Chapter 4

Beluga Whales and Cake Women: Atwood’s Women Characters

If women do not have the right to choose what happens to our bodies we risk relinquishing rights in all other areas of our lives.

Bell Hooks (Feminist Theory from Margin to Center 28)

In Atwood’s novels, there is a decisive transition from the feminist stance to the post feminist in terms of the body, centered around the abject. The women characters of her novels abject their body and their identity to reinvent their selves and in the process, their own bodies.

For the purpose of redefining femaleness in corporeal terms, Atwood’s women characters could be analysed in terms of the body. As bodies, they refuse to be taken as artifacts created and curated by man in an androcentric world for his gaze. They are different from conventional
female bodies in the sense that the conventional bodies are embodied normative femininity; gendered, essentialised, normalised, and docile social bodies which are invisible. Atwood’s women have visible bodies and are corporeal in a variety of ways and in very certain terms. The feminist contention always has been that femininity, created by men and male-centered society, is a myth and a pseudo concept. As Sarah Gamble says “while femaleness is a consequence of biology, femininity originates from within societal structures. Femininity is thus a set of rules governing female behavior and appearance, the ultimate aim of which is to make women conform to a male ideal of sexual attractiveness” (230). Accordingly, woman, as ‘embodied femininity,’ would only be, and has thus far only been, an embodiment of nothingness. But Atwood’s women are not embodiments of nothingness; they are embodiments of humanness. They are bodies with selfhoods and subjectivities and are conscious of their physicality, though yet to achieve liberation and freedom. There are characters who morphe into new bodies through an internal metamorphosis but mostly, they are women who inhabit their bodies and experiment with them in the process of self-actualisation.
Initially they are all aware of their predicament, the characterisitic women’s victimisation consequent to gender discrimination, and they attempt to resist their state undertaking it as the trouble of engendering embodiment. Their resistance then becomes expressed in rebellion in terms of experiments on their own bodies where they come to believe that they have achieved the status of a subject. Later on they become aware that this was a deceitful complacency, a suicidal trap, but do not go back on their mission but proceed to identify and rectify their mistakes. They sit back, take stock and come to terms with themselves and formulate new ideas of their own selves vis-à-vis their sexuality. They terminate their rebellion having come to the understanding that it had mischievously tricked them into recklessness and led them astray. They become preoccupied more with themselves, their selves in terms of their bodies and degendering the bodies, than with patriarchy. All these stages are perceptible in varying degrees in all the characters in her novels.

Their performances are experimental in character and these performative experiments are in fact fresh interfaces with femininity which could be set within the larger frameworks of post feminism. They experiment with their bodies, adjust and re-adjust their bodies continually,
and de-fashion the fashioned bodies they now have in ever so many ways. Some of them try to look differently from how they used to be earlier. They experiment with their bodies by resisting and rejecting roles and, along with them, functions, and, at times, by performing functions instead of enacting roles. Continuing to do the same tasks but by reinventing them as functions in place of roles, they become masters of circumstances instead of being victims of it. They experiment with food and eating habits and wilfully court diseases and abnormalities. Sometimes they resist and reject biological functions, only to accept them later. Some of them distort their bodies but beautify them at a later stage.

Atwood’s characters are entangled with a range of issues that concern women, of which many had been taken up from the feminist point of view and treated on their own well-structured lines for quite a long time now. There is no hard and fast rule demanding that anything that concerns women should be discussed within the framework of feminism alone, just as feminism need not conform to a rigid monolithic homogeneous model for ever. To be dynamic, every idea has to be self-criticised, adaptable, and constantly reinventing itself. Elements that concern women and women’s life can be brought forth by examining Atwood’s portrayal of women
characters, studying and analysing their personalities, observing and interpreting their behavioural patterns and performative experimentations and interpreting their degrees of success or failure on lines very different from traditional orthodox feminism and under the umbrella-term of post feminism. All actions a woman performs do not, as a rule, emanate from imposed roles, as feminism was wont to believe. It is a false perception that makes functions read like roles and vice versa. Post feminism involves a shift of perspectives and a revision of attitudes and if this shift lends it an extra-feminist character, it is simply because it does not subscribe to the canon of institutionalised orthodox feminism. In the words of Fien Adriaens:

Post feminism is a new form of empowerment and independence, individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour, and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered fundamental for this contemporary feminism. It is a new, critical way of understanding the changed relations between feminism, popular culture and femininity. (n. pag.)
Atwood’s female characters handle these womanist issues in what can certainly be termed post feminist ways and in keeping with the post feminist praxis. Struggles with society, fiancée and food are issues which come up in Atwood’s work. Struggle with society involves abjection of the products of society, marriage being one. Atwood does not offer alternative solutions for women as a group or class, nor do her heroines intend to subvert the prevailing social order. Instead, they opt for a mature non-fatalistic acceptance and experience of femininity. There are characters who seem to adhere to what could be regarded as gender stereotypes crafted by patriarchy. But their attitudes and approaches are administered by circumstances, and not by male-inscribed ideologies, and give them the impetus to conduct themselves through seemingly weird experiences like eating experiments. There are also characters who openly defy the impositions of gender stereotypes. Sometimes the same character is seen to display both these traits and sometimes they fumble and fail and return to the stereotypes, and there are instances they succeed and yet afterwards perform the female roles without identifying with the gender stereotypes. It is not these attempts or their successes that make them post feminist, but the fresh sensibility that makes their action different. What this thesis proposes
is an explication of the pivotal points in the passage of these women from victimhood to self-actualisation.

Experiments with the female body, vis-a-vis food and eating, are, like religion and art, purificatory engagements. They are cathartic attempts to redeem a lost subjectivity in the immediately experienceable and tangible corporeal terms. The abject provides for an in-between space where something thrown away, a refuse, could be recycled to reconstruct oneself. It is a space of simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction. In the post feminist perspective, the abject must be understood as a space of écriture féminine that exists beyond the binaries, where a rework of the gender paradigms is in the process, not in association with the regnant patriarchal ideologies, but totally removed from them.

Atwood’s female characters explore the space of the abject where boundaries and liminal spaces break down—a liminal space beyond the spatialities of the symbolic order. It cannot even be called the transcendent space for there is nothing here to transcend. It could be termed the space of the sublime, in Kristevan terms. Kristeva believes that the best of literature produced by masters like Dostoevsky, Proust, Artaud, Céline and Kafka explores the place of the abject, a place where boundaries begin to break
down, where we are confronted with an archaic space before linguistic binaries such as self/other or subject/object set in. The transcendent or the sublime is, in reality, an attempt to cover up the breakdowns and subsequent reassertion of boundaries associated with the abject. Literature is the privileged space for both the sublime and the abject:

On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject. (*POH 207*)

Atwood’s women and their experiments with their bodies become experiments with the abject, culminating in the sublimation of the abject. It is the space where previous notions of identities, and the identities modelled on them, collapse and a new female world is created where fresh female identities are naturally born. It is the realm where fantasy is brought down to Lacanian reality.
In an interview given to *The Independent* in 2014 Atwood commented: "*The Edible Woman* came out just at that time when the movement was rolling out. Those who had heard of it reviewed the book as feminist . . . but my novel was not informed by it.” It narrates the story of Marian MacAlpin, a determinedly ordinary young woman working in Seymour Surveys, a market research company. She is in love with Peter Wollander and leads an uneventful life. Her roommate Ainsley is an avowed feminist who often expresses displeasure at Marian’s complacency towards life. In contrast to Ainsley is Clara Bates, Marian’s college friend, who leads a happy married life with her husband Joe and their three little children. Life goes on smoothly for Marian until Peter proposes to her. On proposal, a part of her longs for the security that marriage is expected to offer, but deep down an alarm sets off. This disturbance manifests itself quite strangely in her, it robs her of her appetite. What we see here is a subversion of the Cartesian body/mind split, for this psychosomatic reaction very effectively projects the self as a unified body-mind entity. Starting with meat and eggs, she progressively develops an inability to eat food of any sort. Some inexplicable fear disturbs her inner self, which is akin to the existential angst of woman when the female entity is fated to come in contact with, and share, a human space with the male. It sabotages her
careful plans, stable routines and even her digestion. Marriage, she soon
discovers, is something she literally cannot stomach. She begins to feel that
marriage is a move through which Peter is trying to monopolize, regulate
and consume her, thus reducing her to a mere puppet or, in terms of a much
more vivid imagery employed in the novel, to a consumable food. Viewing
it from the feminist angle, the image unambiguously articulates a case of
masculinity all set to consume femininity, causing the latter to cease to be
altogether. This position reinforces the central idea in Atwood’s *Power
Politics*: “You refuse to own yourself, you permit others to do it for you”
(30). The more Marian fulfils the expectation of others, the more she is
‘normalized,’ the more she feels engulfed. Finally, at the end of a long
stormy phase of self-management, Marian bakes a cake in the shape of a
woman and offers it to Peter as a resolution of her self-annihilating conflict.
When, however, Peter refuses to eat it, in a very suggestive act, she eats it
herself with relish. The refusal of Peter to eat it could indicate that the male
will not, and need not, participate in the woman’s search of her self; for her
it is more or less a cappella. The act is certainly cathartic to herself: with
this redemptive act of consumption of the cake-woman, she regains her lost
appetite, inner peace and self-confidence. The cake-woman is her own
image—that part of her self which had to be, and had been abjected for a
very long time. Since it is the woman who abjected elements of her self, only woman can, and need, consume the abject and obliterate the process of abjection itself. With the highly suggestive act of cake consumption, the male and the abject both become extinct, and woman is liberated from the elements that oppressed her. She is now free to do what she likes to, and is naturally meant to, do. The solution that Marian arrives at restores her to her self, and liberates her from patriarchal shackles through a distinctly personal and private and interior activity.

