Conclusion
A Body of Her Own

“We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world, women will truly create new life, bringing forth . . . the visions, and the thinking necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence.”

Adrienne Rich (Of Woman Born 285)

Margaret Atwood is a post feminist writer in that she, in very distinct terms, points to the reality of a world, a hitherto unvisited site of human self and sensibility, in which there are myriad possibilities of woman being able to become what Adrienne Rich envisions.

Critical discourses on feminism have tended to centre on the theorizations of feminism as activism rather than engage subtexts of the representations of women and explications of the aesthetics of feminism as a literary practice. Academic debate persists on whether post feminism is a continuation of feminism, a revolt against feminism or the end of feminism. Opinions differ on whether it is a new critical practice or a subset of feminism. The thesis disengages itself from such concerns and is centered
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on an analysis of the character of the post feminist condition and its implications for individual and collective female life. It does not conceive post feminism as an extension or a counter movement to feminism, but looks at it as feminism become mature; as a perspectival shift within feminism. Post feminism is used as an umbrella term that could accommodate the entire gamut of discourses connected to women’s issues as different from those structured ones that subscribe to the models, norms and paradigms of academic feminism. Any discussion of women’s issues need not as a rule be labelled feminist or fall in line with whatever has already been identified as formally feminist.

One main concern of feminist thought and discourse is the body. The female body has been subjected to a long and consistent social process of reification, commodification and essentialisation. The structures of representation established by patriarchy had been entrenched in language which patronized the female body and reduced it to the inferior other. Woman was forced to occupy the position of an object subjected to male gaze. In reaction to the patriarchal homogenization and objectification of femininity, the physicality of the female body was banished into the realm of invisibility by the feminist critical practices. Notwithstanding this current,
the body continued to reaffirm itself in textual representations of femininity and feminist models of womanhood alike as both presence and absence.

This prompted post feminism to respond to what it recognized as the indispensable corporeality of female subjectivity by openly reclaiming and acknowledging the abjected female body. Feminism outgrew its orthodoxy and became more flexible and eclectic, by modifying its erratic binary models. It also inculcated new terrains of more justifiable praxis and set new goals other than the obsessive insistence on securing gender equality through a drawn out war of the sexes. The attempt was to transform its proactivism to post feminist performative action involving a fresh understanding of femaleness and a search for female identity/identities.

Originally discussed by Georges Bataille and later given currency as a critical theory by Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, the ‘abject’ has immense potential as a post feminist strategy. In the feminist model, abjection was the perceived solution to the female debacle. It is the process by which feminism sought to liberate woman from the clutches of the power politics of patriarchy by making totally unavailable to man that which he is in pursuit of, and by virtue of which he could further and further reinforce the male hegemony on woman—the female body. It was a feminist attempt at liberation yet at the same time exposed the limitations of the male/female
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binary involving male domination and female submission. In this feminist phase the anticipated escape from male tyranny turned out, for woman, to be an escape from herself (her self), taking her to the verge of self-annihilation. The boundary over which the feminist slips into the post feminist in terms of the abject, is the site on which the thesis situates itself and plumbs the possibilities of the abject becoming a redemptive tool that would rehabilitate woman and her selfhood and subjectivity.

Margaret Atwood can be classified as a post feminist writer. She began writing when feminism had not yet arrived on the scene as a definite movement. Atwood herself unambiguously denies that she is a feminist writer in the face of the conventional critical canon that has fixed her as a feminist writer.

Notwithstanding the fact that Atwood decidedly addresses women’s issues, they still do not subscribe to the formal feminist patterns. She refuses to portray women as blameless victims and hapless pawns pushed around the chessboard by the invisible hand of patriarchy. Her fiction looks into the abyss, extracting subtle actions, buried emotions and dark motives that are often glossed over or denied by feminism. Atwood can rightly be called a post feminist writer for the simple reason that it is an inclusive term that could at once define her wholesome and nuanced engagement with women’s issues beyond the narrow paradigms of feminism.
Her characters and her treatment of womanist issues certainly draw attention to alternative possibilities of imagining, conceiving, experiencing and enunciating femininity other than those that have been explored so far in the orthodox feminist praxis.

