Post feminists challenged concepts such as ‘oppression’, ‘patriarchy’, ‘sexuality’, ‘identity’, ‘difference’ and ‘equality’ used by white middle-class feminists. Viewed from another angle, it expresses the intersection of feminism with post modernism, post
structuralism and post colonialism. It is also about the challenges facing the so-called ‘hegemonic’ feminism.

Post feminism is the culmination of a number of debates and fiercely fought arguments both from within and outside feminism. It seems to have resulted from the collapse of consensus from within feminism formed around issues of theorising. Generally speaking, post feminist debates tend to crystallise around the feminist theorisations of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility. Kate Roiphe claims that second wave feminism is in the process of defeating the very cause of feminism by projecting women as hapless victims of sexual harassment:

The image that emerges from feminist preoccupations with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victims . . . This image of a delicate woman bears a striking resemblance to that fifties ideal my mother and the other women of her generation fought so hard to get away from . . . They didn’t like her excessive need for protection . . . But here she is again, with her pure intentions and her wide eyes. Only this time it is feminist themselves who are breathing new life into her. (115)
To locate the precise point of dissension between early feminism and its second wave, it is imperative to have a brief overview of the entire movement right from the time of its inception. The political and ideological foundations of second wave feminism can be traced back to the 1800s, a period noted, as Judith Hole and Ellen Levine observe, for its:

geographic expansion, industrial development, growth of social reform movements, and a general intellectual ferment with a philosophical emphasis on individual freedom, the ‘rights of man’ and universal education.(2)

Early advocates of women’s rights focussed on suffrage because disenfranchisement was the most notable official exclusion of women. They believed that securing women’s right to vote would bring social recognition of women’s value which would lead to the moral and social improvement of the entire society.

Feminism has been a struggle which is, in very certain terms, political rather than simply and purely social. This political struggle sought to challenge prevalent social assumptions as exemplified in Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In
John Stuart Mill attacked the Victorian theories of biological determinism. And, in her 1873 speech “On Women’s Right to Vote”, Susan B. Anthony questioned the validity of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. By 1895 feminism became a movement for equality, a socio-political activism for the political and economic equality of the sexes. First-wave feminism culminated with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, after which the women’s movement was virtually dormant for forty years. Speaking about this period of dormancy, Pollock explains that a woman was:

expected to enter into a monogamous marriage, live in a nuclear—often emotionally isolated—family, and limit her activities to domestic concerns, volunteer work, and social interests, that [were], in the final analysis, severely circumscribed. (16)

and, as Hole and Levine point out, “any discontent [women] felt was believed to have resulted from individual maladjustments” (17). The feminist movement then resurrected itself in the 1960s. Once again, an awareness about lack of economic, social, political and legal opportunities dawned on the feminist thinkers. This is what inspired the second-wave
feminists to address the deep-seated psychological roots of inequality and to dwell on the possibilities of a change.

Whereas first-wave feminism focussed on officially mandated inequalities, most notably disenfranchisement, the second-wave engaged with unofficial inequalities such as discrimination and oppression. The change of agenda did not bring about a substantial difference in the practice of the movement by introducing an inclusive theoretical platform to its praxis. But, it succeeded in making women aware of the politicised nature of even their personal and private lives to see how social discourses of all kinds operated through a highly complicated, intricate and subtle sexist power structure to reduce and reify woman to ‘the woman’. As Pollock says in her article:

the sexist mythology exists because the relationship between male and female is a political one, a relationship of superordinate to subordinate – and a relationship that obtains in the most intimate and personal as well as the most massive and public of our activities. (18)
The publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 was an important milestone in this direction. It signalled an important shift in the cultural perception of women, for the focus was shifted from individual maladjustments to the forced, imposed and endorsed social order. Liberal feminists were more interested in ensuring that women enjoyed the same privileges, protections, pay and opportunities as men. As can be inferred from activist Brigitta Linner’s observations in 1972, women felt it was necessary to challenge and dispense with the existing male-female role divisions and traditional family systems codified and endorsed by religion and legality through decisive socio-cultural discourses. She observes:

