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Les constructions culturelles du corps féminin : résistance narrative dans Margaret  
Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* et Gabrielle Roy  
*La Rivière sans repos*

Cultural Constructions of the Female Body : Narrative as Resistance in Margaret  
Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* and Gabrielle Roy's  
*La Rivière sans repos*

Par Jackie Hall

Travail présenté à :

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Cultural Constructions of the Female Body: Narrative as Resistance in  
Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* and  
Gabrielle Roy's *La Rivière sans repos*

Jackie Hall

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### Abstract

In this study I explore narrative resistance in three Canadian novels: Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* and *La Rivière sans repos* by Gabrielle Roy. I argue that the first two novels counter the dominant constructions of the virgin as the thin, acquiescing body and the whore as the out of bounds, devouring body respectively. I also reflect on whether these texts recognize the importance of a common narrative that speaks to the specificities of female experience, helping us move beyond the dominant constructions that continue to frame our day-to-day lives. *La Rivière sans repos* is a postcolonial narrative, but it is also a text about mothers. It exposes the containment Western consumerism has placed on the role of mother, the subsequent devaluing of that role and consequently a devaluing of the women who fill that role.

Throughout this study I draw from recent theorists who combine feminist perspectives with theories on the body including Susan Bordo and Elizabeth Grosz along with feminist literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Smart. By incorporating feminist theory and theory on the body along with literary criticism I approach the texts with an interdisciplinary analysis that offers a new reading of these narratives. Feminist thought was only just emerging into our cultural consciousness, and theory on the body was little known when Wiseman, Atwood and Roy were writing these novels in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Classical texts reflect and create the construction of women as objects of beauty, who are selfless, inherently weak and needy or they condemn us as "bitchie", manipulative and threatening if expressive of our desires. I seek alternatives to such cultural constructions by exploring how the three novels present and represent the body in relation to female subjectivity and agency by writing against classical representations. In my reading of *The Edible Woman* I suggest that Atwood's protagonist

deviates from the virgin stereotype by following the knowledge of her body rather than that of her intellect. In *Crackpot* I argue that the fat, sexual body of Wiseman's Hoda asks the reader to question assumptions about normative beauty, female sexuality and marginalization. In *La Rivière sans repos* I explore how Roy places mother at the centre of the text, which allows for an exploration of the contrast between mothering as experience and motherhood as institution. Each novel proposes a complexity to our experience that has generally been limited to virgin, whore and mother and, consequently, I argue that each offers a discourse of resistance and the possibility of social, cultural and political change.

Resistance

Narrative

Feminism

Body Knowledge

Female Body

## Résumé

Dans cette étude, j'examine la résistance narrative dans trois romans canadiens : *The Edible Woman* de Margaret Atwood, *Crackpot* d'Adèle Wiseman et *La Rivière sans repos* de Gabrielle Roy. Je soutiens que les deux premiers romans contestent des représentations dominantes de la femme, celle de la vierge au corps mince et soumis et celle de la putain au corps provocant et insatiable, respectivement. Je pose aussi la question à savoir si ces textes reconnaissent l'importance d'un discours commun qui affirme les spécificités de l'expérience féminine, nous permettant ainsi de nous libérer de ces représentations dominantes qui pèsent encore lourd dans notre vie quotidienne. Quant au troisième roman, *La Rivière sans repos*, c'est un récit postcolonial dans lequel le thème principal est celui de la mère. Le roman expose en effet le carcan imposé au rôle de la mère par la société de consommation occidentale, la dévaluation subséquente de ce rôle et, par extension, la dévaluation des femmes qui tiennent ce rôle.

Tout au long de cette étude, je m'inspire de théoriciennes contemporaines, telles Susan Bordo et Elizabeth Grosz, qui combinent des perspectives féministes avec les théories sur le corps, ainsi que de critiques littéraires féministes comme Linda Hutcheon et Patricia Smart. En combinant la théorie féministe, la théorie sur le corps et la critique littéraire, j'effectue ici une analyse interdisciplinaire qui permet une nouvelle lecture de ces récits. La pensée féministe commençait à peine à poindre dans notre conscience culturelle, et la théorie sur le corps n'en était encore qu'à ses premiers balbutiements au moment où Atwood, Wiseman et Roy écrivirent ces romans, c'est-à-dire vers la fin des années 1960 et le début des années 1970. Les œuvres plus traditionnelles reflètent et perpétuent cette construction de la femme, d'une part, comme l'objet de beauté, celle qui est désintéressée et par nature faible et nécessiteuse, et d'autre part, comme

la « garce », celle qui est manipulatrice et qui devient menaçante lorsqu'elle exprime ses désirs. Je tente de trouver des solutions de rechange à ces constructions culturelles en explorant de quelle façon les trois romans – via une écriture qui propose un contre-discours à ces représentations traditionnelles – présentent et représentent le corps par rapport à la subjectivité de la femme et son rôle. Dans mon analyse de *The Edible Woman* d'Atwood, je suggère que la protagoniste s'écarte du stéréotype de la vierge en obéissant aux messages que lui transmet son corps au lieu d'obéir à son intellect. Dans *Crackpot*, je soutiens que le corps gras et sexuel de Hoda force le lecteur à remettre en question ses idées reçues quant aux normes de beauté, à la sexualité féminine et à la marginalisation. Dans *La Rivière sans repos*, je relève le fait que Roy place la mère au centre du récit, ce qui permet une exploration du contraste entre les soins maternels comme expérience et la maternité comme institution. Chaque roman ajoute une autre facette à notre expérience, qui a souvent été limitée à celle de la vierge, de la putain ou de la mère, ce qui me porte à affirmer que chaque roman propose un discours de résistance et la possibilité de changement au niveau social, culturel et politique.



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## Introduction

The body continues to gain a growing acknowledgment in both theory and practice. No longer assumed to be an obstacle to our learning, our quest for health and enlightenment, it is now actually seen as an integral part of this process. It is this process that I explore in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*, and Gabrielle Roy's *La Rivière sans repos*. I have selected these three novels by Canadian women from the late 1960's to the early 1970's because they were written slightly before the time when the body was truly gaining such recognition in intellectual circles yet each suggests that there is power and agency to be had through the knowledge of our bodies.