Atwood explores gender stereotypes through characters who strictly adhere to them, such as Lucy or Peter, and those who defy their constraints, such as Ainsley or Duncan. The perspectival shifts involved are brought about by a deft treatment of language itself. The point of view of the narrative shifts from first to third person, accentuating Marian’s slow detachment from reality. At the conclusion, the first person narration returns, consistent with the character’s willingness to take control of her life again. In the background of such experiments in self-management, food and clothing become major symbols used by the author to explore themes and give the reader insight on each of the characters’ personalities, moods and motivations.
Marriage, as it occurs in *The Edible Woman*, is a motif that comes to mean a lot to women who experiment with femininity. Ainsley is a character who strongly believes that marriage is destructive for women and she has strong reasons for it. There are two undesirable elements in marriage: one is maleness and the other is the institution itself. Maleness is a compelling and incessant reminder of her inferior otherness in the binary relationship and the institution is a disturbing reminder of patriarchy’s colonisation of the female site and its discursive power politics through which it will annihilate her by reifying her and consuming her totally. Through marriage men are wont to monopolise women and reduce them to helpless invisible beings totally dependent on them. It is the prospect of this disgusting element that she notices in Joe on their return from a visit to the house of the pregnant Clara. Ainsley expresses her disgust at the way in which her husband Joe pampers her: “The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands . . . North American men hate watching the basic mother-child unit functioning naturally, it makes them feel not needed” (*TEW* 40).
Getting engaged reminds a woman of the prospect of taking on a new identity, part of her self welcomes it while the other part resists it. The former sees it as actualisation of femininity and the latter sees it as a threat to self-actualization. The conundrum, as it appears, is whether it is possible to actualize oneself and actualize femininity simultaneously. To actualize herself, should woman surrender her femininity to patriarchy and whether without this surrender and she will accomplish it are question that arise. She is also at a loss whether personal freedom and female freedom can co-exist as they do with men. In “The Dynamics of Marriage and Motherhood”, Beverly Jones outlines this conflict, which can have no individual or personal solutions. Jones finds that:

A relationship between a man and a woman is no more or less personal a relationship than . . . a master and his slave, a teacher and his student. Of course, there are personal, individual qualities to a particular relationship . . . but they are so overshadowed by the class nature of the relationship.  

(52)
The fiancé represents the social institution called marriage. Society as a panopticon puts a surveillance on woman by means of the institution. As Foucault argued:

The body is a field or surface on which the play of power, knowledge and resistance is worked out. Through social norms, self-surveillance and disciplinary practices, the body’s materiality and its desires and pleasures are produced and restricted to a narrow range of acceptable attitudes.

(Discipline and Punish 20)

Later in the novel, Clara, after giving birth to her third baby, talks to Marian very passionately about the experience of parturition and about her husband Joe. She is so very much in love with Joe and says that though he may not be Jesus Christ himself, he was at least “one of the minor saints” (131). Marian found that Clara’s attitude was “both complacent and embarrassing: it was sentimental, like the love stories in the back numbers of women’s magazines” (131). Quite surprisingly, Clara’s husband Joe seems to fully comprehend even her unexpressed sentiments. He tells Marian that Clara’s “feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her . . . so she allows her core to get taken over by
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her husband” (235-6). Marian’s problematic predicament vis-à-vis marriage is that she is unable to perceive the difference between the inherent and integral functions of the ‘female’ woman and the artificial and imposed roles of the ‘male-constructed’ feminine women. Marian can be seen as the typical independent, educated young woman of the 1970s, whose head and heart were befuddled by the raging fires of contemporary feminist movements.

At first, Marian’s attitude towards the institution of marriage is quite ambivalent. She is aware that marriage is the safest option available to a young woman of her age. When she informed her parents about her plan to marry Peter, they were quite relieved because they were beginning to think that college education had put foolhardy notions of independence into her head. Ironically, Peter tells her that what attracted him most about her was her “aura of independence and common sense” (TEW 61). He saw her “as the kind of girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life” (61). ‘The kind of girl’ refers to woman as a class in no uncertain terms, either as a class that is inferior to man or as a class that is striving to outgrow its inferiority and approximate the standard norms that men like. But, more than anything, it is a class which couldn’t be allowed to take over masculinity and which,
contrarily, is meant to be always taken over by masculinity. He likes the fact that he can always depend on her as one who would willingly depend on him, one who would be sensible enough to always appreciate her own dependency on him and his superior sensibility. As he puts it, “Most women are pretty scatterbrained but you’re such a sensible girl” (TEW 89). Obviously, what he likes about her is that she is a girl who is not a girl, clearly stating that the woman man likes to have is the ‘un-woman-ed’, ‘de-sexed’ woman, feminine, but never a female.

But later Marian begins to doubt whether she is that sensible after all. She is struck by the ambiguity of the world ‘sensible.’ It has a male meaning and a female meaning, as it were, and Peter was using it in the former sense and waiting to consume the latter along with her and her self. The ambiguity is about how far she might be successful in performing her biological role in accordance with the standard norms that have been set by the culturing society. It is unlikely that she will be able to perform up to those standards. Probably, she will not be able to reconcile the functions and the roles, any such attempt might only ostracise her. The question is whether she needs to conform to the kind of sensibility Peter has set for her or choose to be her own sensible self, sensible enough to recognise the trap
of sensibility into which she is being invited and is most welcome. She has her own doubts regarding motherhood and parenthood also, and is uncertain whether she would be good at it. Her view on marriage was indeed quite practical: “I’ve never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is. She’s against it on principle, and life isn’t run by principles but by adjustments” (TEW 102). At the same time she also feels she can manage her marriage more efficiently than Clara does hers: “So much of it is a matter of elementary mechanical detail, such as furniture and meals and keeping things in order. But Peter and I should be able to set up a very reasonable arrangement”. After some deliberation, she also convinces herself that Peter, who is attractive, successful and neat, is “an ideal choice” (TEW 102) for a husband. Betty Friedan argued that American women of the era were enslaved by domesticity and defined by their roles as mother and wife. Although she called the family a “comfortable concentration camp” (282), Friedan's goal was not to eliminate marriage. She merely wanted women to insist on more from life, for them to reach for fulfilment.

We see Marian as a typical woman in the beginning of the novel, one who has an ambivalent relationship with Peter. The relationship gets concretised when he proposes to her. At that instant, she readily agrees to
marry him and responds to the proposal in a manner which, is in conformity with the role of a traditional woman. A part of herself is pampered and flattered when Peter says that she is “such a sensible girl” (TEW 89). She willingly surrenders her identity before Peter when he asks her, “When do you want to get married?” (90) She can’t decide it herself despite her individuality and independence and replies, “I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you” (90). She is surprised at her willing surrender, which she expresses thus: “I was astounded at myself. I’d never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was, I really meant it” (90). She thus unambiguously endorses the phallocentric norms of femininity inscribed in her. In fact, it had started expressing itself for the past one month or so, during which she had already begun to allow him to choose things for her. Peter, on the contrary, could make up ‘their minds’, not just his mind. When they visited restaurants, the menu, with all its wide range, seemed to be deceptive to her. For she didn’t quite need the menu; Peter was there to choose for her. On one occasion, she finds herself apologising to him for her silliness and Peter magnanimously forgives her.