> Despite the enlightened laws enacted early in the century to improve the status of women and create equality in marriage, those in control of the institutions of society—the politicians and many of the religious leaders—were successful in maintaining the traditional family system and the public’s adherence to it. It was not until the 1960s that real debate, research, and reform exploded. (55).
Though the efforts of Liberal Feminists had a profound impact on culture, the movement had inherent faults which made it stray from its real destination. It presented itself as the women’s movement proposing that the white middle-class suburban woman was the only woman. It never noticed working-class women, minority women, non-white women and the non-Western women. The West rarely bothered to acknowledge that there was an East and there were people called women embedded in unique societies and cultures and civilisations and traditions. Its exclusive projections could not be taken as modular solutions to ‘other’ women’s societies and problems. Some of the unrepresented sections, though few in number, formed their own groups which functioned as sub-groups of mainstream feminism. Atwood’s relationship with some of the most pertinent of these subgroups will help support the argument that she is not a feminist writer but a post feminist performer. Cultural Feminism, Separatism, Materialist Feminism and Radical Feminism are the sub-groups that emerged as a challenge to the universalised feminist movement. Each of these sub-groups is “representative of the rifts of the time” (27), in the words of feminist scholar Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner. Instead of collaborating with divergent strains in a radical movement, second-wave feminists often took to separate, sometimes parallel and often conflicting, tracks. Each of these sub-groups,
competing for authority and recognition, and in the process undermining women’s solidarity, made discerning writers like Margaret Atwood wary of them.

As a politically active advocate of human rights since 1960s, for Atwood Cultural Feminism was critically deficient, vis-à-vis the overtly political discourse of Feminism because it failed to demystify male-dominated institutions and values. Neither did Atwood endorse Separatism which longed for ‘female only spaces’, which manifested in the form of all-female banks, businesses, and social agencies. To Atwood, this was problematic since it was unrealistic and utopian. Pollock observes that this will further encourage men “to equate power with power over others, to view aggression as a valid means of problem-solving,” (16) further nourishing and sustaining the patriarchal systems. Hole and Levine characterize the Separatists as women who “took a pro-woman anti-brainwashing position” and who “rejected the traditional explanations for female behavior, agreeing with other feminists that women’s behavior is not the result of inherent psychological characteristics” (139). They believed that women’s actions sprang from “continual, daily pressure from men” (140). They fallaciously believed that by separating themselves from the
sphere of male influence, expectation, and judgement, women could find their identity and freely express it. Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for instance, contains hints of her criticism of Separatism. Offred’s mother, a committed second-wave feminist, comments: “I don’t want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (Atwood 121). This marked disdain for the male sex, which merely reversed the extant social attitudes, without offering solutions to the issue of gender inequalities, was not in the line of Atwood’s conception of femininity. In the true essence of post feminism, Atwood, in an interview given in 2014, stated her idea of woman as “equal but different”.

Materialist Feminism, though firmly founded on class-consciousness, was not to Atwood’s taste due to its messy entanglement with left wing politics, and because of her own contrasting liberal political outlook. Their opposition to capitalism in favour of socialism and their belief that the path to freedom and equality lay in the abolition of the faulty economic system whose division of labour necessarily privileged men over women, thereby relegating women to positions of subordination, was not in tune with Atwood’s credo. Hole and Levine point out that for Materialist
Feminists, “women’s issues’ [were viewed] as part of the larger struggle for socialist change” (108), which meant that women’s issues were subsumed by the larger issue of social, economic, and political revolution.