In this study I propose a new reading of these three texts by analyzing them with contemporary theories on feminism and the body as put forward by such philosophers as Susan Bordo and Elizabeth Grosz. Like many feminist theorists today they extrapolate from masculine-centred theories on the body in order to contest classical constructs. I also draw on the literary perspectives of such feminists as Patricia Smart and Linda Hutcheon as they critique the patriarchal narrative in Canada and Quebec and point out how this narrative represses female potential. By exploring counter-narratives to the virgin, whore and mother in *The Edible Woman*, *Crackpot*, and *La Rivière sans repos* I find resistance to the imaginings of Plato and Aristotle that proclaim the body is an entity quite independent from the mind. Bordo discusses how the body was considered a confinement of the soul, a limitation to intellectual and spiritual awakenings. Quoting St. Augustine, who cursed the body and defined it as the enemy - "the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control"(145) - Bordo explores these imaginings that would have us believe that by killing off all bodily desires and hungers, "man" would rid "himself" of obscure and confused thinking. These ideologies called for the silencing of bodily

need and desire in the quest for improved intellectual and spiritual clarity. Although contemporary ideologies question this dualistic approach, we, as women, are still not able to celebrate a possible codependence of mind and body. Rather, in the Western world at least, we continue to divide mind from body, denying the needs of our bodies for improved social and cultural acceptance. Like Augustine, we attempt to gain control over our bodies – but rather than in spiritual quest, the objective is to obtain the ideal slender form for the promises of sex, wealth and happiness that are attached to normative beauty. And despite contemporary challenges a debilitating message still lingers from dualistic mind-sets: the body, desires and hunger are feminine by nature (of woman), while the mind, reason and clarity are attributes of the masculine (of man). What this ideology reinforces is a male superiority and a male subjectivity that relentlessly objectifies the female body. Within this structure women feel guilty if we cannot control our bodies while, at the same time, we are seen to threaten men's attempts at control. Yet placing women in this position of inferiority is not only detrimental to the feminine; it traps both sexes within a limiting binary dichotomy. This hierarchical framework, particular to patriarchal structures, thus devalues knowledge that is of body born, the knowledge categorized as women's ways of knowing.

Women have long been associated with the volatile nature of the body and as the body was devalued so were women. Equally devalued was the knowledge apparent in the body: the knowledge fixed in sensations, feelings and intuitive response, and the knowledge of mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters. Daniel Marcheix and Nathalie Watteyne point out in their "Presentation" of *L'écriture du corps dans la littérature québécoise depuis 1980* many new theories and epistemologies that emerge around this "culture somatique." Philosophers, feminist theorists and literary critics alike see a depth of knowledge accessible through the body and that

exists beyond the imaginings of the mind (Flax, Gallop, Kamboureli). Patriarchal culture, however, constructs norms of appearance and behaviour that manage female potential within this devalued state based on normative beauty and self-denial. These constructions strengthen a male subjectivity while placing women as objects before the male gaze. As a result master narratives categorize women according to sexual and reproductive use, as virgin, whore, and mother, providing us with weak and shallow stereotypes as female role models. Narratives by women began offering women alternatives, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These counter-narratives offer a resistance to dominant cultural and social constructions that continue to devalue and objectify the female body. They propose that knowledge exists in corporeal experience; that big is also beautiful; that female desire is part of our being and not necessarily threatening or all-consuming; that marriage is not the only happy ending; that women can be mothers and.... These counter-narratives offer resistance to the cultural constructions and historical limitations imposed on the female body that label us as object, as less than, as Othered.

Feminist discourses have contributed to the social and cultural changes that frame our realities and, as Susan Bordo acknowledges in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, these discourses offered a “systematic critique capable of rousing women to collective action” (31) and helped us to “guard against the feeling of comfortable oneness with culture and to foster a healthy skepticism about the pleasures and powers it offers” (31). Despite this consciousness-raising though, our bodies often still become the texts of our dis-ease. Despite the potential solidarity that might have emerged from “collective action”, we continue to be alienated from ourselves and often isolated from each other. One explanation feminist theorists and literary critics alike offer regarding this continuing discomfort with our bodies and isolation from each other is that knowledge that was previously shared amongst women began to

dissipate. Rich argues that social contexts and spaces that nurtured such sharing began to disappear, such as in the home when it was a unit of production, in the professional world between midwives to birthing mothers, and among women gathered together in the act of creative yet practical tasks such as sewing, food processing and childcare. These shifting contexts may have allowed us increasing access to masculinist institutions professionally, but as Bordo points out, we are at the same time being conditioned to take on more masculine ways of interacting because “relational, holistic and nurturant attitudes continue to be marked as flabby, feminine, and soft” (233). Like many feminist theorists, Rich argues that this gendered division of qualities is in part due to the “specialization of motherhood” that took place during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a development that separated “the ‘domestic’ from the ‘public’ or the ‘political’” (46). She then explains further:

From the earliest settled life until the growth of factories as centers of production, the home was not a refuge, a place for leisure and retreat from the cruelty of the “outside world”; it was a part of the world, a center of work, a subsistence unit. In it women, men, and children as early as they were able, carried on an endless, seasonal activity of raising, preparing, and processing food, processing skins, reeds, clays, dyes, fats, herbs, producing textiles and clothing, brewing, making soap, and candles, doctoring and nursing, passing on these skills and crafts to younger people.... Women and children were part of an actively busy social cluster. (46-7)

Rich admits it is important not to romanticize this time when social structures were more communal, for it was also a time of malnutrition and disease, a time when mortality from “childbirth and pregnancy and the loss of infant lives was high” (47). Nonetheless, perhaps it was a time when women’s ways of knowing and men’s ways of doing were more equally

recognized. Conversely, as Rich states, as industrialization encroached and urbanization increased, the respect for women, their skills, experience, and knowledge, seemed to diminish and became increasingly devalued. However, we attempt to regain our voice and identity and as many feminist critics propose, one means to this end is through narrative (Curti, Godard, Heilburn, Jeffreys).