But Marian becomes a feminist in an instant when she is literally caught in the male gaze. When Peter proposes to her, “a tremendous
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electric blue flash very near, illuminated the inside of the car. As we stared at each other in that brief light, I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (TEW 83). She realises with a start that she is to be enslaved by Peter. This is the beginning of an inner metamorphosis that is awaiting her, and her alone. The mirror image is what woman has been since the dawn of organized society and the irking problem for the feminist. Woman has had to live a virtual image ‘neither outside nor inside the mirror.’ In a flash, the frightening prospect of her future ensnared in the role of a docile wife to an assertive husband is displayed before Marian. She suddenly realizes that her existence as subject woman has no independent identity outside the confining periphery of the male gaze.

Soon, much to her discomfort, Marian began to feel that Peter was encroaching into her personal space or, rather, her personal space was being lost in his overwhelming male space that engulfed it from all sides. Whenever there arose a situation involving making choices Peter would “make up their minds right away” (TEW 147), making it seem that she was already inside him; contained in him, owned by him, locked inside him and consumed by him. He was becoming increasingly overprotective and beginning to watch her more and more. Before proposing to her, he had not
even looked at her often, but “these days, however, he would focus his eyes on her face, concentrating on her as though if he looked hard enough he would be able to see through her flesh and her skull into the workings of her brain . . . It made her uneasy” (149). This penetrating look is the penetrating male gaze which freezes woman, reifying her into an object and commodifying her, but, more than that, unmakes her. The problem is, how to handle this, how to counter this self-annihilating encounter. The gaze is on her body and, affecting it first, it then penetrates the body, finding its way into her inner being and self, her very core. But she projects the problem onto food since there is a short circuit between body and food in that it is food that makes the body. Perhaps, she unconsciously feels that by managing food, she might manage her body. This is why she is not body-conscious now but food-conscious; her body-consciousness is transformed into food-consciousness.

It is in this context that abjection of food becomes a significant element. Marian soon starts having trouble with her food. One day she sat watching Peter as he skillfully sliced the steak on his plate. Watching him evoked in her the image of the real cow that had been butchered to make the steak and suddenly things changed for her: “She looked down at her own
half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar” (TEW 151). The food, all of a sudden, becomes a corporeal experience to her. The corporeality of the food that she is consuming, the image of the body that the food had previously been, and the thought of her own body, which this ‘body-food’ is about to compose, unsettles her. Her loss of appetite is not the result of her dislike of food or her not being able to be hungry. She is no more able to see food as food — she can only see it as body — food and body being superimposed. The body obsesses her totally, she wants the food and she feels her hunger. Both are inevitable aspects of her being, but she cannot feel and live the naturalness of both; she can only see it as combined body matter. She can’t retract her psyche into the old normality before her marriage, when there was no male encounter. So she can only abject her own food, which is the reason for Marian’s loss of appetite. She could not eat any meat: “Whatever it was that had been making these decisions, not her mind certainly, rejected anything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre” (TEW 152) and “The quiet fear, that came nearer to the surface now . . . was that this thing, this refusal of her mouth to eat, was malignant; that it would spread; that slowly the circle now dividing the non-
devourable from the devourable would become smaller and smaller, that the objects available to her would be excluded one by one” (153).

For Kristeva this process of establishing boundaries is itself a bodily process, manifest in bodily responses. Our sense of self is not established solely through a conceptual positioning in the symbolic order, but happens prior to that in a corporeal way. “Nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it . . . ‘I’ expel it . . . but since food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’ . . . I expel myself . . . within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (POH 3). This image clearly explains the idea of the abject. Just as the food is not an ‘other’ for her, the abject is not an ‘other’ for woman, either. Only a given other can be expelled, an artificially or forcefully othered part of the self can never be expelled from the self. Abjection will cause the self itself to be abjected, consciously or unconsciously. What she is drawing attention to here, with the abject, is the existence of that which lies in between herself and the other, which is both her and not her, and consequently that which reminds us of the constructedness and instability of the boundary which constitute a single subject. The recurrence of these bodily reactions in later life, serves to remind us of the fragility of those boundaries. By presenting us with what is neither clearly self nor the other, they both establish and
undermine the borders between them. With our reactions to the abject we are reminded of the articulated nature of the self as positioned in the symbolic, and concomitantly of a corporeal self which echoes the original interdependence of our body with the maternal body.

Marian’s loss of appetite has even more significance. It is actually a compelling, albeit involuntary, abnegation of her self; she has the only alternative of parting with her freedom. Her anorexia is an enactment of her revolt against patriarchy which demands her to be in a body category. Revolt distorts her body and unsettles her self, yet it is not this unsettling that she seeks because it is not a solution to her problem — the fear of enforced domesticity. Disruption of an existing system or an order without an alternative cannot be a solution at all. Her engagement to Peter stands for woman’s conformity to domesticity even though she later becomes sensitive to the politics of domesticity and revolts against it through her anorexia. The peculiar nature of her anorexia, of feeling afraid that she herself is being consumed, represents the critical juncture in the subversion of feminism. She projects her predicament into the cake she bakes to give Peter — the cake, and all that which it represents, her body and self, becomes the abject. Further in the story, she regains her identity in terms of
how she had looked earlier by beginning to eat again, which means that the very same appearance she had had earlier and which she abjected is now regained. But her identity is now altered, the mute object has now become the speaking subject. The edible part of the woman has been abjected away and only the pure woman remains. There is neither defiance nor liberation there, you are just what you are— the woman. Later, having gone through an eventful and tumultuous phase, we find a Marian musing about everything that happened and realizing that Peter was not the enemy after all, he was just a normal human being like most other people. It is at this point that she realizes that man, after all, is not woman’s enemy to be fought; indeed, no one is. Her sense of guilt is only reflective of the feminist mistake referred to earlier.

While Marian loses her appetite in response to her mental agitation, Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* has a contradictory experience, she gets insatiably hungry and starts gorging on food. As a teenager who endlessly, but unsuccessfully, strives to gain the approval of an ever-controlling, authoritative, passive and emotionally distant mother, she finds solace in the excessive consumption of food. The tendency to deviate from the norm is of paramount significance since, as with many characters, it turns out to be
the first step in the journey toward new vistas in selfhood and female experience.

Joan Foster is a character who inhabits an abject body. The abject body can be understood as the embodiment of all the objectionable elements of femininity. Butler talks about exemplary bodies beyond the binary as abject. They include fat bodies, perverted bodies, queer bodies, sick bodies, and excluded, ignored, denied, or feared bodies. In a 1998 interview in *Signs*, Butler clarifies what she means by this concept: “‘bodies that matter’ simultaneously materialize, acquire meaning, and obtain a legitimate status. Bodies that do not matter are ‘abject’ bodies. Such bodies are not intelligible . . . nor do they have legitimate existence . . . Hence they fail to materialize” (Meijer and Prins 279). Butler argues that the abject status of some bodies which are often the “no-bodies” of this world has serious material consequences:

The abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology. I’m enraged by the ontological claims that codes of legitimacy make on bodies
in the world, and I try, when I can, to imagine against that.

(277)

Atwood’s fictions also ‘imagine against’ stabilized codes of legitimacy. Her most powerful early fiction features characters teetering on the edge of abjection, their materialization problematic. Inhabiting abject bodies, these characters are outside of the heterosexual binary where women are defined by sight/cite, where to be is to be seen, and to be seen is to be pursued as a desirable object. But whether abject bodies are invisible or spectacular, they go unacknowledged as women. Atwood gives us these ‘unsightly’ creatures—neither men, nor women. They are un-cited as bodies because they are abject and thus un-sited (immaterial) and un-sighted (unacknowledged as sexed). Then, through a process of the abject aligning itself with heterosexual norms of gender, these characters are engendered and the heterosexual she-body comes into being. Atwood describes this process of moving from abjection to heterosexual being as a comic horror show. Taking full advantage of parody she develops abject characters beyond the binary and then moves them into attractive bodies — bodies pursued by men — and observes the consequences. In the case of Joan, under social pressure her body migrates to the ideal heterosexual she-body. This is how Joan in *Lady Oracle* disturbs maternal identity:
By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body . . . I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. 

*(LO 67)*

Ironically, when she says that she was undefeated, she has just defeated her mother and through her, herself. Failure of her mother can imply her own victory only if the two of them are the opposite elements of a binary, but unfortunately it is not so, since both of them are women. So her mother’s defeat only re-enacts and reinforces her own defeat and, together, they defeat femaleness.