Radical Feminism thought about the annihilation of natural and given sex functions, “the annihilation of sex roles” (143), as Bell Hooks phrased it. To Atwood, this was detrimental to the womanist cause. Drawing on Cultural Feminism and Separatism, Radical Feminists advocated, as Hedges points out, “nothing less than a complete revolution in terms of gendered oppression and resistance on all fronts, public and private” (2-3). They seemed to be blind to everything other than the implications and effects of women’s oppression under the patriarchal social order. It seemed a far cry from the task of true feminism where they sought to create awareness of the disparate needs of women through the identification and deeper politicisation of women’s issues, more specifically, on reproductive rights, on pornography, legislation, sexuality, and equality in relationships. The second-wave feminist considered all men are the enemies of all women. They, too, offered the unrealistic solution of establishing a utopian woman nation, a female only space, a separatist community, and the subjugation or extermination of men. Schönpfug quotes Shulamith Firestone’s observation
that feminist thought and theory are short of “visionary thinking” (16). According to Hedges for Atwood, therefore, it did not seem “to strengthen public understanding of the significance of authentic feminist movement. Instead, this adversarial approach could only reignite the wars of the genders, “the war between the sexes” (38). Hole and Levine maintain that as early as in 1968 it became evident that “the new women’s movement was not going to limit itself to statements of principles or traditional actions of political protest” (124). They go on to suggest that “the targets of what radical women considered ‘sexism’ were everywhere, and susceptible to attack” (124). Atwood’s humanism prevented her from envisioning a male-female antagonism. Her line of feminism is more in alignment with the moderate nature of first-wave feminism and not with the radicalism of second-wave which, she saw, could only culminate in self-abnegation and self-segregation. Atwood further felt that if patriarchy had wrongly defined ‘woman’, the feminist redefinition of ‘woman’ was not taking woman any nearer to herself / her self, either. Reading sexism and gender in each and every element of human culture, they became unable to come to terms with both society and themselves and found themselves incapable of defining their own expectations and goals. They had found their problem, but could not define it perfectly and in place of the present order they could not offer a
viable alternative of their own. Carol Ann Howell illustrates this Catch-22 situation in *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*: “The greatest challenge for a woman writer is how to position herself in response to changing cultural definitions of ‘woman’ and its ‘constellations’ like ‘feminine’ and ‘feminist’” (8) Atwood chooses to avoid this difficult task and instead engage in her own independent way, in the task of enunciating her own version of femininity. In *Conversations* she says, “Feminist is now one of the all-purpose words. It really can mean anything from people who think men should be pushed off cliffs to people who think it’s O.K. for women to read and write. All those could be called feminist positions” (140). Considering the problematic nature of the term, she owns to being ambivalent about being labelled as a feminist writer. In *Waltzing Again* she is quite at ease at being concerned with the dignity of ‘people called women’, which would define her feminism as “human equality and freedom of choice” (81). One significant element of her feminism is that she, instead of prescribing answers and solutions, problematises the issue by posing questions and exploring possibilities of movements; which is also what her female characters do. That is why they don’t behave as “enormously powerful and malevolent female[s]” (*Waltzing Again* 19). But, at the same time, this sentiment need not necessarily be read as an anti-feminist
backlash of sorts, as has generally been done. She is certainly not an advocate of the polarisation of sexual politics and it is because of the liberal humanistic strains in her writing that she can be considered ‘post feminist’ in outlook. We can make allowance for her averment that she is not a ‘feminist’ but a ‘womanist’, in a post feminist sense.

The post feminist engagement with the body is quite evident in the following oblique remark by Rosalind Gill:

One of the most striking aspects of post feminist . . . culture is its obsessional preoccupation with the body. In a shift from earlier representational practices it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property . . . Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity . . . in today’s media it is possession of a ‘sexy body’ that is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity. (6)

Even though critical of the way in which woman engages with her body, Gill appears to suggest that the post feminist woman uses her body and
sexuality for self-discovery. Departing from the implied criticism, the word ‘sexuality’, as used by Gill, could be understood in contrast with the word ‘gender’ and can be taken to mean the natural given physicality of the body. It could be argued that her use of her body and sexuality both affects her development as a person and exerts influence over her relationships. Post feminist writers today focus on sexuality and the female body, both of which their characters use as vehicles for self-discovery and self-expression.

We find the same preoccupation in Atwood’s fiction where her female characters are women who try to transform ‘bodies that do not matter’, the abject bodies, into ‘bodies that matter’ and which enable them to pick up their long lost meanings and identities in a fresh way, and legitimise them in female terms.

Atwood herself admits that the ways in which body-concepts are imposed, compelled and internalised are central to her work. She states in an interview with Elizabeth Meese while commenting on the relationship among body, body-concepts and culture:

The body as a concept has always been a concern of mine . . .

I think that people very much experience themselves through
their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their bodies (104).

