Chapter 2

From the Pedestal to the Parlour: Shifting Feminities

*It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her . . . by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self.*

Hélène Cixous *(Laugh of the Medusa 878)*

Critical approaches have by and large presented Margaret Atwood as a feminist writer, even while she has reiterated that she is not a feminist writer. After an interview with the author in 1975, Margaret Kaminski notes:
Atwood has repeatedly been pressured to support and endorse feminist politics and to explicitly associate her work with the movement. She has famously refused to be drawn into such an allegiance, and over the years has repeated in various guises the formula perfected after the publication of her novel, *The Edible Woman*: "I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting. It was written in 1965 and that's what things were like in 1965. (Waves 8)

Academic feminism is a well-defined category which has very systematically defined its scope and identified well-structured frameworks and work limits. Atwood began writing before second wave feminism established itself. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, appeared as early as in 1969, when feminism as a movement had not yet gathered strength though, as she admits, she had taken note of the miscellaneous writings of some writers who later became pioneers of the feminist movement. Her fictions do not subscribe to the norms of radical feminism. In her introduction to *The Edible Woman* Atwood says:
The Edible Woman appeared finally in 1969, four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed that it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as proto-feminist rather than feminist: there was no women’s movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I am not gifted with clairvoyance, though, like many at that time, I’d read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors. (8)

This is, of course, not to deny that her works deal with women’s issues just as they deal with gender issues. But whether there is a marked feminist position in them is highly debatable if feminism is defined as an academic and critical activity. There are a host of feminist issues outside the category of academic feminism, which are impossible to be labelled as such, yet are necessarily womanist in address and tone. Rene Denfeld accuses feminism of alienating a generation of young women who do not recognise their needs and concerns in its policies. She says:
We are not apathetic but we are often resistant to organizing . . . we value our individuality. While linked through common concerns, notions of sisterhood seldom appeal to women of my generation. Efforts to unify all women under one ideology seem pointless. (263-64)

Atwood does have a clarity of vision regarding her version of feminism, and this vision often transcends the limits of traditional feminism. In a 2014 interview Atwood comments:

It is not the job of feminism to figure out “how men and women are different”—or to assert that they are not. Feminism should be about making sure men and women have the same opportunities, and combating the institutional sexism that sometimes keeps women from taking advantage of these opportunities. It may be interesting to debate whether women are hardwired to pick up socks (I’m skeptical), but the real task of feminism is to make sure we are not forced to pick them up. The confusion comes because a lot of the rhetoric of sex difference is aimed at convincing us we’re meant for sock duty. But the enemy of feminism is that rhetoric—not the difference itself. That is for science to figure out.
Post feminism is an all-inclusive platform capable of accommodating such extra-feminist discourses. Atwood's work perceptibly anticipates future movements within feminism and can be identified as intelligent narratives of post feminist discourse. Post feminism has to be understood as a continuation of the issues related to the feminist cause and at the same time resistance to the feminist myths and fallacies. Even though Atwood’s novels focus on women’s lives and the female viewpoint, to read them through a feminist-fundamentalist lens is to skew the import and implication they carry, leaving their depths unplumbed. Atwood’s novels scan a wide experiential range, reaching out from the personal and the autobiographical to embrace the larger spheres of Canadian national life and global and humanitarian concerns.

Atwood does believe in social equality of women and is aware that women are discriminated against. She is also aware of the pressing need to restore equality of the sexes and genders. But, as a writer, she is not a full-time activist or a committed social reformer and does not subscribe to many of the techniques and attitudes of the second-wave feminists. She is hesitant to regard herself as their champion and asserts that her “characters are not role models” nor does she “try to resolve the problems of the living [or] deal out the answers” (Waltzing Again 33).
A distinction ought to be established between the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as also between ‘function’ and ‘role’: sex is the given natural and gender is the social construct, whether it be man or woman or transgender. Function is the performance patterns characteristic of the female and male members of the human species and role is the society-ordained duties and responsibilities as also rights and privileges both genders have come to assume over time. Sex and function have to do with nature; gender and role with culture. Woman has to be discussed as both sexed woman and gendered woman, the natural woman and the social woman, within the context of feminism and outside it in the space of post feminism. The term post feminism will not represent any single monolithic definition; instead, it will be used eclectically to accommodate a wide variety of concerns and possibilities.