Joan in *Lady Oracle* says that her mother had named her after the beautiful actress Joan Crawford, but unfortunately, she did not turn out to be like her. Joan Crawford was thin but she was always fat, and this, she feels is what upset her mother the most:
I was not (thin), and this is one of the many things for which my mother never quite forgave me. At first I was merely plump; in the earliest snapshots in my mother’s album I was a healthy baby . . . The photos went on in an orderly series; though I didn’t exactly become rounder, I failed to lose what is usually referred to as baby fat. When I reached the age of six the pictures stopped abruptly. This must have been when my mother gave up on me, for it was she who used to take them; perhaps she no longer wanted my growth recorded. S he had decided I would not do. (LO 39)

Yet another incident that reveals the impact of the indirect and very subtle power politics of patriarchal impositions is one that is painfully etched in Joan’s memory and which occurred when she was about nine. She had been attending dance school and quite enjoyed her classes there. In the annual spring recital Joan was to wear a short, gauzy, tight bodiced ballerina’s dress with a pair of coloured cellophane wings attached and was very excited about it. But her mother and Mrs. Flegg, the dance teacher, felt that she looked ludicrous in that costume. Much to her shock and sorrow, Joan was given the role of a mothball and was bundled up in a teddy bear.
costume. She felt extremely betrayed and desolate, and learned that it is not easy to live as a fat person:

If Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture on the sleazier men’s magazines are always good-looking? The effect would be quite different if they were overweight. The men would find it hilarious instead of immoral or sexually titillating. (LO 48)

Atwood’s female characters, at some time in their lives, have to face all these questions. Life then turns out to be, for them, an odyssey into the dark regions of the female self and its corporeality.

Joan was fat from her childhood up to when she became a woman. She had not been body-conscious then. She decides to become thin when she had to, in order that she be able to inherit the two thousand dollars Aunt Lou had left her on condition that she reduced hundred pounds of her weight. Being thin, she discovers, opens up a hitherto unknown world of promising opportunities as also lurking dangers. As her lover, the Polish Count says, she has “the body of a goddess” (LO 141). But, for the same
reason, now she has the cumbersome responsibility of taking care of this body. Earlier she could enjoy fearless mobility. As Bordo comments: “female slenderness . . . has a wide range of sometimes contradictory meanings . . . suggesting powerlessness . . . in one context, autonomy and freedom in the next” (26). When she was fat, employers welcomed her because she was “cheap as a woman but didn’t cause the disruption among male employees and customers other women did” (95). Even her girl friends excluded her from their discussions on sexuality and boyfriends “as one would exclude a nun or a saint” (95). Whereas now, when she became thin, that freedom is lost. She is unused to the mental and emotional scripts that accompany such bodies, and she lacks the interpretive skills to function as a woman. It is as if she needs re-mediation in another language so that she can learn to read her own surface:

It was on these bus trips that I first discovered there was something missing in me. This lack came from having been fat; it was like being without a sense of pain, and pain and fear are protective, up to a point. I’d never developed the usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing
cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magic circle defines safety. I wasn’t whistled at or pinched on elevators, I was never followed down lonely streets. (LO 139-40)

Joan, here, is at a disadvantage because she has lived outside the dominant models of signification for bodies in her culture. As such, she has experienced herself as the other. Arturo Madrid defines otherness:

It means being outside the game, outside the circle, outside the set. It means being on the edges, on the margins, on the periphery. Otherness means feeling excluded, closed out, precluded, even disdained and scorned. It produces a sense of isolation, of apartness, of disconnectedness, of alienation.

(23)

As Madrid argues, the colonized subject too is the other in the postcolonial context. Atwood draws striking similarities between immigrant men who experience themselves as other and the abject bodies of obese women. This treatment of otherness gives a profound depth to Atwood’s representation of the oppressive social world and the many shades of discrimination it metes
The parallels between Joan and the cook in a restaurant she had worked as a cashier, who finds her fat body attractive, is a case in point. He is a “foreign” (LO 98) man who misreads her body as desirable. Atwood implies that he pursues her because he lacks the ability to interpret her body. Since the commonplace conventions governing the ways that bodies can be read are heavily scripted, subjects must acquire idioms and be familiar with the clichés for reading the attractive body within the heterosexual binary of any given culture, automating them through repetition, like language. This clichéd citation of the attractive body is not the same from culture to culture but is the imaginary script concocted and presented as an end which subjects must aspire for to clarify themselves as women and be read, unequivocally, as such by others, especially men.

However, some bodies are not such easy reading. They are incoherent or difficult to make out, as if written by a dyslexic; they seem illegible or “foreign,” the letters themselves unfamiliar and unreadable. These abject bodies either go unread or are misread; they do not conform to the scripted citations that produce ‘legitimate’ objects of desire. In order to be deciphered as desirable, bodies must be read according to the conventions of the particular locale they inhabit. Subjects of a given culture
are pressed to employ a common system of deciphering what counts as sexy, but those from elsewhere read differently.

Atwood combines the post colonial reading of societies and the post feminist reading of the body. In a 1997 interview in Critique with Danita Dodson, Atwood links “the goals of feminism and what is now called postcolonialism” indicating that they are “both concerned with the rearranging of previous power structures” (102). Misreading of the female body by a cultural outsider is one of Atwood’s most effective means of demonstrating how sex-citation works. At her heaviest, Joan is pursued by the cook, a “foreigner, either Italian or Greek, I wasn’t sure which” who asks her to coffee. “He helped me on with my coat and opened the door for me, darting around me like a tugboat around the Queen Elizabeth; he was five inches shorter than I was and probably eighty pounds lighter” (LO 98). On the very first date, he proposes to her in his unidiomatic English: “I require for you to marry me” (98). But Joan rejects him after she “imagined the expression on my mother’s face as I loomed down the aisle in white satin with the tiny foreign man slung over my arm like a purse” (99). Even after her rejection, he continues to court her. She reflects that “the whole thing had the air of a ceremony, a performance . . . I knew I didn’t merit
such attentions, and besides, there was something absurd about them; it was like being pursued by Charlie Chaplin” (100). But after Joan quits the restaurant, she still fantasizes about her pursuer although she:

never did learn his real name . . . For the most part I saw him merely as a landscape, a region of blue skies and balmy climate . . . a place that would be in dour contrast to Toronto . . . a place where I would fit in at last, where I would be the right shape. (LO 100)

These fantasies blend with the one associated with the Fat Lady from the freak show “ in pink tights with spangles, a short fluffy pink skirt, satin ballet slippers and, on her head, a sparkling tiara” (101) who Joan had come across during a visit to an exhibition with her aunt. Here Joan’s longing to “fit in at last” is artfully balanced against her wishes to escape the traps of generic gender through a balancing act that shapes her character and the plot of the novel through re-citation (Boynton 19).

Bodies have to do with identities because we identify ourselves with physical forms. The physical form is made, sustained, remade and unmade by food. Changes in food and eating habits effect changes in identity
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consciousness and thereby impact selfhoods. The protagonist of “Unpopular Gals” in Good Bones, says:

I haven’t even been given a name: I was always just the ugly sister; put the stress on ugly. The one the other mothers looked at, then looked away from and shook their heads gently. Their voices lowered or ceased altogether when I came into the room, in my pretty dresses, my face leaden and scowling. They tried to think of something to say that would redeem the situation – Well, she’s certainly strong – but they knew it was useless. So did I. You think I didn’t hate their pity, their forced kindness? And knowing that no matter what I did, how virtuous I was, or hardworking, I would never be beautiful. Not like her, the one who merely had to sit there to be adored. You wonder why I stabbed the blue eyes of my dolls with pins and pulled their hair out until they were bald? Life isn’t fair. Why should I be? (GB 25 – 26)

Body, as the object of male gaze, is the site of male desire and the corporealisation of femininity defined by male desire. Rejection of female functions is an attempted resistance to male desire. However, Atwood’s
female characters show signs of mature realisation that if it is the body that is responsible for oppression, the body alone can ensure its opposite—liberation. The perceived solution is the demystification of the female form, which they undertake and all their experiments henceforth are in a way part of this demystification drive and, therefore, could be perceived as post feminist acts. They experiment with their bodies hoping that altering their corporeal experience might alter their cultural experience too. Only later does the realisation dawn on some of them that this is a fallacious hope and that in fact corporeal experience needn’t change for one’s own cultural experience to change — one may well continue with the same body and yet experience one’s self differently. The body can be independent of identity and vice versa, but whenever they are mutually dependent, it will be an identity grounded on the body. Feminists disembodied woman by abjecting their bodies; post feminism seeks to reclaim the bodies to re-embody woman. In *The Lady Oracle*, Joan says: “I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn’t really there, I was an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone? So she wouldn’t be able to get rid of me?” (76) It is this annihilation of physicality which feminism has always been preoccupied with. Eliminating the body, or even minimising the body, is tantamount to self-abnegation and any attempt at negating or
overlooking the maternal possibilities of women will only be acts of self deception. Post feminist position reviews the identity crisis and the consequent existential angst of woman in terms of her body. In this context, it is also worthwhile to observe that Kristeva is trying to describe a subjectivity for which experience is heterogeneous. This brings the abject again into focus since part of this subject's being is constituted of the other who has dwelt within the self as an alter ego. This other, as alter ego, is identified as other through loathing, through repulsion, through a pushing away. Kristeva will again assert the primacy of this concept by locating it in the primal repression, one that is constitutive of subjectivities and therefore precedes any later forms of repression.