Women writers in Canada did begin to break the growing silence by creating characters that resisted the stereotypes, female characters that were speaking their experience to female readers. In the late 1960's and '70's writers like Margaret Atwood, Adele Wiseman, and Gabrielle Roy brought female experience from the margins. Linda Hutcheon states in her introduction to *The Canadian Postmodern* that such writers achieve this by "taking pot-shots at the culture of which they know they are unavoidably part of but that they still wish to criticize" (3). It is this time period that interests me – the late 1960's throughout the 1970's – for it was a time of political and social upheaval that was punctuated by the emergence of the counter-narratives that began to recount female experience, to suggest possible alternatives, and to offer resistance (Heble, Meese). The three texts I have chosen for this study narrate female experience, offer alternative choices and propose resistance. In master narratives female experience is narrated from a male perspective and women are configured as virgin, whore or mother. I wish to explore how emergent feminist writers approached these configurations and wrote beyond the stereotype. I want to discover narrative examples of our emerging voice as women. Although feminist theory and theory on the body were still only just beginning to emerge in the '60' and '70's, these ideologies and epistemologies are evident in the works of Atwood, Wiseman, and Roy.

In the course of this study then, I argue that Atwood, Wiseman and Roy subvert the disregard of women's ways of knowing by narrating female experience. Feminist theorists including

Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway and Dorothy Smith have used masculinist theories on the body as a spring board for developing their own discourses. Working with standpoint theory Smith develops knowledge that places corporeal experience at the base of understanding, arguing that our perspective depends upon where we have come from and from where we stand and supporting the belief that female experience is, indeed, sometimes different from that of men. Such feminist arguments also bring a value and a credibility to the knowledge to which we have access through our corporeality. What emerges from this understanding is that it is no longer taken for granted that the male standpoint is universal. Pluralities exist due to sex as well as cultural and historical inscriptions of gender. For women, these inscriptions include an ideal of beauty and a self-effacing comportment that are generally inscribed on each of us as a discomfoting text.

Not only do I address ways in which body-knowledge is marginalized in these novels, I also explore how patriarchal structures oppress even our ways of moving and as a result the way female characters express their sexual selves. Sandra Lee Bartky posits that there “are significant gender differences in gesture, posture, movement, and general body comportment: Women are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality” (134). As our own self-worth becomes dependant on how we perceive our bodies, our bodies continue to be perceived as sexual objects, alienating us from a sexual self. The male gaze persistently demands eroticized images of the female form and the expression of feminine desire is, too often, merely a response to that gaze. The consequence has been our tendency to deny our needs and desires in deference to this dominant male construct (Daurio). With growing feminist consciousness, female desire attempts to find its place in our experience as independent of the male gaze. The fat body also finds agency within this feminist consciousness. As Bordo

says, “the obese elicit blinding rage and disgust in our culture and are often viewed in terms of an infant sucking hungrily, unconsciously at its mother’s breast: greedy, self-absorbed, lazy, without self-control or willpower” (202). Consequently the fat body in itself can be seen as subversive to the patriarchal order.

Atwood, Wiseman and Roy may write female experience, but are they able to bring value to our bodies, our bodily expression – sexual or otherwise – and our body knowledge? Grosz proposes that an awareness of gender difference may provide “new bases to rethink the body (and) share the unarticulated assumptions of these knowledges” (20), seeming to imply that these knowledges, to date attributed to the feminine, may finally gain recognition through new understandings of the body. An observation made by feminists and psychologists alike is that because dominant constructions of beauty and appropriate behaviors are so far removed from most women’s real experience, the inability to achieve this beauty and embody the feminine ideal has not only caused women to write disorder on our bodies, it has instilled a sense of competition and comparison amongst women that is divisive and isolating and causes us to question our identity (Chernin). This dynamic amongst women has caused us to fear one another, and as Naomi Wolf states, “for women to fear one another, we had to be convinced our sisters possess some kind of mysterious, potent secret weapon to be used against us – the imaginary weapon being ‘beauty’” (284). I suggest that by establishing a female voice in their narratives, Atwood, Wiseman and Roy better resist the “feeling and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough” (Bordo, 106) and realize the power and agency in our corporeal knowledge.

Until modern times there had been relatively few counter-narratives by women. Female characters of note in the classical canons of literature were, for the most part, created by men.



Thus, although women were ever-present in literature, these characters did not necessarily reflect female experience. Yet texts that *did* speak to female experience tended to be met by resistance at both publishing houses and bookstores. Novels and other writings by women were, in the beginning, trivialized and devalued by both the book industry and the public. Margaret Atwood notes that women's writing was criticized for being "too subjective, solipsistic, narcissistic, autobiographical and confessional" (Language, 18). However, increasingly since the 1960's women writers pursued this more subjective approach and it became apparent that it was the very subjective and autobiographical nature of these texts that voiced our experience and articulated our needs. Women persisted in writing despite cultural obstacles and our counter-narratives continue to challenge the status quo and express a discourse that has previously been systematically silenced.

Female-specific experiences involve knowledges that have been feared and ridiculed by patriarchal norms and repressed by the institutionalization of education, birthing and mothering. This fear and ridicule have made female experience a topic weighted with taboos. Schools have taken on the responsibility of sex education and birthing has been moved from the private home, where the mother was surrounded by the care of family and midwives, into the male-dominated environment of the hospital. Similarly the spaces where women gathered and shared experience have disappeared – such as around the village well and the weekly quilting bee. Thus, as this collective knowledge that was grounded in the knowledge of our bodies began to dissipate, so did the female collective itself. Ideologies such as those founded in Freudian discourse also influenced the growing isolation of women for they encouraged the separation of mothers from daughters, contributing to the dissolution of a female community, a community formed amongst family and between friends. The consequences of this dissolution of a female community grew

evident as my research progressed. It appeared to be a key reason behind the fact that despite the upheaval of norms in the 1960's and then strides made by and for women in the feminist revolution of the 1970's, we are still objectified in the media and are at war with our own bodies. I argue that this ideology *is* partially due to a weakened sense of community and that it also allows normative dictates of beauty to keep us in our place and our sexuality to still be commodified. In the chapters that follow I suggest that the texts in question offer words of potential change; and transgressive insights. As the dominant narrative proclaims women as one of the three constructs of virgin, whore or mother, the novels articulate resistance to these norms and stereotypes, finding moments where woman is not Othered but rather valued in her social and physical space, respected *in* her body rather than *as* a body. Once in her body, perhaps there can be a better understanding of self. I propose that these texts offer an alternative to the village well and the quilting bee, presenting the possibility of a new meeting place where we can share experience and transfer a common knowledge.