Atwood commented in an interview with Kaminski, "I've always wondered . . . do so many women think of themselves as menaced on all sides, and of their husbands as potential murderers?" (Waltzing Again 44). This points to an underlying paradox of Western culture which feminism and post feminism had to grapple with. Differences of a neutral nature have always been the starting point of frames of binary oppositions. In such binary oppositions one pole comes to be privileged over the other. This
paradigm is used to measure things and it is such tools which later solidify to become scholastic structures that define social life built on seemingly natural norms and orders. Hélène Cixous, for example, locates in the symbolic order of language a series of binary oppositions which privilege the masculine pole over the feminine. In *Laugh of the Medusa*, she passionately declares:

Wouldn’t the worst be, isn’t the worst, in truth, that women aren’t castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing. (355)

Again, in an interview with Elizabeth Meese Atwood has commented, “For a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals, women merely as examples of gender; perhaps it is time to take the capital W off woman” (Interview 1985). She does admit to having read and being influenced by Simone de Beauvoir’s iconic statement:
One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (249)

A similar sentiment is voiced when Eva Figes says that “Women have been largely man-made” (15).

To escape the binary structure within which it is, feminism tries to reject the tag of femininity and enter the domains of masculinity. It is a conscious rebellion and a fight. In the introduction to The Feminist Reader Belsey and Moore suggest: “Conceptualised as supplementary to the patriarchal symbolic, the feminine is seen both to exceed and to threaten patriarchy’ (14). Feminism is a reiteration of the binary state whereas post feminism is an expression of woman’s condition of being self-aware of her existence as an individual outside the binary.

Post feminism, according to Brooks, “is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference” (4). It is about a political shift in the conceptual and theoretical
agenda of feminism and represents “a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialistic frameworks.”(4) Feminism was intended to be a movement for liberation but it failed to become one of self-discovery and self-articulation. In typical feminist rhetoric Andrea Dworkin declares:

The feminist project is to end the male domination. In order to do this we will have to destroy the structure of culture as we know it, its art, its churches, its laws; its nuclear families based on father-right and the nation-states; all of the images, institutions, customs, and the habits which define women as worthless and invisible victims. (61-2)

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace a very obvious inscription of “tension, self-doubt, renunciation and, above all, rage against the society which confines them” in the psyche of the female writers. Dale Spender in *Man Made Language* points out that the binary oppositions are the “fundamental premises in an order based on the supremacy of one group over the other” (101). As K.K. Ruthven points out:
Language does not merely name male superiority: it produces it. The deceptive transparency of words, which simply appears to label a pre-existing reality, indicated to feminists “the crucial role of language in the construction of a world picture which legitimates the existing patriarchal order. (52)

What feminism sought was to destroy rather than deconstruct, much less to be creative. Dworkin passionately declared: “We intend to change [the world] so totally that someday the texts of masculinist writers will be anthropological curiosities” (9). But post feminism is a movement which attempts to create a new écriture féminine or to even go beyond the need of one by just de-gendering language by simply absenting the gender in it. If feminism is about being self-conscious in the matters of sex and gender and nature and culture respectively, post feminism is simply about being aware of the female experience which it envisions to be beyond both sex and gender. Whereas feminism raises the problem of ‘ex-gendering’ humanity, post feminism attempts to resolve the conflict by de-gendering and humanising femininity.
In order to achieve its proposed ends, feminism needed to be focussed on power which it actively seeks. Post feminism, on the other hand, neither seeks nor rejects power. Power, by definition, being a construct, post feminism does not restrict itself to its contours. The former aims at woman empowerment by instating woman at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy in place of man, which could result in creating a female-only space. The latter aims at self-actualisation and self-articulation independent of social constructs and constructions, navigating towards a female space, as a completion of the human experience. As Alice claims:

Perhaps the most persuasive message for popular postfeminism is that feminism has pushed women into wanting too much. Postfeminism is offered as an escape from the imposition of being ‘superwoman’ in order to fulfill a feminist image of success. (17)

Feminism by and large rejects the notions of the natural and biological functions of the female sex, perceiving, for instance, even the prospect of finding fulfilment, completion and satisfaction in such natural functions as pregnancy and mothering as patriarchal structures and gender impositions.
In her essay titled “French feminism’s écriture feminine” Kari Weil observes:

“Mother”, it should be stressed, is a role that de Beauvoir deliberately distanced herself from, both in her life (she never had children) and in her thought, believing that it was primarily because of their identification with the maternal function that women were confined to a domestic role and prohibited from transcending their bodies and nature to become fully human. (155)