Joan’s resistance to her mother’s efforts to force her into conforming to the narrow constraints of her normative, normal body also speaks for the conflict involved in her having to reconcile compelling contradictory elements connected with culture, normalization and identity. Her mother used to give her a clothing allowance as an incentive to reduce, but Joan spent the money on clothes of “a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped" (LO 85) which would make her look fatter than she was. It was a resistance to attempted normalization. “The
brighter the colors, the more rotund the effect, the more certain I was to buy . . . I wasn’t going to let myself be diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka sack” (85). When her mother cried seeing her in such ‘ungainly’ attire, Joan was “dismayed but elated too at this evidence of [her] power, my only power. I had defeated her, I wouldn’t ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful” (86). Through this single act of resistance, Joan powerfully demonstrates the inner crisis of feminism. Joan’s act of abjection also borders on matricide, a riddance of something which is governing, manipulating and erasing her physical personality.

In the feminist model, the maternal is an enemy of femininity. The maternal represents all that male hegemony would want women to be as also all that women wouldn’t want themselves to be. All these are integrated and corporealised into the maternal body so as to be abjected concretely. The maternal body therefore lies in the space between nature and culture. It is a site of battle between the biological mothering drives and the activist resistance to the cultural mother. In the post feminist experience, however, the maternal body is restored to the space of nature. A femininity that has to abhor the maternal function along with the maternal role for self discovery cannot be femininity at all. In fact it would only be
tantamount to assisting the patriarchal agenda of cultural femicide. Post feminism recognizes mothering as a function. The maternal functions cannot be simplistically and monolithically reduced to the female roles of the feminist model. Woman ought to be mature enough to acknowledge them as natural functions in relation to the infant and of meeting the child's needs. The maternal function is separate from both love and desire. A woman loves and desires both as woman and as mother. And as both, she is sexed. The mistake of feminism was that it perceived her as gendered, making her more a social being, an active agent, than a speaking being. And the general feminist position is that if it is role that makes and determines a father or mother, then, men and women alike could be mother in various degrees. Joan further complained that this natural function restricted her in many ways, having had to role-play the mother alone, unassisted by the male partner, and alienating her from the ‘freedom for’ many things. This is the base of the feminist resistance to the maternal, a resistance actually against engendering rather than against the maternal per se. It is this misplaced resistance that resulted in the abjection of the maternal, causing the maternal body to operate in the space between nature and culture. But post feminism restores the maternal function along with the reclaimed maternal body and reconciles the maternal functions and roles.
The body-self-identity paradigm is seen working itself out in a very different manner elsewhere in Atwood’s work. Interestingly, in more than one novel women are pictured as disembodied beings growing on plants. This image speaks a lot for the vegetable existence of women. There is a revealing instance from the chapter titled ‘The Peach Women of A’Aa’ in the *The Blind Assassin*. The women in it are extremely beautiful, sexy and obedient—all that a man can ask for. These women have nothing to do with the story of the novel. They only occur in the plot as characters mentioned in a story cooked up by the fictitious narrator of an imaginary story written by Laura, one of the main characters of the novel. They are inhabitants of the planet of A’Aa, where two fighter pilots, Will and Boyd, get stranded following a plane crash. To their great surprise the two men meet these women:

Coming towards them were two of the peachiest dames they had ever seen. They were wearing long garments of a purplish-blue hue, which fell in tiny pleats and rustled as they moved . . . their arms and feet were bare; each had a strange headdress of fine red netting. Their skin was a succulent golden pink. They walked with an undulating motion as if they had been dipped in syrup. (*TBA* 353)
This description of woman, the womanliest woman, reads like a perfect fairy tale woman, a woman who never exists in the real world, an inhabitant of a fantasy world, thus signifying the romantic model, in physical terms, of feminine beauty.

The narrative proceeds thus:

There was no death as such. These women grew on trees, on a stem running to the top of their heads and were picked when they were ripe by their predecessors. When the time came, each of the peach women would simply disorganize their molecules, which would then be reassembled via their trees into a fresh woman. So, the very latest woman was, in substance as well as in form, identical with the first. (TBA 354)

The ‘predecessors’ mentioned here can be read as the agents of patriarchy, both men and women. Mothers raise daughters conditioned by patriarchy and sons exercise patriarchal dominance over their sisters. The stem running to the top of their heads also signifies patriarchal domination. Since identities are conceptualized in heads, heads connected to something/someone outside signify that their heads are ruled by extraneous
controls that shape them and confer them with identities, which are, in truth, pseudo-identities. At the same time, there is no death, as there is only a reconfiguration of the molecules, a process happening through the trees. There can be death only if there is life; and the women mentioned here are unreal women and therefore lifeless. Woman is not born and reborn here; she merely re-forms herself into the next woman, which doesn’t exactly change her identity. Her death in conformity or resistance will not liberate her, she is fated to reconfigure herself.

The same sentiment is seen expressed in yet another situation in The Edible Woman, where Marian is partaking of a feast at her office. She observes the women around her: “They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; she thought of them as attached by stems at the top of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay” (TEW 166-7). The image of the head connected to the vine reiterates the idea that women’s identities are derived from some invisible outsider. The hanging posture is itself very suggestive, indicating a hung state, a no-man’s-land of women, where they are rendered incapable of physical action.
The abject-identity paradigm can be scrutinized from another angle. The abject serves to disturb identity. By identity is meant a finite experience of the infinite, a reductionist experience of the unclassifiable and the unnameable. It is, like the name that Karen in *The Robber Bride* detests, saying some things, but not ‘all things’, about yourself (your self). Female identities are therefore limited selfhoods, which is to be subverted. The abject could, therefore, be used to disturb such identities, oppressive systems, power structures and social norms, and demolish arbitrary discriminative borderlines. This is what Atwood’s women do. The abject is that which has been expelled from the subject into the outside space and which yet continues to define the subject from outside, owing to the subject’s relentless and integral attachment to it. Instead of setting the subject free on its exclusion, the abject continues to stay alive as the subject’s constitutive outside.

Again, in *The Robber Bride*, Charis, whose real name was Karen, one of the major characters, had a troubled and nightmarish childhood. Her real name was Karen. Her mother frequently went into bouts of insanity and died soon, leaving her at the mercy of Aunt V and Uncle Vern. The uncle is a perverted paedophile who sexually abuses little Karen. Aunt V
refuses to believe this when she complains to her and Karen is left with no alternative but to suffer at Uncle Vern’s hands. She makes herself believe that the bad things are not happening to her, but to another person in another body. In a bizarre situation, Uncle Vern:

falls on top of Karen and puts his shabby hand over her mouth, and splits her in two. He splits her in two right up the middle and her skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out. Her new body is light as a feather, light as air. There’s no pain in it at all. She flies over to the window and in behind the curtain, and stays there, looking out through the cloth, right through the pattern of pink and orange roses. What she sees is a small pale girl, her face contorted and streaming, nose and eyes wet as if she’s drowning—gasping for air, going under again, gasping. On top of her is a dark mass, worrying at her, like an animal eating another animal. (TRB 294)

As the image suggests, Karen is consumed after she is split in two. It is this split that she had to escape or retrieve herself from, but its trauma was too great for her to overcome. The only solution was to force-eject that
traumatic phase off her life, even though that would mean self-annihilation. She abjacts that part of her life through self-annihilation by dumping her old name when she turned twenty six. The name, again, is very problematic to woman, being a referential and citational label. But it is not just its citatoriness that is repulsive to her, the name that cites also functions as the name that contains identities tailor-made for women. It is a container of phallocentric ideologies and invisible and indirect oppressive social discourses that forcibly make her fit into the androcentric world.