The binary system of Aristotle, Plato and Descartes is evident in the gendered divisions of labor and behavior in *The Edible Woman*. We see Marion, Atwood's protagonist, limited within these divisions and, as is typical of the virgin construct in the dominant narrative, she tends to put her own needs and desires second. But we see her even more clearly limited within her own body as it begins to resist her intake of food. It has been proposed that this behavior mimics that of women suffering from anorexia, but I argue in Chapter One, that unlike the anorexic woman, Marion resists not only the construct of the thin body but that of the self-denying virgin. Her body does not remain her limitation but becomes her awakening. By listening to and accepting the knowledge of her body, she arrives at a place of female subjectivity and a place of agency.

In Chapter Two I explore the possible resistance presented by the corpulent, carnivalesque

body of Hoda, the obese and ubiquitous whore in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*. Wiseman's protagonist is a body out of bounds, a female body beyond constructions, a corpulent body that shouts resistance, allowing Hoda to become the subject of her own female experience. The fat body in the novel is presented as a means of joyful transgression.

Chapter Three turns to the mother. In *La Rivière sans repos* Roy presents Elsa, a young Inuit mother caught between her Native culture (mothering) and that of the encroaching consumerist culture (motherhood), placing her in unexplored territory not yet explored, between worlds, between paradigms, on the precipice of possibility. Focusing my reading of Roy's narrative on the mother and the mother-daughter relationship, I explore the alienation mothers can experience in the patriarchal order as well as the power that might be gained from a shared narrative amongst mothers, daughters and women.

## Chapter 1

### Resisting the Virgin

Long ago, in the land of small metal curlers, of respectable white-cotton garter belts and panty-girdles with rubbery-smelling snap crotches, of stockings with seams, where condoms could not legally be displayed on pharmacy shelves, where we read Kotex ads to learn how to behave at proms and always wore our gloves when we went out, where cars had fins like fish and there was only one brand of tampon, women were told many things.

We were told that there were certain 'right', 'normal' ways to be women, and other ways that were wrong. The right ways were limited in number. The wrong ways were endless.

We did some investigations of our own, and concluded that virgins were at a premium not because they were pure, but because they were stupid.

(Atwood, *Language*, 15)

There is much evidence of resistance to the dominant constructions of the virgin in Margaret Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*. Using feminist theory and body politics, this study looks at ways in which Atwood's protagonist Marian McAlpin subverts the virgin construction through corporeal experience. I veer away from a thematic reading of the text and draw from literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Smart, who approach texts from a feminist view point, acknowledging the significance of corporeal experience. Theories put forward by scholars Susan Bordo and Elizabeth Grosz have also informed my research and have contributed to an interdisciplinary reading of the text including psychological and sociological perspectives.

Given the time period and cultural setting of this novel – North America in the late 1960's - the construction of the virgin does not necessarily dictate chastity but continues to dictate a regime of slenderness, self-denial and normative beauty (Davis, Lambert, Starkie). For women growing up in Western culture these dictates define femininity and, as Sandra Lee Bartky argues in "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", these dictates are

merely an artifice, perpetuating the image of woman as object and consequently destabilizing our sense of identity. Bartky lists three particular forms of self-discipline we tend to impose on ourselves in order to meet with the cultural ideal: “Those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface” (134). In other words we subscribe to a self-discipline that keeps us thin, compliant and adorned, continuing to construct bodies that aim to accommodate the male gaze. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, Susan Bordo points out that this is

one juncture where Foucauldian insights prove particularly useful to social and historical analysis of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. Where power “works from below”, prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion (although social relations may well contain such elements) but through individual surveillance and self-correction to norms. (27)

Although our patriarchal culture can be seen as propagating the image of the ideal woman it is this “individual surveillance” and “self-correction” that actually perpetuates the virgin construction and basically demands that women function in a constant state of self-denial. Bordo feels that this behaviour is the result of “a constellation of social, economic, and psychological factors (that) have combined to produce a generation of women who feel deeply flawed, ashamed of their needs, and not entitled to exist unless they transform themselves into worthy new selves (read: without need, without want, without body)” (47). Marian McAlpin, the heroine of Atwood’s Novel, is on this quest for a worthy self and initially believes this will be found by seeking integration into the social order, attempting to be “without need, without want, without

body". Through the course of this chapter I identify moments in the text where Marian strives to conform in this way, and then explore the literary strategies Atwood invokes, combined with Marian's corporeal representation, that lead her to resist the stereotype of the virgin and to resist conforming to the dominant constructions of the feminine.

*i. Corporeal Significance: Slight of Body*

Carol Ann Howells affirms that "Atwood has always been intensely aware of the significance of the female body" (20) and this is confirmed by Catherine Rainwater's observation that Atwood's female characters "unsurprisingly suffer troublesome relationships with their own bodies. They exhibit an array of physical and body-related psychological ills: eating disorders, disturbed body image, rational and irrational fears of infestation, mutilation and amputation" (14). She goes on to conclude that these ills are "inevitably augmented by cultural stereotypes of feminine beauty that demand thinness (little embodiment) and spirituality (disembodiment) on the one hand, and sexuality and motherliness (flesh and physical nurturance) on the other" (15). The artifice of slimness has long been in the female vocabulary, but the quest for the slender body reached new heights during the 1970's. The self-denial that thousands of North American women began to practice in order to achieve the ideal appearance presented in magazines, movies and on television resulted in epidemic-like numbers of women suffering from eating disorders, causing women to write our dis-ease on our bodies in response to this construction (Chernin, Knapp, Orbach). Although Atwood began her novel in 1964, prior to any general knowledge of the disquieting statistics about anorexia, she poignantly links self, body and food and their significance in our identity as women. In "Famininity, or Parody of Autonomy: Anorexia and *The Edible Woman*", critic Elspeth Cameron notes the parallels

between the experience Marian has with food and that of the anorexic woman. W.J. Keith critiques this article suggesting that the most useful discussions of literature “are those which start from a more strictly literary approach to the text” (23). He claims the article must be read with caution, for it may provide “some sources of analogues to the presentation of Marian, but not sources for Atwood” (22). His justification for this criticism is that most research on anorexia postdates the novel. Alternatively such research and theories that postdate the publication of literary works might shed new light on a narrative and prove its durability and relevance over time. I argue that recent research on eating disorders and new perspectives on the body are relevant to *The Edible Woman* not because Marian *is* anorexic, but that she is *not*. I propose that the anorexic woman perpetuates the mind-body split of Cartesian dualism that Jane Gallop sees has become our destruction (2), while I propose that Marian in the end manages to synthesize the duality of mind and body.