Post feminism, however, shuns nothing and celebrates all female functions and the totality of female life by not reading patriarchy into them, and, by differentiating between functions and roles. Ann Snitow in A Gender Diary narrates an instance which expresses the confusion of this transitional phase:

In the early days of this wave of the women’s movement, I sat in a weekly consciousness raising group with my friend A. … A said she has felt, “Now I can be a woman; it’s no longer so humiliating. I can stop fantasizing that secretly I’m a man, as I used to, before I had children. Now I can value
what was once my shame.” Her answer amazed me. Sitting in the same meetings during those years, my thoughts were roughly the reverse: “Now I don’t have to be a woman any more. I need never become a mother. Being a woman has always been humiliating, but I used to assume there was no exit. Now the very idea ‘woman’ is up for grabs. ‘Woman’ is my slave name; feminism will give me freedom to seek some other identity altogether. (9)

Feminism is an activism, a socio-political and socio-cultural reaction, whereas post feminism is an experience which could be individual and/or social or both and also the celebration of a condition. Feminism’s problem is with the patriarchal model of woman. For Kari Weil, the feminist:

Masculinity and femininity both derive their meanings, and more importantly, their values, in opposition to each other, but that opposition is produced through a repression of particular qualities on one side and their projection onto the other. Hence the understanding of masculinity as powerful, reasonable, and essentially of the mind is derived from the definition of femininity as vulnerable, emotional, and
essentially of the body. She is the negative of what he wants to be. The purpose of examining such oppositions is not only to reveal the symbolic denigration of “the feminine”. It is also to reveal the illusions on which the oppositions themselves, and the hierarchies they establish, are constructed: hierarchies of mind over body, reason over emotion, power over vulnerability. (154)

Feminism equates woman with ‘un-man’, man minus something, the incomplete man, man without the phallus, in what could be called the phallocentric fallacy of feminism. Women are reduced to ‘the sex’, ‘the other’ of man who is the centre of the universe. To cite the famous statement of Simone de Beauvoir: “For him she is sex . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man, and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (24)” Jane Gallop further elaborates on this unfair asymmetry:

In question here is some “whole” which is made up of two parts, like humanity is divided into two sexes. The phallus is both the (dis)proportion between the sexes, and the
(dis)proportion of any sexed being by virtue of being sexed(having parts, being partial) and human totality. So the man is “castrated” by not being total, just as the woman is “castrated” by not being a man. Whatever relation of lack the man feels, lack of wholeness, lack in/of being, is projected on to the woman’s lack of the phallus, lack of maleness. Woman is then the figuration of phallic “lack”; she is a hole. By these mean and extreme phallic proportions, the whole is to man as man is to the hole.( 22)

For feminists, the opposition between mind and body has also been correlated with an opposition between male and female, with the female regarded as ensnared in her bodily existence in a way that makes attainment of rationality questionable.

In feminism there is a male orientation whereas in post feminism there is only woman’s self-awareness. Post feminism attempts to define a new model of possible relations between man and woman, without submission of either one to the other.
Feminism is conscious of the commodification of the female body and is obsessed with the idea of the patriarchal mortification of the female body. It observes that man has been (mis)using it as an object of male gaze but post feminism happily accepts the corporeality of the body, dismisses its commodification and resurrects the mortified body. Feminism uses the female body to annihilate all that is feminine whereas post feminism uses it to rediscover and redeem it. For feminism body is the source and site of inferiority whereas in post feminism body makes woman neither inferior nor superior since there are no opposites to compare, contrast or equate, but only the singular, the wholesome female experience, the experience of being a woman biologically and in all its other attendant dimensions and the experience of living womanness.

Feminism brands woman as the perpetual victim. Post feminism examines the possibility and prospect of making woman the subject, and is the dynamic, non-essentialist, female experience ready to accommodate localised female experiences. Any attempt at universalizing femininity by defining it would only essentialise it further since femaleness can only be actualised and experienced across culturally divergent contexts by different female individual entities. Sophia Phoca observes:
Feminism has assumed that being female unites all women without taking into account differences between women, such as racial and class differences by universalising sexual difference, all other cultural differences are erased. Haraway destabilises the binary notion of femininity or masculinity by stating that there is no such thing as ‘being’ female or male. Gender categories are in fact highly complex notions constructed by scientific discourses and other social practices which are now being challenged. (63-64)

As an activism, feminism fell victim to certain critical fallacies central to its conception and practice. It conceived female identity or femininity as an absence of masculinity rather than a presence of the woman. On the feminist platform woman tried to reject femininity and attempted to embrace masculinity in its stead, thus unwittingly endorsing and reinforcing the male/female binary.