The same sentiment is expressed in Cat’s Eye, a novel in which the middle-aged protagonist Elaine Risley relives the traumatic memories of her childhood and adolescence. She recalls her harrowing schooldays, when she was ragged and bullied by her friends Cordelia, Grace and Carol. Having been subjected to constant physical and mental torture, she discovers that fainting is a sure way of escaping the trauma. “Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it’s later. Time has gone on without you” (CE 183). So she resorts to fainting whenever she is confronted with such situations, thereby making conscious attempts at escaping embodiment:
I begin to spend time outside my body without falling over.

At these times I feel blurred, as if there are two of me, one superimposed on the other, but imperfectly. There is an edge of transparency, and beside it a rim of solid flesh that’s without feeling, like a scar. I can see what’s happening, I can hear what’s been said to me, but I don’t have to pay any attention. My eyes are open, but I’m not there. I’m off to the side. (CE185)

The notions of male as norm, even in the physical dimension, are built into both men and women quite early in life. In an address to a gathering in New Jersey College, Adrienne Rich says:

Sexist grammar burns into the brains of little girls and young women a message that the male is the norm, the standard, the central figure beside which we are the deviants, the marginal, the dependent variables. It lays the foundations for androcentric thinking, and leaves men safe in their solipsistic tunnel-vision. (Rich: Address)
Therefore, a married woman considers it a privilege to be known by her husband’s name, as though only its addition to her own can complete herself. Nomenclature, as it turns out, is definition, which is strongly resisted. The leather bag Karen carries around is an icon of this resistance against identities conferred by names. It is an image of herself, her pseudo-self and her body and she abjects it by discarding it and, along with it, all that is part of her repulsive and threatening memory by mentally sinking it in the waters of the imaginary Lake Ontario—the symbolic act putting an end to the Karen in her. The narrator says: “Karen was gone. But the Lake was inside Charis really, so that’s where Karen was too. Down deep” (TRB 298).

There are many occasions when Atwood’s women realize that it is not their weaknesses that men exploit to oppress them, but their strengths, necessary to perform their specialized natural functions, which make them vulnerable. This realization is echoed by Joan:

I retreated behind the camouflage of myself as Arthur perceived me. He wanted me to be inept and vulnerable, it’s true, but only superficially. Underneath this was another myth: that I could permit myself to be inept and vulnerable
only because I had a core of strength, a reservoir of support and warmth that could be drawn on when needed.  

Joan resorts to writing Gothic romances in order to retain the most precious part of her self and her identity. She hides it from Arthur because she knows that he would never approve of his wife writing such trash. Joan simply cannot resist the urge to write. Here one cannot but recall Cixous who wrote:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst . . . And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world . . . I said to myself: You are mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naiveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? (876)
The Edible Woman offers further glimpses into the prospective postfeminist identities of woman. Ainsley says that she wants a baby: “Every woman should have at least one baby. She sounded like a voice on a radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair-dryer. It’s even more important than sex. It fulfills your deepest femininity” (40). Ainsley’s longing for a baby is reflective of the body’s urge to fulfill its natural given functions and the body-self’s creative urge for expression, extension, and experience of desire and its completion. It is the sexed body’s (sexually female body’s) longing for its sexual function, its natural destiny. The experience and expression of female personality is circumscribed by the female body or its subjective identification with the physicality of the female body. It also testifies to the individual woman’s longing for completion through the performance and accomplishment of her biological function. That ‘every woman should have at least one baby’ could be read like a patriarchal dictate over woman — a case of the function transformed into the role. It could also be the woman-as-passive-agent’s reiteration and reproduction of the man-as-active agent’s decision. But if the ‘should’ could be read as just an auxiliary verb, without the intended injunction, the idea would rid itself of the binary-problematic and will just be a statement. Added to it the comment which follows, “It is even more
important than sex” will then refer to the third space beyond the man/woman binary and will foreground the woman as subject, replacing the woman as object. Once she becomes the subject, her body becomes the platform on which her individual desire is pronounced. She becomes a woman who is not defined by man as the ‘un-man.’ She enters the female space which fulfills her deepest sense of femininity in a post feminist act. As Gill puts it:

Femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment and the dominance of a make-over paradigm; and “a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. (151)

The function/role binary problematic recurs again on yet another occasion, when Ainsley asks caustically, “What has having a baby got to do with getting a job at an art gallery” (TEW 41), when Marian tries to talk her out of her notion of having a baby outside wedlock. Having a baby and getting a job ought to be two different things in two different levels of life. Obviously, there is the suggestion in Marian’s statement that both are not
compatible and that one has to be abandoned for the other. Ainsley, however, refutes the suggestion by refusing to compare them thus unequally and by regarding them as compatible. She articulates the post feminist view which dispenses with the need to maintain a binary anymore. Her retort “You are always thinking in terms of either/or,” (41) is revealing. Obviously, the “sense of purpose” (41) she refers to is the sense of the purpose of life, namely, to not allow social or cultural constructs to determine one’s choice of action whether it amounts to acceptance or negation. Life is not something to be sacrificed, in the act of conditioning oneself to it or resisting it— unlived, un-enjoyed and un-celebrated. The purpose of every individual is to live in terms of identities at multiple levels and yet in certainly individual and particular terms. It is this that woman needs but it is needed not because it is absent and not yet there, but because it is naturally there and longs for enunciation. The female experience cannot be rejected and abjected for the sake of unreal and contrived social and cultural constructs.

The expression ‘You are always thinking in terms of either/or. The thing is wholeness,’ is strongly evocative of the fallacious positions feminism was wont to adopt, since either/or is the basic fallacy of feminism.
To the feminist, man is free because he is male and the woman isn’t free because she is female. Adrienne Rich aptly expresses the predicament:

> Women have been driven mad, “gaslighted”, for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us. *(Women and Honor 190)*

The female body, too, has to be either male or self-less, and whether to be a normalised body or to resist normalization is a case of choice of either/or. This conception misses wholeness making the female body absent. The post feminist reinvention makes the body whole by making it female instead of demeaning it as ‘un-male’, ‘sub-male’ or ‘for male’ and, by replacing the exclusionary either/or with the balancing conjunction ‘and’ proposes that there are just the male and the female in a unity of difference.

When Ainsley refuses to take a husband, it amounts to feminist resistance for reasons already discussed earlier; but when she wants a baby outside marriage, which she can have only through the abjected biological functions, she is accepting the abject to sublimate a sex-specific personal
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desire. This, no doubt, is a perfect instance of transformation of feminist resistance into post feminist subjectivity. Gender is abjected, but sex, which had been abjected, is reclaimed to live the female selfhood and actualise it. Mothering, a sex-function, is one function that post feminists feel should not be abjected. Kari Weil observes, “Patriarchal culture has repressed its own maternal origins and it has made it impossible for women to represent or imagine their own relation to the mother by refusing her difference from the male subject” (153-171). It is such a self-actualisation in terms of the abject that Ainsley seeks. She wants to actualise her maternal self and doesn’t like to eschew it. Marriage is not acceptable to her since it implies subjection, subjugation and subordination. The feminine role is unacceptable to her; but the female function is a celebration for her.

She decides to become mother, but not through institutionalised marriage. This is woman’s attempt to eschew roles and espouse functions — to avoid gender and engendering and welcome sex. That is why she doesn’t want to be wife but wants to be mother. Further, the body-interaction involved in marital relation, is also repulsive for her, an abject act. The sight of the male body reminds her of her own body as the site of inferiority and the deficiency in her own body. If anything, she can shun or
abject only her own body since she can’t abject the other body since she
doesn’t have the power for it. But she takes the mature decision of not
abjecting it, unlike Marian who does it by manipulating food and eating
habits to suit various stages of thought and feeling and experience of
abjection.

Marriage is problematic for other reasons also which, interestingly,
involve food. With marriage woman becomes conscious of how to look
and, more correctly, how not to look. They are both used to conform to, and
resist, reigning models of patriarchal femininity. Both become associated
with food and eating habits. The boundary between the body and the non-
body is the region of corporeal refusal of corporeality. Post feminism reuses
this region for the corporeal recall of female body.

Simone de Beauvoir evokes poignant images of the feminist rejects:
“Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her
subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature” (512).
These objects, integral parts of the female body, cannot be rejects since they
are the natural strengths of woman provided to perform her sex-specific
functions; but there is the suggestion that it is these strengths that imprison
woman. All these body parts, therefore, becomes repulsive to her since they
constantly remind her of her loss of life and identity. That is why they are abjected.

She goes on to say, “Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal . . . an incubator, a conscious and free individual who has become life’s passive instrument . . . not so much mother’s . . . as fertile organisms, like fowls with high egg production” (513). It is the biological condition of woman that we see here, something to be celebrated and lived, but unfortunately was abjected as a result of the misplaced feminist fear of itself.