Marian in many ways reflects the North American ideal of what a young woman ought to be, yet as Catherine McLay asserts, Marian is certainly “not the traditional virgin heroine” (125) as her identity is not finally actualized through marriage. She is attractive, slim and polite, educated enough to be independent but not too much so as to intimidate a potential husband. She has a respectable job working with a marketing company in the surveys department – a department delegated to female workers. The managers, the men, work upstairs. Marian is about to take her gendered, predetermined course, deciding to marry her present boyfriend and to give up her job - as “she couldn’t become one of the men upstairs” (20), and to assume the role of wife and eventually, mother. Up to this point Marian “is moving towards the conventional ending of happily-ever-after which she, like her family, equates with marriage” (McLay, 126). But this direction begins to shift early in the narrative.

Howells categorizes *The Edible Woman* as a narrative belonging to “a specific moment in the history of North America postwar feminism, which registered the first signs of the contemporary women’s movement in its resistance to social myths of femininity” (20). This statement reflects what Atwood herself observes of the era when she wrote *The Edible Woman* saying, “there wasn’t any feminist movement, really, that I noticed, until about 1969” (LAS Interview, 172). Aside from many assertions in early reviews of the novel that this was indeed a feminist text, the general theme was thought to revolve around consumerism and, as George Woodcock put it, “emotional cannibalism” (98). Woodcock refers to the title as well as the final consumption of the goddess-cake to support his claim, while Howell sees Atwood exploring the “relation between consumerism and the feminine mystique, where one woman’s resistance to consuming and to being consumed hints at a wider condition of social malaise which the new feminist movement was just beginning to address” (21). Atwood uses the body as the medium of this consumption and a resistance to it.

As Gayle Greene notes of the novel, “the idea of eating is central. Numerous scenes take place over lunch, dinner, drinks; food metaphors are everywhere” (98). Marian begins to hunger for a more meaningful existence and sense of self that are missing in her relationships and her situation at work. In keeping with Greene’s observation, Marian is also constantly physically hungry, yet she usually denies her body adequate nourishment with pre-packaged food like “wizened meatballs and noodles from a noodle mix” (35), or processed cheese slices on Wonder bread – food with no aesthetics and little nutrition. Marian’s eating patterns support Rainwater’s contention that “undesirable relationships with food appear amongst Atwood’s characters during the first phase of their metamorphoses, and such troublesome relationships are symptomatic of these women’s disturbed attitudes towards the body” (17). Thus her “just eating to stay alive”



(192) with food of limited nutritional value mirrors the limited nourishment she is receiving from the social and cultural constructs that surround her. At home she is limited by a spying landlady, at work by “limits (that) are vaguely defined” (19) and in her relationship by a pompous and domineering fiancé. These external (of the mind) limitations begin to affect her internal (of the body) sense of well-being. As she begins to process these experiences her sense of self wanes and is translated into a waning of her body as well. As she awakes one morning she remembers a dream: “I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent” (43). Or later, in a bath, “she was afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle” (218). For Rainwater these disturbing body images “evinced the fundamental difficulty of negotiating the boundaries between self and world” (15) and are also examples of the process of self-actualization that Linda Hutcheon refers to in her comments on *The Edible Woman* in *The Canadian Postmodern*. Of Marian’s process Hutcheon says we must not always take it at face value, for this process,

is not...always presented in positive terms, and when it is not it is usually a signal of Marian’s unreliability as what Henry James called a narrative ‘centre of consciousness’: images of drowning, dissolving, drifting into a natural realm are viewed as negative at first, that is, from Marian’s limited, unreliable point of view. Such loss of individuality as is implied in these images of merging with process is therefore perceived as dangerous to her personal sense of herself (and her self). (141)

In the early stages of this process, Marian’s mind perceives the tenuous state of her existence through these surreal images, images that re-enforce her “pathological condition of self-division” (Howells, 27). It is most markedly after she has agreed to marry Peter that this opposition

between body and mind becomes evident, when her body “becomes the battleground in the struggle towards self-definition” (Rainwater, 17). Shortly after their official engagement Peter and Marian are at a restaurant together. He has ordered steak – for both of them – and, about to take his first bite, comments, “A good meal always makes you feel a little more human” (152). It is at this point, now beginning to fully digest the realities of her impending future that Marian’s body embarks on its silent yet unerring stance of resistance. Her body begins to wake up to the demise it will encounter (disembodiment) if she continues to follow the pre-determined course at hand, which would be to give up any career options, marry, become a mother (physical nurturance) and live, if not happily, at least ever after. If Marian does not begin to navigate a more autonomous course, she will have no clear individual identity, therefore not be “fully human”, as Peter proclaims. The intuitive nature of her body protests and begins its refusal of food. It starts with a rejection of steak and progresses to eggs, cheese and down through the food chain until all her body finally allows her is a few carrot sticks and spoonfuls of peanut butter. Much to Marian’s dismay her body appears to have a mind – a knowledge – all its own, a knowledge that is other than her conscious intellect, a knowledge that is centred in her body. Although not yet merging mind and body, her mind’s growing awareness of her body’s voice indicates the potential conversation that might arise between the two. This potential conversation offers an interesting twist to Cartesian ideology that sees “the body as alien...a confinement and limitation...the enemy (and) the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control” (Bordo, 144-5). In this discourse it is the mind that must control the body, yet in Marian’s case it is her body overriding her intellect. It is not until she accepts this dialogue with her body that her intellect can take action towards autonomy – symbolized in the baking and eating of her goddess-cake. At the end of the novel she plunges “her fork into the carcass, neatly

severing the body from the head” (273). This might well have been her own fate if she had stuck with convention, but in the end she asserts that the cake is edible, where she is not. At the end of the narrative she may not yet be “fully human”, but she appears to be on the track that will lead her there. This conversation between mind and body is what sets Marian apart from the anorectic, for, as psychologist Helen Malsen observes in her study of anorexia, women with eating disorders are relentlessly attempting to silence the body and its messages saying

body management becomes central to the maintenance of self-integrity, and eating becomes an occasion when the body, something that is ‘not me’, ‘takes over’ and triumphs in the discursively produced conflict between mind/self and body. As an object of bodily desire, food...takes on very powerful significations within this discourse. It is simultaneously wanted (by the body) and forbidden (by the mind/self). Food becomes constituted as a profoundly threatening temptation.