Feminists by and large rejected the female body in the name of rejecting femininity and tried to model it on lines of the male body. She was made to look upon herself as the ‘castrated man’ and in brief tried to prove
to man that woman, too, could become man. In doing this she failed to
perceive the true task of feminism, namely, of reassuring herself that it is
possible to be woman and live womaness with equal dignity. It is post
feminism’s task to transform the war of the genders into a co-existence of
sexes based on identical selfhood experiences and equal prospects of self-
actualisation.

There are various angles from which post feminism has been
perceived and discussed. Pollock holds that “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 post feminist stance is not preoccupied with debates
on such matters as involve the sexes and genders; instead, it studies woman
as a human being, without having to compare, contrast or equate her with
‘the standard sex’ or ‘the standard gender’. It examines the individual and
social experience of women and studies the individuation of the female self.

The turn of the new millennium also was a watershed moment for
the feminist movement. It provided the clearest signal of the much-debated
subsidence of the second wave of feminism and subsequent rise of the third.
Reference first began being made to the third wave in the mid-1980s, with the term frequently conflated with another new label: ‘postfeminism.’ Elizabeth Wright highlights the different precepts of these apparently synonymous concepts. Seen positively, post feminism is “continuously in process, transforming and changing itself,” (2) and should be considered as a critical advance on earlier feminist discourses. Alternatively, post feminism can be viewed as anti-feminist, a view that “assumes that feminism is being sabotaged by the ‘post,’ which indicates that feminism can now be dispensed with, at least in the form of making a special plea for the subjectivity of the feminine subject.” (3)

Post feminism, however, creates a space for the desires and contradictions of the individual, regardless of how those choices fit into the feminist manifesto. Ann Braithwaite, however, mediates between these two positions, saying: “postfeminism does not simply privilege the personal or individual over the political or specific types of activism, but rather entails a range of explorations of the possibilities connecting those two feminist trends.” (335-44)
Whilst feminism sought to create female-only spaces and remains exclusivist in nature, what post feminism seeks is to create female spaces. If feminism understood power as male power, and male power defined as power over women, post feminist positions prefer to consider power as female power too. By releasing themselves from the sphere of male influence, expectation and judgement, women could freely express and live their femininity and female identity. This would make amends to the feminist reactivist separatism and its tendency to encourage resentment between the sexes and dispenses with the need of focussing one’s energy on patriarchal discourses within feminist discourses being embedded within. The feminist mistake of misappropriating functions as roles in its urgency to resist the culture-imposed roles on women and the abjection of nature-specific functions could also be remedied.

The post feminist position could also be understood in terms of what could be perceived as feminist-existentialist combine. Feminism perceives, reviews, analyses, and establishes equal social, economic and political rights for women. Existentialism holds that the starting point of philosophical thought and inquiry ought to be the individual and the individual’s experiences. Moral studies and scientific studies or any kind of organised
thought alone would not suffice to gauge human experience. All phenomena should be studied in relation to individual experience, on the principle of individual authenticity. The postfeminist position combines the two postulations and examines the experience of living as a female human being and with a female body, a body in relation to other bodies. It recognises the need for, and the value of, radical change but also recognises the mistake of self-deception and self-defeat that overcame feminism which limited women’s power of self-determination. It exposes, undermines and critiques socially imposed gender roles and cultural constructs in line with feminism, yet critiques the feminist aversion to the intrinsic freedom of the individual woman, like the freedom to discharge the function of mothering, the freedom to live the feelings of the body and its extensions—mind and intelligence — and the freedom and need of female individuation. Atwood’s heroines can be seen as existential-feminist-heroines, or better still, post feminist heroines, in the sense that they are female human beings, who make considered choices regarding their ways of life, and suffer the anxiety associated with that freedom, isolation or nonconformity, and yet remain free. Suffering is common for the female characters in Atwood’s poems, although they are never passive victims. Atwood remarked to Judy Klemesrud that her works concern “modern woman’s anguish at finding
herself isolated and exploited (although also exploiting) by the imposition of a sex role power structure.” She also added that her suffering characters come from real life: “My women suffer because most of the women I talk to seem to have suffered.” The attempt in this thesis is to study what her female characters are ‘doing’ with their ‘can do’ bodies, how far they ‘do’ them and how they both succeed and fail.