Despite the early feminist visions of liberating women from reproductive tasks, within most radical feminisms, both female sexuality and the female capacity to give birth were seen as grounds for affirming both the power and the value of the female body. Female sexuality was celebrated for its power and its capacity to escape from structures of dominance and submission. Women’s maternal bodies were seen as a source of positive values to set against male norms, stressing care and inter-subjectivity, as opposed to autonomy and duty. Women’s engagement with the reproductive process was also regarded as anchoring both antimilitarism and a respect for the natural world, which put them at the forefront of
ecological movements. These approaches were very significant as they imparted to woman’s devalued bodies a positive value which induced pride rather than shame. But care had to be taken to ensure that they are free from the dangers of homogenizing what were very variable experiences of both sexuality and maternity.

Abjection involves the abjection of female identity itself. What woman seeks is her identity as person, and as an individual, an identity not defined by binaries. Awareness of the suppression of this identity by a patriarchal society unsettles her and creates a constantly nagging pressure in her. Wishing to forget it, she shuns her identity altogether by abjecting it. In *Lady Oracle*, we find a perfect demonstration of this predicament. Joan says:

> For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be . . . I made a real effort, but somehow I was always out of date . . . by the time I’d adjusted my views to Arthur’s, his had already changed. Then I’d have to be converted anew, improved, made to see the light once more. (*LO* 212)
Joan has had to constantly abject and adopt identities. She, for instance, abjected her fatness and adopted thinness. But in this constant shift and flux, she is conscious of her identity as a Gothic writer, which she doesn’t abject. She keeps it secret even when she rejects a life with him abjecting her wifehood. She was able to recognize and preserve her writer-identity. She is mature enough to perceive the sequential nature of Arthur’s multiple identities and, in contrast, the spatial nature of her own, where a host of identities and parts at once constitute and reinforce her overall personality. But this abjection involves an inner conflict within her, for she, as a woman, has her own idea of selfhood-actualisation. Joan says:

> When I looked at myself in the mirror I didn’t see what Arthur saw. The outline of my former body still surrounded me like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own. I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me. It waited for sleep, and cornered me. (*LO* 216)

Abjection needs a medium and the body becomes that. Bakhtin draws a close connection between what he calls the carnival and the body. Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body of the carnival could be
associated with the abject body in the post feminist discourse. He introduces the notion of the grotesque body in opposition to the classical body. The grotesque diminishes all that is harmonious and cultured. As Bakhtin states: “Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). It emphasizes the comic and repellent aspects of the human body such as spitting and drinking, arguing that the body has to be engaged in new experiences. He explains that corporeality has to go beyond the traits of nobility and elegance. According to Hohne and Wussow: “Disembodiment and discord become a means of rebellion against the canons of the humanist and hierarchical systems” (99). The carnivalesque body is constantly recreated and pictured through its indecency and excess. The clownish and obscene body is a triumph against the static body which engenders repression through its closed boundaries. In Bakhtin’s words: “They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were” (8). Marian does this by abjecting food since the body is in a way the experience of food, as the body is constituted by food. In the process she abjects her identity also since what she has is only a physical identity in accordance with patriarchal norms. So, through food and eating experiments she abjects her familiar
body the carnivalesque way, by defamiliarising it. She is also abjecting reality because what is made to appear as real is a patriarchal construct. But she inadvertently makes the mistake of abjecting the natural also, the sexed body as against the gendered-body, along with it and it is this body and her normal eating habits that is redeemed later by her. According to Kristeva, “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (*POH* 2).

The feminist contention was that to civilize means to become like man or to be for man; since the feminist woman was unwilling for that, she had to abject civilization and the act of civilizing oneself. As Bordo remarks: “The body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature . . . [Bodies] are disciplined directly through ‘the practice and bodily habits of everyday life’” (35). Ainsley dressing up as a schoolgirl, though for other purposes in the novel, can be seen as abjecting her natural body and the act of civilizing itself. It is also an act of annihilation of the body and the self, and of fading into invisibility and non-existence. Body means not just human body, it entails the physicality associated with it, the experience of physicality. Our body perception occurs with the experience of the corporeality of the body.
In fact, there are very many occasions where the egg as a dish, or even as a mere object, appears to articulate the complicated nature of body-perception. Whenever the egg is seen in its physicality, repulsion and disgust are bred. This happens even with the male, not just the female. For instance, Len reveals on one occasion that “his shell had not been as thick and calloused as [was] imagined” (TEW 160). Len had formed a childhood aversion for infants and childbirth since, as he says, his mother had once forced him to eat an egg with a little chicken inside it. Under the compelling pressure of this childhood memory, he is shocked to discover that Ainsley was pregnant with his child and his fear of marriage and childbirth express themselves at that instant. He expresses his revulsion for birth, fecundity and gestation. Ainsley, who believes that the relationship between the mother and the child is the loveliest and closest in the world, taunts him then by telling him that he is displaying what she characterises as “classic symptoms of uterus envy” (TEW 159) and rudely reminds him that he was all curled up inside somebody’s womb for nine months just like everybody else, further forcing him to imagine that stage in all its physicality. He also recalls his traumatic childhood experience and breaks down hysterically. One morning, when Marian opens the soft-boiled egg, she sees “the yolk looking up at her with its one significant and accusing
yellow eye” (TEW 161). She experiences its ‘aliveness’ and is herself unable to eat the egg, like Len. Here, the physicality of food becomes equated with physicality of the body.

Ainsley uses a dual identity very effectively in an attempt to manage her own womanly instincts and patriarchal agency tactfully and to manage female functions and feminine roles. On the one side she preserves her true identity as a mature, self-reliant and wholesome woman, which she doesn’t let Len know; on the other hand, she projects before him another identity of hers, that of an innocent, even naïve, lass. She feels that Len would be an acceptable and appropriate father. She thinks: “if only people would give more thought to the characteristics they pass on to their children, may be, they wouldn’t rush blindly into things. We know the human race is degenerating and it’s all because people pass on their weak genes without thinking about it” (TEW 43). Len is educated, has a good ancestry and is even good looking. He is creative, and works with the television company. He is therefore the right person for the father-function. She considers herself an acceptable and appropriate mother, having similar attributes. She understands perfectly well that the mother-function is a creative function, a creativity she is naturally endowed with at birth as a woman. She wouldn’t
think of foolishly abjecting it in a reckless act of resisting patriarchy, but she is not quite willing to perform the wifely role since it might amount to self-annihilation. She would not allow her self and identity to be subsumed, or consumed, by an all-appropriating patriarchy. So she sports two identities, one to reject the role and the other to retrieve the abjected female function:

Ainsley, who seemed as young and inexperienced as a butter mushroom, was in reality a scheming superfemale carrying out a foul plot against him using him in effect as an inexpensive substitute for artificial insemination with a devastating lack of concern for his individuality. (TEW 122)

Fear of losing identity is ingrained in the unconscious regions of the mind and therefore its effect could be psychosomatic. It could manifest itself as the fear of food. That is what happens in Marian’s case. Marian’s fear of being consumed makes consumable food her abject, and food becomes a metaphor for her fear of consumption. Abjection, being the critical point of identity crisis, can be used to end oneself or intelligently used to live. Atwood’s characters take up this challenge resourcefully.
The gender binary is a vital element in the feminist and post feminist discourses on femininity. The gender binary entails attendant issues like gender roles, gender identities, gender subjectivities, gender personhoods and gender essentialism. This binary is problematic in that it pins down individual persons to gender by insisting that the members of the male sex are masculine and the members of the female sex are feminine. Essentialisation, which makes it almost impossible for persons to act or perform outside gender roles without being scrutinised, results in the engendering of sex and personhood. But for social constructions, male wouldn’t be required to be always translated as masculine and female as feminine. From the post feminist perspective, both the sexes lie outside the gender binary, where they would exist not as mutually exclusive categories, but as independent subjectivities. The use of the words masculine and feminine can be more justified as adjectives or as personhood descriptors rather than as gender descriptors. Transgender identities allow us to see beyond the essentialising binaries. Gender is a result of reiterated acting. It produces the effect of a natural, normal and standard gender which, in fact, subsumes the personhood of the individual. The personhood of woman therefore gets reduced to gender subjectivity. Thus performance (mode/s of self-presentation) is forced to give way to performativity (the process of
discursive production of identities). Such an identity is not an interiority but an exteriority in the sense that it is an assumed role-induced identity. It could be said that the production of cultural signification for gendered bodies relies upon, and is enforced by, discursive power.