(125)

It is in this relationship with food that Marian and the anorectic experience their corporeal realities differently. In the case of the anorexic woman food is constantly craved by the body yet repeatedly denied by her conscious self, while in Marian’s situation, her mind constantly acknowledges that she is in need of food, but it is her body that is denying its entry. The body is the enemy of the anorectic, but where Marian initially also sees her body as the enemy for it threatens to deny all she has been conditioned to do and be, eventually her body brings her to her self. McLay sees that by accepting to marry and follow convention Marian is “ignoring the demands of her subconscious mind” (126) – or otherwise put, ignoring her more intuitive sense of being, the knowledge of her body. When she is finally forced to listen or starve, McLay suggests that Marian reaches a “higher level of reality”: “While she is faced with the same

decisions as before and must search for a new job, new accommodations, and a new lover, she has gained a sense of identity and a new knowledge of self. And she has discovered, in a world seen as alien and threatening, the need for integration not only of mind and body but of multiple aspects of self.” (126).

Although Marian and the anorectic appear to diverge in their corporeal experience, they are similarly influenced by the hierarchy of gender that has been established by a phallogentric economy. Both Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* and Bordo observe that women much more profoundly than men, have written our obedience to this economy on our bodies. Bordo sees anorexia as a prime example of such obedience and argues that it is a “virtual, though tragic, parody of twentieth-century constructions of femininity” and that “(t)he emaciated body of the anorectic...immediately presents itself as a caricature of the contemporary ideal of hyper-slenderness for women, an ideal that...has become the norm of women today” (170). Thus women who have written this disorder on our bodies have lost our own narrative and have become a skeletal parody of the slender cultural construction of the female body. We obsessively deconstruct our form but remain void of a new text (Brook). The protest that Atwood manifests through Marian’s corporeal experience becomes life-affirming, eventually leading Marian to regain her narrative with a new eye/I.

## *ii. Corporeal Insignificance: The Non-Body*

Bordo asserts that every woman, although to varying degrees, is vulnerable to “the requirements of the cultural construction of femininity” (47) and the slender body is but one of those requirements. Appropriate behaviour looms large as well, behaviour that often aims at making ourselves as inconspicuous as possible, often compromising or denying our own needs in

our attempts to accommodate others. Howell refers to Betty Friedan's citation of "case histories of women suffering from fatigue, heart attacks and psychotic breakdowns, a catalogue of female hysterical illness induced by women's attempts to conform to the artificial codes of the feminine Mystique" (23). Bordo's research also confirms this connection between culturally imposed patterns and women's physical dis-ease when looking at the epidemic of hysteria in the Victorian era. She notes that "all clinicians and theorists today agree that the ultimate sources of hysteria...as characteristic disorders of elite Victorian women are located in Victorian culture" (50). This becomes clear with historical distance because "it becomes possible to see the degree to which femininity itself required the holding of breath, the loss of air, the choking down of anger and desire, the relinquishing of voice, the denial of appetite, the constriction of body" (50). Likewise today women with eating disorders "offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter – a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender" (Bordo, 169). As literary text and fictional body, *The Edible Woman* and Marian make similar demands.

From the opening of the novel we see Marian is sensitive to her appearance and compromising her own needs in order to accommodate others. The novel begins with an interaction between Marian and her roommate Ainsley. Ainsley is not overly concerned with the social and moral structures Marian is at first determined to uphold. In Marian's attempt to sympathize appropriately over Ainsley's morning hangover and her disappointments with men, Marian dutifully puts Ainsley's needs before her own, although in a rather holier-than-thou way. Marian says, "I got so caught up in being efficient for Ainsley's benefit while complimenting myself on my moral superiority that I didn't realize how late it was" (12). Consequently she must skip breakfast and dash to work so as not to be late. Once outside at the bus stop, Ainsley

is not far behind and Marian, noticing Ainsley's tousled beauty, remorsefully comments that she herself is not such a "quick change artist" (13). Then, although she judges that Ainsley's dress is too tight around the hips, she goes on to wonder if she should not have put on a sleeveless summer dress as well. In these first two pages Marian questions her appearance and denies her needs while envying and judging Ainsley at the same time. Marge Piercy criticizes Atwood for not giving her protagonists more resources, that in their quest to become non-victims "each of her protagonists fights an entirely solitary battle" (65). Yet women do tend to face the constraints of construction alone, for our North American culture sets up a sense of insecurity and competition amongst women that Marian experiences here, thwarting any strength in solidarity. Marian can be seen struggling with her body image once again while on the bus on her way to the Laundromat. She ponders an ad for girdles, wondering who would actually respond to the ad, as the "female form...is supposed to appeal to men, not women, and men don't usually buy girdles....perhaps the (female) purchasers thought they were getting their own slenderness and youth back in the package" (93). But even though she is aware of this objectification of the female form she can't help comparing herself to the model and questioning whether her own body is actually flawed: "(F)or the rest of the journey I thought about middle age spread: when would I get it? – maybe I already had it" (93). In this situation she is also attempting to be as inconspicuous as possible in fear that someone might admonish her for doing her laundry on a Sunday. Judging from her insecurities it is evident that Marian is not certain of the boundaries between self and "other". Eleonora Rao in her study of Atwood's fiction asserts that "Atwood emphasizes the necessity for the female protagonist to establish independence" (43). Marian does manage to establish independence learning how to move towards subjectivity through her body.

The textual examples given above indicate the cultural and social constraints that cause Marian to remain disconnected from her self. In Part I of the novel she refers to herself in the first person yet never seems to consider herself a valid being. She continues to doubt herself and modify her actions to please others. She shares a bathroom with her landlady and one day, taking a bath, she wants “to soak for awhile, but (she) had barely scrubbed away the afternoon’s film of dust and bus fumes when the (landlady) began making rustling and throat-clearing noises outside the door. This is her way of suggesting she wants to get in” (16). Marian immediately suppresses her own desires and leaves the bath to return back upstairs. She also consistently squelches her own needs to acquiesce those of her fiancé, Peter. On her way to visit him in the evenings she always picks up things for supper because “he is made irritable by errands” and she contains her own sexuality in deference to his: “I was wondering why he insisted we get into the bathtub. I hadn’t thought it a good idea, I much prefer the bed and I knew the tub would be too small and uncomfortably... but I hadn’t objected...” (60). In T.D. MacLulich’s comparison of *The Edible Woman* with the fairy tale *The Gingerbread Man* he states that “Marian fears sex.” (189). I disagree. Female sexual desire has consistently been seen as a taboo in the patriarchal narrative. Women are to be passive or they become a threat. I believe Marian’s cool approach to her sexuality stems from these cultural dictates rather than any fear. Bordo speaks to the role literature and film play in transmitting this message of passivity:

In (films), the trope of female hunger as female sexuality is embodied in attractive female characters; more frequently, however, female hunger as sexuality is represented by Western culture in misogynist images permeated with terror and loathing rather than affection or admiration. In the figure of the man-eater the metaphor of the devouring woman reveals its deep psychological underpinnings. Eating is not really a metaphor for

the sexual act; rather, the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire. Thus women's sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male. (117)

Ainsley's pursuit of a potential candidate to father her child flips the roles of gendered hunter and prey and "works as a comic reversal of the traditional seduction plot, exposing the dynamics of the sexual game in all its duplicity" (Howells, 26). In this role reversal Ainsley can then express her needs and desires as she embodies the male construct. Marian on the other hand remains ambivalent and far too dislocated from her self to acknowledge, let alone express, any sexuality. This is evident not only with Peter, but in her tentative exchanges with Duncan, a new friend who also appears to represent her alter-ego. Lured somewhat innocently into his room and then convinced to remove her clothes so he can iron them, Duncan lends her his dressing gown. To her surprise she finds herself on the bed with him yet as he tugs her down towards him her response is detached to say the least: "She was not sure what was happening: there was an uneasy suspicion in one corner of her mind that what he was really caressing was his own dressing gown, and that she merely happens to be inside it" (144). Rosemary Sullivan quotes Atwood saying

Marian is meant to be a young woman "attempting to be normal, but failing despite herself". She views her incapacity to adapt as a consequence of her own stupidity, and until the end of the novel is "unable to trust her own perceptions about other people and about society. (165)

The detachment depicted in the dressing gown scene with Duncan demonstrates Marian's inability to trust her own perceptions and her physical needs. Bordo suggests that women with



eating disorders experience this dislocation to dramatic degrees, having difficulty in identifying even “cold, heat, emotions, and anxiety as originating in self” (147). When sensations do arise, the anorexic woman feels threatened by these eruptions, and anorexia itself can be seen as an extreme development of the capacity to deny and repress not only appetite, but any form of desire” (Bordo, 148). Marian mirrors this behaviour as she desperately attempts to suppress the “eruptions” of her body, both physical and emotional. When she is at a bar with Peter and some friends, this self-alienation begins with a sense of division from everyone and particularly from Peter, but then, rather shockingly, from herself: “After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then!” (70).

Up to this point Marian is not aware of the dualism she is experiencing. She is still referring to herself in the first person, but within a few pages she has shifted her awareness and become an observer of her actions, changing the narration to the third person. Her disengagement from her own body becomes even clearer when she happens to encounter her quirky, quasi-lover Duncan in the cinema: “She noticed a peculiar sensation in her left hand. It wanted to reach across and touch him on the shoulder. Its will seemed independent of her own: surely she herself wanted nothing of the kind” (125). Whether in first person or third, both of these situations demonstrate Marian’s anxiety over her body’s expression of despair and desire. Her impulse is to subdue, conceal and deny them. Once she realizes she is actually crying in the earlier scene with Peter she says: “Something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole. I was going to break down and make a scene, and I couldn’t” (70). She tries to remain “inconspicuous”, have “no witnesses” and to “get a grip” on

herself, as though insisting that these emotions are separate from her self, not part of her identity. And in the cinema she “made her fingers grab the arm of the seat”, for to touch Duncan “would never do” (125) – he might scream or disappointingly not be there at all. In keeping with her lack of trust in her own perceptions, these moments indicate a lack of trust in her intuitive impulses as well, the impulses of her body. Marian’s surprise at these impulses of emotion and sexual desire reflect Bordo’s observation of a similar disconnection women suffering with anorexia experience with the sensation of hunger. For these women hunger is seen “as an alien invader, marching to the tune of its own seemingly arbitrary whims, disconnected from any normal self-regulating mechanisms” (146). Like Marian at this stage, rather than fostering a conversation between mind and body, the anorectic engages in a continual battle between the two. Bordo concludes from her research that the voice of judgment we hear, our self-criticism and disapproval, is heard as a male voice, where “the ‘*other self*’ - the self of the uncontrollable appetites, the impurities and taints, the flabby will and tendency to mental torpor – is the body.... But it is also...the *female self*” (154). The female self is then constantly denying itself in search of approval from the male eye/I. But unlike the anorectic that allows the male self to dominate, Marian’s “female self” – her body - grows louder than her internalized voice conditioned by the patriarchal order and she finally allows her own needs and impulses to become manifest. Reaching a panic state just before her engagement party she calls Duncan admitting her need for him to come to the party. Finally he agrees and, as she hangs up the phone, she realizes that she needed “to make sure there were people at the party who really knew her” (220) if she was going to cope. Later, leaving the party and Peter behind she is determined to make at least some attempt at authentic physical expression and does reach out and touch Duncan, however clumsy, seedy and only “slightly friendly” (254) this passionless sexual encounter ends up being.

### *iii. Corporeality: The Decorated Body*

Grosz talks about the body as involuntarily marked by social norms, culture, and categorized into socially significant groups, but that it is also marked “through ‘voluntary’ procedures, life-styles, habits and behaviours” (142). Items such as “makeup, stilettos, bras” mark women’s bodies and she argues that there “is nothing natural or ahistorical about these modes of corporeal inscription. Through them, bodies are made amenable to the prevailing exigencies of power” (142). She goes on to stress the point that there is “no ‘natural’ norm; there are only cultural forms of body, which do or do not conform to social norms” (143). There are certainly clichés that arise from these norms, and Atwood parodies such clichés and stereotypes in *The Edible Woman*, a novel she saw as “a send-up of the genre”, a genre presenting “modern life and female problems” (*Red Shoes*, 164). The image of Marian as she leaves for her engagement party in her red dress, high heels and Cleopatra-like makeup job echo Atwood’s own experience early in her writing career as she was about to receive her first literary award. Convinced Atwood did not have the appropriate attire; college friends dressed and adorned her for the occasion, much to Atwood’s discomfort (*Red Shoes*, 185). Atwood’s friends were attempting to help her conform to what an award-winning woman writer should look like. It is hardly likely that friends would have fussed over Michael Ondaatje’s hairstyle or Milton Acorn’s choice of shirts in similar fashion, their choices perhaps accepted as expressions of artistic personalities – but more likely just not taken note of at all. In Marian’s case she is now ornamented to satisfy the male gaze and is presented much more as the stereotypical whore rather than the sweet, pre-nuptial virgin. This image suggests that in going through with her plans to marry Peter she would be prostituting her potential by denying herself a chance at autonomy. Up to this point in the narrative Marian’s body is persistent in its attempts to alert