Judith Butler was a critic of the practice of treating women as a class or a category; such a classification, she felt, would only annihilate the individual woman’s possibility of actualising her individual personal self. It would permanently exclude the possibilities of individual female identities. Besides, a class defines itself by referring to yet another class, which would only further reinforce the already problematic male/female binary. The post feminist perspective is not fixed on the liberation of women as a class but on the actualisation of the individual female self—a social condition where the individual woman will be able to live her individual personal female self. Butler also maintains that even though feminism, in all its stages of evolution, rejected the patriarchal myth that biology is destiny, they were still not able to depose the reigning myth but only supplanted it with a system which still practised the belief that a patriarchal culture was inevitable and in it the masculine and feminine genders would continue to be constructed upon male and female bodies. Post feminism, on the other hand, is not willing to accommodate this reaffirmation of patriarchy. Butler, in conformity with the feminist convention, perceives even sex as a social
and cultural construct but post feminism is mature enough to perceive in it the fallacy which would amount to not making room for woman in the social scheme at all. It contends that even though femininity is materialised and established in terms of the female-sexed body, sex is not a limiting discourse, as Butler would observe in *Bodies That Matter*, but is one among the many means to self-actualisation. Sex should be maintained as a fixed constant and gender should be understood as a fluid variable and, by the same argument, altered from time to time, place to place, culture to culture and context to context. Post feminism favours Butler’s argument that gender is flexible, free-floating and not caused by external stable factors; that gender as an objective natural thing does not exist; that “gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed [as a role]” (Performative 278). Post feminism tries to subvert this fictitious nature of gender and replace it with the reality of sex. It dispenses with the invectives of orthodox feminism which would only contribute to further marginalisation and eventual annihilation of the female selfhood. As Butler wrote in *Gender Trouble*:

If there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that
cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the ‘congealing’ is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. (45)

Post feminism corporealises just sex, and not gender, and redefines the socio-cultural discursive practices that so far effected the reification of sex into gender. By expressing the performative nature of the gender-construct, post feminism would help enunciate female selfhood in purely female terms through a purely female discourse. It can even do without an écriture féminine which had long ago been conceptualised by Monique Witting as the only solution for the feminist cause. ‘To be’ and ‘to do’ are two inalienable aspects of existence, at once individual and social. To be the being subject and the performing subject all at once is the post feminist idea of femaleness. Butler’s concept of ‘materialisation’ of the body in lieu of ‘construction’ of the body will equip us with the right kind of discourse to delineate the problematic.
Post feminism refuses to acknowledge the myth that superior strength of the male body in comparison with the female body is the reason using which man dominated woman. The social conditioning was a mischievous manipulation of what are basically special abilities of woman and not exactly her weaknesses. Of the two members of the human species, it is the female that is naturally endowed with the function of conceiving, containing, nurturing and delivering life in the form of a new human entity. For this specialised function, it is only natural that the female body and self are endowed with special attributes and unique sex-specific innate potentials. It is these strengths that enabled her to withstand, tolerate and forgive the male onslaught on her life domains. The motherhood potential is thus not weakness but strength. It is this and such other feminine strengths which have been exploited by man, and not her weaknesses. This realisation made post feminism redeem all that was abjected and call back those strengths specific to the female sex.

Traditionally, man has been thought to have transcended his superior body and succeeded in actualising his mental, intellectual and spiritual potential. But woman was left stuck in the corporeal level, the level of their naturally inferior bodies, barring them from being fully human. Sexual
functions and gender roles thus collude in negating the selfhood of woman. That is why feminism felt it the need of the hour to dissociate sex and gender which would serve to deconstruct the social edifices built on patriarchy.

The conception of the female body has undergone a discernible transformation parallel to the evolution of feminist thought. From being a tool of self-defeat, the body has now become a means of self expression and discovery. While feminism tended to subjugate the impulses of the body viewing them as products of patriarchal conditioning, post feminism celebrates the same as manifestations of a pure female experience, devoid of any political or ideological colouring. In keeping with the spirit of post feminism, Margaret Atwood’s female protagonists set out on journeys of self-discovery and achieve a wholesome perception of their corporeality and selfhood.