

**Back to the Body: Margaret Atwood and the Reaffirmation of the
Female Physicality**

Synopsis

Lakshmi S.

The dissertation titled “Back to the Body: Margaret Atwood and the Reaffirmation of the Female Physicality” seeks to problematise the theoretical underpinnings and critical practices of feminism in the context of the ever advancing inquiry into the content and meaning of female life. It explores the possibility of a wholesome understanding of individual and social female life than had been made possible by orthodox feminism, and of vocalising the concrete meaning of the feminine aspect of human selfhood. The notion of femininity has suffered significant semantic, conceptual and structural changes in the course of the complex processes of acculturation that civilised societal formations ferment. The emergence of gender and concomitant ‘gender trouble’ changed the destiny of woman for ever, and it would be worthwhile to subject the trajectory of female social identity to a comprehensive critical scrutiny.

The body has always occupied the centre stage in feminist thought and feminist discourses by virtue of both its visibility and its invisibility. In the visible dimension the body had been viewed as femininity reified, commodified and essentialised by a long and continued social process which paved the way for a mechanical compartmentalisation of gender difference. The structures of representation established by patriarchy had been entrenched in language which patronised the female body and generated a patriarchal construct of woman that was essentially inferior in gender. It commodified the female body and rendered it an object of the male gaze. In reaction to the patriarchal homogenisation 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 compelled post feminism to respond to what it recognised 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 confirmed 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.

The thesis disengages itself from an academic debate on whether post feminism is counter to feminism, which tends to treat both like two mutually exclusive categories. Instead, it assumes that post feminism need not be viewed either as an extension of feminism or as anti-feminism. It is critical feminism become mature; a perspective shift within the greater feminist framework. Post feminism is used as an umbrella term that could accommodate the entire gamut of discourses related to women's issues which makes it different from those structured ones that subscribe to the models and normative paradigms of established feminism/s. It is believed that all discussions of women's issues need not, as a rule, be brought under the rubric of the feminist discourse.

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 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 began her writing career well before the advent of feminism and continues to write even after the idea of feminism has largely been replaced by the prospect of post feminism. She mirrors the entire spectrum of feminist thought and praxis and also the shifts in the course of its evolution.

Atwood denies that she is a feminist writer, yet is considered as one, thus providing space for an enquiry into the nomenclature that could be applied to an author who professes to be a non-feminist but simultaneously addresses women's issues. Many of the features associated with post feminism could be identified in the writings of Atwood. The difference between feminism and post feminism drawn here—the former as activism and the latter as performance—is unmistakably perceptible in her work. In order to concretise this distinction, the thesis evaluates functions and roles and discriminates between what could be broadly defined as female functions and gender roles through a critical analysis of Atwood's characters.

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. Novels like *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman*, for instance, address the relationship of the female appetite to power and the cultural significance of bodily experiments. For Atwood, these very physical manifestations demonstrate how the body feeds identity and how a woman's corporeal experience directly influences her cultural experience. An examination of how 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 to situate the diversity of the post feminist experience. A prolific writer, Atwood has created her own definite space as an author of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and literary criticism and speaks in a voice that is perceptibly strong, clear and different. Though Atwood's writing has been variously labelled as feminism, human rights activism, and nationalism, she effortlessly incorporates and transcends all attempts at classification. Her books focus on issues predominantly affecting women but she refuses to confine her thoughts within the constraints of a feminist outlook. In an interview she clarifies her stance: "There is no single, simple, static "women's point of view" (Atwood: Interview 1990).

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

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

Chapter Three is exclusively dedicated to the explication of the concept of abjection central to later feminism, especially the writings of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. It discusses and explores what abjection means for feminist and post feminist discourses, its ramifications and its potent influence on female life.

Chapter Four focusses on Atwood and her work as a post feminist, rather than feminist, writer and thinker. It examines, in terms of the abject, how her works pertinently espouse post feminist concerns and how her characters, through their post feminist tendencies, evidenced by their various experiments in femininity, generate comprehensive and diverse post feminist discourses. The notion of the abject, the theorisations thereof, and the differences in the practice of abjection in the feminist and the post feminist critical models are emphasised here. The corporeal dimension of the abject is brought into prominence so as to make an effective use of the concept while trying to explain the reclamation of femininity in terms of the female body.

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

Terming Atwood as a post feminist writer does not mean that she has invented a separate strand of feminism and has succeeded in theorising and

practising it. The implication is that there are pertinent dimensions in her work that indicate strong tendencies of the post feminist sensibility, in terms of the intense personal experience and the interior metamorphosis of her characters. Attempts in this direction, along with an awareness of the self-deceptive and self-deprecating tendencies of feminism, are considered as post feminist stances. The focus is only on the maturation of feminist positions into a wholesome condition accommodative of unique and multiple femininities. The high point is that that which had proved to be self-destructive for feminism—abjection—becomes, in post feminism, a redemptive performance proving that there are hitherto unexplored territories of human life and being where a woman can discover and articulate her female self, selfhood and subjectivity in her own terms.