The founding tenet of feminism is that society is patriarchal and that this patriarchal society is capitalist in character. The commodity in this capitalist society is woman. Woman, as commodity, exists as body; the buyer being man. This is the rationale behind the course of feminist thought where the body is the surface of exploitation; a concept very crucial to feminist theory and praxis. Woman exists as body but it is not just the biological body. She is the gendered body and this body is inert, manufactured, and modelled by man for man. This is not the female self but the ‘other’ of the self, the object of the subject that is man. It is the surface on which man inscribes his models of beauty and need. Man has claimed that he is the unified, self-controlled center of the universe, and that the rest of the world, which he defines as the Other, has meaning only in relation to him, as, in the words of Elaine Marks “man/father, possessor of the
phallus’(836). Atwood revisits the patriarchally embodied woman, resists the embodiment process, and liberates the bodies from the highly intricate and subtle oppressive web of discursive practices that freeze the female self, and elicits the female selfhood in those natural bodies, allowing woman to live femininity in her own terms.

Unlike other women who are normally unconscious of this tacit embodiment because they are the ‘normal’ women, Atwood’s women characters are conscious of it being body-aware and (female-) self-conscious. Women, historically limited to being sexual objects, have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they can do this, and if they can speak about it in the new languages it calls for, a site of difference will be established from which phallocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory but also in practice. Atwood’s writing is an attempt in this direction, an endeavour to provide a platform for self-expression devoid of gender consciousness.

Embodiment, rather than being the cultural process that reduces woman to body, becomes the post feminist practice of using the female body to live femininity, to define woman from the female perspective, to construct a new female subjectivity outgrowing the male/female and
sex/gender binaries. In feminism the female body is the site of woman’s alienation and de-humanisation, and to be gendered means to feel, and to be made conscious of, woman as the inferior other. The female body exists for man to see. How it should look, what its identity is, all these will be prescribed by man. Man tutors woman, his pliant agent, and woman, in turn, tutors other women. Thus the female body becomes an object of reference. Judith Butler says, “Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is inassociable from relations is from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment” (Performative 232).

Femininity is constructed through a process of embodiment. The notion of embodiment refers to the ways in which societal rules and discourses are internalized and played out in different ways. In the purview of feminist discourse, embodiment happens the Foucauldian way through the invisible circulation of power, female bodies are made into docile bodies.
Foucault saw subjectification as a dual process, that operated through external regulation, as well as internally, as a process through which individuals make themselves subjects. He conceptualizes the body not as a fixed entity, but as a heterogeneous multiplicity because it is a “volume in perpetual disintegration” (Nietzsche, Genealogy, History 148). While the formation of subjectivity is an ongoing process, it is not something that the individual invents, but is connected to patterns found in the culture, society or social settings that are so normalised as to be taken for granted. Subjectivity is part of a scheme of relationships of power that are changeable, reversible, unstable and capable of modification, and is therefore not given once and for all. Foucault states that power relations have an immediate hold upon [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Discipline and Punish 25). It is constantly reiterated. This reiteration constructs the body; thus making the body a citation. The materiality of the reiteration is body and the living the body is gender. The individual birth of the biological female sexed body is thus transformed into the social birth of the gendered ‘other’ body.
Body as a social, gendered, product and as a generic group, is sex-cited body; body as female individuation is re-cited. Female bodies are no more the old bodies within the spaces of patriarchy but are new bodies creating their own new spaces outside of patriarchal domains. Sex is retained while gender is rejected. Abject bodies acquire 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. Unsightly for male gaze, they are never more the cited bodies or sites of patriarchal oppression. They are bodies with female selves, individuations of the female self. Women become people with female sex and they are sexed people called women alongside sexed people called men, rather than gendered objects; they are bodies that matter.