Halberg contends that the feminist view of knowledge and reason as male emerges from the feminist view that the Enlightenment thought is rooted in the mind/body, male/female dichotomy. He asserts that feminism “tends to see every idea (in, for example, philosophy or meta-theory) about everything is male biased, as if the hegemony of dominant conceptions were complete. Patriarchy appears free of conflicts and contradictions, totally dominated by a unified masculinity” (374). According to Weil in This Sex Which Is Not One Irigaray, “designates the female sex as that which has no proper identity, nor proper form. Located in the in-between, as that which defies the borders between self and the other, it is that which, in the male economy, would not count as sex” (165).

The Kristevan conception of abjection is perceptible in the experiences and identities of women characters throughout Atwood’s work. As Kristeva conceives it, the abject turns out to be that which, having given existence/being, and reached a point where it threatens the very same
existence, has to be cast away. To Kristeva, the abject is the: “edge of non-existence and hallucination, a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (POH 2). There are numerous occasions where there are threats to the elements that constitute life for the women characters, making life, identity and self an unrealizable dimension for them. Their life is traumatized when their bodies are interrogated and invaded by the male. However, abjection, which was a mode of escape into self-annihilating invisibility for feminism, becomes a mode of escape into self-enunciation for post feminism. The abject body ceases to be a tool that external power uses to threaten its own life. There are numerous situations in Atwood’s novels where an enquiry into the possibility of abjection turns out to be a tool for escape not from personality, but into personality, or, an escape from an ascribed and inert personality into an autonomous and live personality.

Abject is neither object nor subject. Subject is a subsidiary something on which experience takes place or someone who experiences and is determined and defined by the experience. Object is that which is understood as the one in relative opposition to the subject—the ‘other’ of the subject. Both subject and object define each other semantically. But abject is that which collapses meaning. It is a space which, if subject and
object were there, would be called the ‘in-between.’ It is a point, not fundamentally spatial but which also can be conceived spatially. When the body is restored it interrogates and redefines subject and object creating subjectivities.

Selfhood is existence, if notions, ideas, or concepts threaten the experience of self, the self is abjected. Abjection, therefore, is the expulsion of the female self, but expulsion of the self means annihilation and death. There are many instances in which Atwood’s characters realise this and choose to correct themselves by redeeming their expelled selves through the body and a long lost femaleness is retrieved. In this way woman’s journey back to the body in fact becomes a journey back to femaleness, a return from ‘the feminine’ to ‘female.’

A vital point about abjection is that it is not just about ugliness, as it might seem. The abject is anything that threatens or disturbs identity. Beauty also could threaten identity, and could also be abject. A classic example of this can be seen in The Robber Bride, a multiperspectival novel which portrays female friendship, rivalry and betrayal. Set in Toronto in the early nineties, the story is narrated by three different women: Tony, a historian and teacher, Roz, a successful business woman and Charis, a
mystic dreamer. The friendship with Zenia, a glamorous and charismatic figure with an enigmatic past, is the common link between them. Fabricating different versions of her identity and origins, Zenia befriends each of them in turn. She alternately presents herself as the orphaned daughter of white Russians, Rumanian gypsies or Berlin Jews. She poses as a cancer patient, a journalist, or a freelance spy. She worms her way into their confidence and their lives, seduces each of their husbands and lovers and symbolically consumes them. She tramples in and out of their lives, bringing catastrophe in her wake. She is a lurking enemy commando to Tony who almost lost her husband to her and ruined her academic career. Zenia is a cold and treacherous bitch to Roz because she led her husband into suicide and almost snatched her magazine from her. To Charis, given to spiritualism, she is a kind of a soulless zombie who, without a warning, took away her boyfriend from her and left her alone to look after her child not yet born then. She is a man-eater, viral, self-mutating and opportunistic. Roz thinks, “Women don’t want all the men eaten up by man eaters; they want a few left over so they can eat some themselves” (385). Apparently killed in a bomb explosion in Beirut, Zenia unexpectedly turns up in a high-end Toronto restaurant several years later. Her return from the dead forces the three women to face their own past and to confront buried feelings of envy, hatred, and rage.
In Atwood’s novel, Zenia is both real and fantastic at the same time, a messenger from another world. Her exotic beauty is fatal for men and also for women. She is the perfect example of the kind of beauty that men would seek. She perfectly fits into their phantasy models and matches their norms. She herself is very well aware of it and uses it very effectively to her advantage. Married men or men who are already in relationships with women fated to confront her in unguarded circumstances feel threatened. She epitomizes the beauty concepts internalized by them through acculturation and these models instantly respond to their externalized objectification noticed in her. They are then left with only two options: either to start a relationship with her or to banish her totally from their lives. Both are abjection. When they start a fresh relationship with her, they are abjecting a part of their inner self which is entangled with beauty concepts in the sense that these concepts are allowed to express themselves externally in the relation and get resolved. The consequence, of course, is that their family is ruined, bringing about an identity crisis jeopardizing their identities as husband and father. In the second case, the beautiful object, Zenia, is abjected in the sense that though she can be driven away from their homes, she cannot be banished altogether from their minds and being. In fact Zenia does go away for some time from their lives, only to resurface
later. Exterminating her corporeal presence will not lead to her expulsion from the core of their beings. She lingers there as the abject because what she stands for and epitomizes — beauty — is an integral element of human personality. She corporealises it and renders it perceptible making its painful presence within them, threatening their identities at multiple levels. As Kristeva puts it in *POH*:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful — a certainty of which it is proud holds — on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1)
Woman is othered through her body, and as the male disengages his identity from his body, he frees his selfhood from its restraints while chaining the female to her anatomy. Margo Culley writes:

Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities… By defining women as 'Other,' men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies—a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally—and to make their bodies other than themselves. From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others are their bodies, while the masculine ‘I’ is the noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other—the body repressed or denied and, then, projected—re-emerges for this ‘I’ as the view of others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence. (80)
Further, this abjection is also in recognition of a foundational want. For though the men seem to be leading normal and happy married lives, it is only when Zenia arrives in the form of the seductress that they are forcibly confronted with their own ‘other’ self which they realise had been impoverished in many ways and constantly longing for completion. Zenia is therefore not a mere human person but an objectification of the foundational want which should be filled in order to achieve completion. But she cannot found a family. As Lorrie Moore puts it, “Zenia does not have a voice of her own; she is only a mad reworking of everyone else’s”. She only wants the men for a few moments and then she throws them away as trash. She is a double for each of the characters, uncannily reflecting their own deeply repressed desires. She is both the other and the same, the stranger within the self. The three women hate Zenia, yet also want to be her. She is both their ideal and the incarnation of what they most hate and fear. In the words of Rita Felski she “is a whirling vortex of insatiable desire, an uncanny shape-shifter, a symbol of lawlessness and transgression. She stands for rapacious, shameless sexuality; all-consuming, atavistic greed; narcissistic fantasies of power over others and sadistic delight in their destruction” (127). She destroys the wholesomeness of their families and leaves them all the more incomplete. Her presence disturbs and disorients
the three protagonists and forces them to face unpleasant memories and painful emotions.

We also perceive here the manner in which the abject exists by the deject, as Kristeva puts it. The one by whom the abject exists, the deject, is one who “places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Instead of sounding himself as to his being, he does so concerning his place: “Where am I?” instead of “Who am I?” (POH 12). The space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never homogeneous, and not at all totalisable, but is divisible, and catastrophic. Zenia the deject’s movement is described spatially and temporally — spatially as alternately straying and situating, temporally as alternately veiled infinity and bursting revelation.

Towards the end of the novel, Roz’s son Larry reveals to her that he is gay and that he is in a relationship with her male secretary Boyce. Though she is shocked, she also realizes that she is not very prejudiced against the fact. “Her own marriage wasn’t such a terrific argument for heterosexuality and neither was Mitch. She just wants Larry to be happy and if this is how he plans to do it, fine . . .” (TRB 512). Post feminism, by critiquing “some objects of second wave feminism like binary thinking, essentialism, ideas on
sexuality, vision on the relationship between femininity and feminism and the body politics,” as Fien Adriaens feels, strives to make life a more fulfilling and complete experience for women.

Margaret Sanger suggests: “No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body” (533). Despite the many social roles that woman might perform, and despite the social recognition she might achieve through them, she can only be free when she becomes her body-self. The body, for woman, is potentially two things: it can be the site of slavery and can be the key to liberty. Like Marian who confronts her problem and resolves it in her own unique corporeal way, many of Atwood’s characters are caught in such bodily conundrums, and, through experimentations are continuously examining which of the two is happening to them.