Atwood treats the female problematic in very concrete terms, by bringing the female body onto the centre stage very cogently. Notions of femaleness, and womanist concerns, are forged and articulated in terms of the female body, through the very diverse behavioural patterns of a wide range of convincing characters that people her fictional world. She provides an astute and tangible analysis of the female body positing it as an alternative to the reductionism of feminist thought. Her novels are explicitly concerned with the complexities of the body image and make an attempt to demystify the female form. The activities of her female protagonists demonstrate how the body feeds identity and how a woman’s corporeal experience directly influences her cultural experience. An examination of the way her characters become experiments in femininity and at the same time exemplify the perspectival shifts within feminism could show how her fictional work offers a platform on which one can situate the diversity of the post feminist experience. Her books focus on issues predominantly affecting women but she refuses to confine her thoughts within the constraints of a feminist outlook.
These issues are concretized by Atwood through their treatment in terms of the female body. The body had been long invisible in the feminist discourses on femininity. Being a problematic element it had, for the same reason, to be abjected. Forays were made into issues like what happens to woman in the process of this highly complex procedure of abjection, and what ramifications abjection has for femaleness. The post feminist conclusion is that the abjection of the feminine body annihilated femaleness and, consequently, as a matter of survival, what is abjected has to be reclaimed.

Reclaiming the body becomes the first step toward a woman’s journey in search of her self. It will enable woman to have a body with a self in the same way as man has a body with a self, thus making her human in the first place. Then, as Cixous opines: “woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (116).

Celebrating the physicality of femininity will confer autonomous authorship on woman in due course in the sense that she will cease to define herself in terms of her ‘other’, namely, man, and instead engage with herself in her own terms outside the binary spaces contrived by an oppressively
patriarchal society. In her works, Margaret Atwood traces the heterosexual body as it materializes through citation. She perceives bodies as unstable social constructions, and sees through the rigid binary that has governed our thinking about sexuality. Judith Butler had stated that a binary division of sexes is taken as fundamental, as a key to arranging society, but that this binary “is itself a social idea that is not given in bodily reality” (GT 7). Margaret Atwood recognizes the trap of sex-citation and offers the existential possibilities of bodies beyond the oppressive binary. And through an explosive and imaginative reading of the body she has opened up hitherto untrodden and excitingly novel avenues of female sensibility.

The focus of this thesis is exclusively on Atwood’s literary representations of women and their issues, and the possibilities they could hold out for post feminist theorization. Feminism suffers from “somatophobia” (Meyers 138), the fear of the body, a cultural malady that needs to be remedied for woman to be woman. Post feminism also contains the realization that the remedy lies not in the escape from the female body (as the feminist positions had it), but in a return to it; for the escape would leave behind an unfinished task, which would be no solution to the female problem, whereas the return would allow for a revamp of the site of female defeat and imbue the reclaimed female body with fresh female life and
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breath. The post feminist discourse actively rejects narratives extolling unitary stories of male vice and female virtue; instead, it strives to privilege the multiplicity and fragmented subjectivity associated with poststructuralist thought. Atwood certainly has gone a long way in privileging a long devalued attribute of femininity, the female body, and, in no uncertain terms, points to the need of transcending gender scepticism by foregrounding her unique and individual characters. She encourages the reader to transcend the dualistic thought patterns of the either/or which chains him to fixed identity positions and gender roles, and to be open to liberating, non-essentialist views of gender relations. Her female characters, through a process of abjection, redeem their expelled selves, retrieve their long lost femaleness and rediscover bodies of their own. Atwood suggests that the purpose of every individual is to live in terms of identities at multiple levels and yet in certainly individual and particular terms. To her, the journey back to the body is a journey back to femaleness, a return from ‘the feminine’ to the ‘female.’

****GREECE****