So far, for woman, ‘to be’ meant ‘to be seen’, to be seen meant to be gendered, and to be gendered meant to be the object; that is why the object was abjected. In post feminism ‘to be’ means to live, to live means to just be of the female sex, to be able to be uncited. Atwood’s female characters labour to do this. Later, when such women are found to conform to conventions, it could be argued that they are willingly doing it in order to observe and relish the consequences, now that they are no more the subdued
selves that they had been, in an act of willing nostalgic submission. Language does not mean verbal language alone. It refers to any kind of discursive practice which exists and performs visibly or invisibly within society and subtly affects individuals. Through such language/s, power, authority and norms circulate from everywhere to everywhere in very subtle ways, as Foucault observes in his discussions on power. Normative body consciousness is circulated, generating the experience of gender in individuals and thereby natural bodies are transformed into social bodies. The key feature of disciplinary power is that it is exercised directly on the body. Disciplinary practices subject bodily activities to a process of constant surveillance and examination that enables a continuous and pervasive control of individual conduct. A section of feminists have assumed that the oppression of women can be explained on the basis of the patriarchal social structures which secure the power of men over women. Foucault's work on power has been used by some feminists to develop a more complex analysis of the relations between gender and power which avoids the assumption that the oppression of women is the direct result of man’s possession of power. On the basis of Foucault's understanding of power as exercised rather than possessed, as circulating throughout the social body rather than emanating from the top and proceeding downward, and as productive rather than
repressive, post feminists have sought to challenge accounts of gender
relations which emphasize domination and victimization so as to move
towards a more textured understanding of the role of power in women's
lives. Foucault’s redefinition of power has made a significant and varied
contribution to this project. Foucault's notion that power is constitutive of
that upon which it acts has enabled post feminists to explore the often
complicated ways in which women's experiences, self-understandings,
comportment and capacities are constructed in, and by, the power relations
which they are seeking to transform. In pursuing this project, post feminist
scholars have drawn on Foucault's analysis of the productive dimension of
disciplinary power which is exercised outside of the narrowly defined
political realm in order to examine the workings of power in women's
everyday lives and have also found Foucault’s contention that the body is
the principal site of power in modern society useful in their explorations of
the social control of women through their bodies and sexuality. Foucault’s
perception of power as productive rather than oppressive is felt to make
more sense in the context of the post feminist productive perception of the
fundamental difference between functions and roles and the need to retain
both in a society, rather than in support of the feminist view of a social
power that can only oppress and annihilate individual female selves.
Even apparently simple aspects of daily life like food and eating are connected to power in that they are decidedly related to body consciousness. Food and eating have to do with the body; they can make and can unmake the body. In an interview in 1988, Atwood said: “Eating is our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk.” (Conversations 53) Atwood’s female characters are obsessed with this process; they are experiments in how, and in what various ways, their subjectivities are both effaced and formed on body-terms, how they become conscious of their existence as social constructs, how they fashion their body-selves through their attempts at abjecting and redeeming of their bodies. These characters also show how their fresh experience of female selfhood is outside the spaces of dualistic essentialisations and how their hitherto abject bodies have the potential to become alternative bodies, sexed but gender-neutral bodies, and normal bodies. Manufacturing, imposing and internalising the female body as a patriarchal object is sex-citation. Atwood’s female ‘bodies’ are engaged in undoing this sex-citation and becoming uncited bodies. Food and eating thus become post feminist tools in actualising the possibility of this new female selfhood. Atwood’s female characters are abject bodies transforming themselves into real bodies which are bodies that
have overcome abjection and have attained liberation, and then conform to the female roles in the society, not as slaves, but in actualisation of their selfhood. Emma Parker also argues that in Atwood’s novels, “eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as a means of examining the relationship between women and men” (349).

Much of the focus of feminism is on two fundamentals, sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological female entity or configuration and gender refers to the social feminine identity. Feminist and post feminist readings analyse the literary and other representations of these two elements using theoretical tools. These analyses are to be done either by confirming to the essentialist conceptions and perceptions of sex and gender or by overturning the same.

Sex will often be regarded as a biological construction of nature in the form of the female body, and gender a social construct. The natural ‘thisness’ of the female body, the wholesome experience called ‘woman ness’, gave way to imposed identities of womanhood. In both cases, the real female self lies inarticulate. In the first case it is merely a biological phenomenon and in the second it is only a pseudo-self. Post feminist critical analysis has made attempts to focus on the in-between or the abject which
defines the female subjectivity and selfhood. This thesis will identify and analyse the behavioural patterns of female and male characters in the selected works of Margaret Atwood based on the abject bodies they possess.

Literature represents arbitrary features as though they were universal, which, in broad terms, is essentialism. Such literary representations are apt to promote and reinforce false essentialist woman-models. The argument in the thesis is built on the conviction that literary criticism is not intended to enforce a wholesome change in the nature of society through feminist readings, but only engages with studying how the process works and how mere sexual difference comes to be literarily (mis)represented as troublesome gender inequality, especially in terms of body and how the woman born becomes woman become within the patriarchal normative outlook.

As these theorisations reveal, patriarchy works in two ways—the first one by men setting standards for women; and the second one by men-taught women conforming to them and setting new ones on those very same models. While feminism is all about recognising and articulating this, post feminist approaches will be also about an inquiry into the possibility of the
creation of a female selfhood above and beyond pure feminism—an inclusive post feminist identity in lieu of an exclusivist feminist pseudo-identity; the ‘woman-made-woman’ in lieu of the ‘man-made-woman’.

The process of identity formation has been discussed by Jacques Lacan. Going by the Lacanian models, the girl child’s identification with its mirror image does two things. It makes her conscious of her loss (or series of losses, consequent to her separation from her mother-body), and also obscures this sense of loss by enabling her to recognise and embrace what she perceives as a totality of a coherent body, by enabling her to project a morphe (shape) onto a surface, which is part of the psychic and phantasmatic elaboration, centered and contained within her own bodily contours. The implication of this projection and elaboration is that one’s sense of one’s own body, one’s sense of physicality/corporeality, is achieved not just through differentiating from another body. It is articulated also through self-division or self-estrangement. This act creates an identity which is more a sense of what one is not than that of what one is. A plethora of things are subsumed within this identity along with many things which were there but which had been left out in the process of the totalising illusory body-image-formation. These ‘lost’ things, paradoxically
enough, make possible the coherent body-image, for it marks the boundary between what is and what is not. Only one side of this boundary is reinforced, namely, the Symbolic side; the other side is the ‘abject’ side. The boundary is very fragile and constantly unstable. Paradoxically enough, it is this instability that determines the stability of the body. Female identity, therefore, rests and relies on the abject. This unknown, unnamable domain is intriguing, horrifying, threatening and finds bodily expression in flesh, blood, mucus, spit and other body fluids. Thus the boundary between the body and the non-body is the region of the corporeal refusal of corporeality. Post feminism reuses this region to emphasise female corporeality. Abjection is the region of feminist rejects. Post feminists recognise the abject, at the same time, reclaim the feminist rejects by reengaging its products.

The question of identity has always been central to human consciousness and conscious enquiry. The notion of identity necessarily involves the question ‘Who am I?’ The problem would fail to yield even a polemical solution, for, the imagined answer to the question would necessarily address ‘who I am not’, thus evading the issue as such. If the answer is ‘I am a woman,’ it entails the adjunct statement ‘I am not a man’
too, operating on the system of binary equations. The apparent answer is a mere formula that generates a series of differences which we call sexual differences, for all of us are men or women or in other words, exclusions and inclusions of both. The answer, instead of defining the completeness of something, merely points to the potential incompletenesses. But the point is whether we are conscious of the platform on which we frame this formula; whether we are situating ourselves on the platform of sexual difference or of gender difference. Whatever the case may be, it is quite clear and unambiguous that the difference operates fundamentally on the level of the body, on corporeality, on the material content of difference.

In fact, sex-identity and gender-identity are two sides of the same coin. It might be said that the social experience of sex is gender. However, an understanding of how this experience comes to be the politics of experience, or, put more simply, gender politics, is necessary to understand femininity. Paradoxical though it may seem, an experience itself might be real, but what is experienced need not be ‘the real’. The realness of the experience and the experience of reality are altogether two different things. There is, on the one side, the individual woman’s experience of female sexuality and, on the other, femininity itself. The former is at the gross level
and the latter is more of an idea than a substantive entity. In post feminist position, there is no universal femininity. A variety of individual experiences of femininity constitutes and constructs the concept of femininity. This perspective suffices to underscore the importance of the body in discussions of femininity since it is the body that individuates femaleness.

The progression of feminist thought, and its evolution and culmination in the contemporary post feminist condition as reflected in Margaret Atwood’s works, is another focal point of the present thesis.

Though she started her writing career in the 1960s, an era of heightened feminist activism, by virtue of her viewpoints, one could assert that Atwood belongs to the post feminist school. Many of her novels and short stories can be read as critiques of second-wave feminism which began to flounder in its course. It can then be seen that Margaret Atwood is at ease more with liberal feminism.

Attempts have been made, and continue to be made, to categorise Atwood as a feminist. But the writer has always refused to be drawn into the group, asserting firmly that her writing is ‘protofeminist’. In an interview in
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The *Independent in 2014 November 02*, Atwood says:

Feminism is a big term. If we are asking 'Are women human beings?' we don't need to vote on that. But where do we go from there? Are women better than men? No. Are they different? Yes. How are they different? We're still trying to figure that out.

From the beginning, Atwood put women’s experiences at the centre of her fiction. Long before the media started discussing eating disorders, Atwood portrayed a protagonist who responds to the sexual dilemmas of young womanhood by becoming unable to eat. She brought out her first novel *The Edible Woman* in 1969, a time when the imagination of women all over the world was fired by de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. From *The Edible Woman*, discussed as a feminist novel, Atwood moves on to mature as a ‘womanist’ by the time she comes to *Lady Oracle*. Her attempt, by and large, is to demystify the female body. In many of her novels, the protagonists use their body to protest and react against the social pressures and repercussions. A post feminist close-reading of the bodies and images of women in Atwood’s novels from various dimensions will help to generate versions of femininity which might, in turn, help redefine the experience of femininity in terms of its physicality.
It is essential that the materiality of gender be highlighted. Gender and the experience of gender has to be done in terms of the body, since individual and group relationships and exchanges among human beings, whether of the same or opposite sex or gender, are effected at the physical level—by seeing one another as bodies—by equating individuals with their bodies.

Femininity and its experience have to be discussed in terms of the female body, at once a sexual entity and a gender icon. Formerly, woman was seen in terms of the body, but then it was as a sex-object—an appropriation of the female sexuality rather than the gender content. Sometimes the physicality was overlooked so as to divest womanhood of its sexuality and invest it with respectability, which again is an attempt to discover the gender content of woman in comparison with that of man. But it was still silent on the body. It was as though for woman physicality and respectability wouldn’t go together. As a result, femininity came to be defined in abstract terms as a sensibility or a consciousness, as a body-less ‘this-ness.’ Atwood examines how women have used their bodies to define and express themselves. She also enquires how the sexual subjugation of the female body by the dominant male body results in breeding a sense of inferiority in the female psyche. The body is a cultural construct—this
'cultural body' corporealis femininity and determines and defines it in various ways. Her novels abound in textual representations of such bodies and their corresponding femininities. Femininity in the conventional cultural context performs as the patriarchally defined body, not as the female body. As Berger observes: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves” (47).

In considering the female self against the female body, there are two possibilities: body determining self and self inscribing itself on the body. Down the ages, the female body has determined the female self. The female body has been a site of patriarchal oppression where patriarchy, through the female body, has determined the female self. The female body and, through it, the female self were owned by the male. It is this that feminists were up against and in the process they discarded the female body.

In post feminism, the second possibility is envisioned. The female self getting inscribed on the female body. The body ceases to determine the self, and the self expresses itself through the reinvented body. Woman will come to own both her body and her self and only through this post feminist act will feminism actualize the goal of complete womanhood it set out to reach.
After regaining the ownership of her own body, the female self is free to celebrate it as her own and express her needs and her likes through it. Functions and roles which are identical with the ones she did earlier may be realised and performed. She will then choose to be wife, mother, daughter, homemaker, or career woman. This does not imply that the society will automatically recognize the redemption of woman because society has to do with classes and genres, not individuals. It may still regard the woman as a docile daughter or a meek wife or an oppressed mother, but she, in her personal self, knows that she has discovered herself and is, after that, performing herself. The societal gaze in the form of male gaze will still continue to be there, but it will no more be the imprisoning gaze that determines and oppresses.

Again, Atwood has averred that her woman characters are not heroines or role models. Heroines are those who seek to change society; role models are those who exist for the society to observe and emulate. The latter reinforces the domination of society as the other and its gaze, confining her to the binary which needs to be transcended. According to Reingard Nischik, “Atwood often emphasizes that it is only by breaking down fixed, binary power structures that mutual dependence can be overcome and an open, trusting relationship be built” (33). Nancy Chodorow states that it is crucial:
to recognize that the ideologies of difference, which define us as women and as men, as well as inequality itself, are produced, socially, psychologically, and culturally, by people living in and creating their social, psychological, and cultural worlds . . . To speak of difference as a final, irreducible concept and to focus on gender differences as central is to reify them and to deny the reality of those processes which create the meaning and significance of gender. (16)

The kind of freedom feminists sought was ‘freedom from’. It backfired by forcing her to seek to be ‘free from’ her own self, distancing her from herself. It became a negative freedom, a freedom built on an absence. Post feminism, on the contrary, seeks and embraces the freedom of presence. The ‘freedom from’ gives way to ‘freedom to’. The feminists ironically achieved what they mistakenly sought — to shun femininity to embrace masculinity. But post feminism seeks to find woman’s self, the speaking woman subject. Female space is not an exclusivist space for heroines and role models; it is a natural space for people called women. It is this female space that post feminism seeks to create.