Marian to her impending demise by rejecting food and overriding her mind's attempt to suppress her emotions and physical expression. It continues by resisting this adornment Marian allows. I say "allows" for the whole process seems removed from her own actions, written on her body by others. Everything about the ornamentation feels foreign to her. As she begins her attempts to conform to the cultural norms of beauty in preparation for her engagement party she equates the hairdresser's to a hospital visit, for she feels "as passive as though she was being admitted (for) an operation" (209) and, walking home afterwards, she feels she is "balancing her head on her neck as though she was a juggler with a fragile golden bubble" (208). After Ainsley has added makeup to complete the picture, Marian looks in the mirror and sees "the egyptian-lidded and outlined and thickly fringed eyes of a person she had never seen before" (222). As Grosz says, "(n)ot only does what the body takes into itself (diet in the first instance) effect a 'surface inscription' of the body; the body is also incised by various forms of adornment" (142) that make it an appropriate or inappropriate body for its cultural and social positioning. As the "egyptian-lidded" lady, Marian's body is now primed for male consumption; it is the body that epitomizes what men desire to embrace and what women envy and desire in order to be embraced. It is this social and cultural positioning that Marian's body is determined to resist. When she finally arrives at Peter's apartment in this "appropriate" body and he approvingly informs her how "marvellous" she looks, she reflects at her own image in the mirror, attempting to get the "right" look, the regard in her face that will match the message her body's external appearance announces:

The difficulty was she could not grasp the total effect: her attention caught on various details, the things she wasn't used to – the fingernails, the heavy ear-rings, the hair.... She was only able to see one thing at a time. What was it that lay beneath the surface

these pieces were floating on, holding them all together? She held both her naked arms out towards the mirror (...) even they looked fake...boneless, flexible... (229)

After this exchange with the mirror Marian knows something is truly amiss, for not only can she not eat, she feels disembodied - completely cut off from her self. This lack of self is confirmed when she is unable even to have her picture taken by Peter: "Her body had frozen, gone rigid. She couldn't move, she couldn't even move the muscles of her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter release, but she couldn't move..." (252). Like a deer in the headlights, or a rabbit caught by surprise she believes by freezing she will become invisible to the beholder. At this moment, so adorned, whoever Marian actually is inside her body *is* invisible. Her body speaks a language that is finally rising to her consciousness. Her body realizes this person in the red dress has no identity and therefore to catch it on film will not only capture an image that will be horrifyingly alien to her, by capturing this image on film she would be locked into her destiny with Peter, which for her autonomous self would amount to the same thing as receiving a fatal gunshot wound from one of Peter's hunting rifles. The protest Marian's body offers becomes life-affirming, freeing her from Peter and Duncan as well as from her gender-bent, dead-end job. It brings her to a new beginning.

#### *iv. The Body Myth*

In mythic and literary traditions in order to truly begin again a death of some sort must take place. Although speaking more specifically to Quebecois texts, both Mary Jean Green and Patricia Smart note the violence women experience in the dominant narrative. Smart refers to "the melancholy cohort of murdered women" (4) she saw in her first reading of several

Quebécois novels. She notes that this trail of death “traverses the writing of men and of women, but differently. In men’s writing (the female voice) is almost always hidden deep down...expressing itself through all the ‘otherness’ that male writers seem to feel the need to dominate in order to assure themselves of their identity within writing” (5). Conversely, in texts by women, Green documents the high number of mothers’ deaths. She cites “Le Torrent” by Ann Hébert, “the story of a child that unleashes a murderous rage against an oppressive mother” (74) as one of the many examples where children rebel and murder their monstrous mothers. In Smart’s assessment of the male narrative, women are silenced in order to maintain the hierarchy, but in Green’s example, mothers act as a pillar of the patriarchal order. By killing off the mother, women writers attempt to liberate the children from this order and alert female readers of our own implication in the perpetuation of this oppressive hierarchy. Smart goes on to observe that before death the “female body must be dominated, dismembered, and mutilated, precisely because of its power to arouse male desire” (196). Perhaps Atwood has taken these acts of aggression and translated them into the dismembering and death of a myth symbolized by the decapitation and consumption of Marian’s goddess cake.

At the end of the novel Marian has resolved not to marry and sits in her apartment the morning after her flight from the engagement party and her departure from Duncan, reflecting on events. In the dominant narrative this is the point where the virgin would meet with her end, death being the only possible alternative to marriage. Counter to this narrative, Marian herself lives on. Rather it is the recreation of herself in the cake that meets its end. Much of the analysis and criticism of *The Edible Woman* at the time of publication was to do with the significance of the cake. Female critics such as Jane Rule and Isobel McKenna rejected the significance of the cake, while male critics volleyed for its symbolism. In light of gender politics and food

consumption and refusal, the cake as symbol seems evident. A monologue rallied half way through the narrative by Fish the academic, one of Duncan's roommates, supports the notion that transformation requires a crisis of sorts, or as he puts it, "a cataclysm" to allow re-birth. He goes on to suggest: "We need a new Venus, a lush Venus of warmth and vegetation and generation, a new Venus, big-bellied, teeming with life, potential, about to give birth to a new world in all its plenitude, a new Venus rising from the sea..." (200). This image of Venus brings to mind the Virgin-Mother-Goddess of ancient cultures that Adrienne Rich describes, where a woman's power was seen to radiate "out from her maternal aspect to the fertilization of the whole earth, the planting and harvesting of crops, the cycle of seasons, the dialogue of humankind and nature" (107) - a perspective where virgin and mother are celebrated as the givers and nurturers of life and the goddess of plenty replaces the feared abundant desire of the whore. The goddess cake does embody the images created by Fish and documented by Rich, but it can also be seen as representing the myth perpetuated by the phallogentric economy, the myth that normative beauty and appropriate comportment are what will bring us sexual joy and overall happiness. This myth, socially constructed but iced by the hands of mothers, daughters and wives, must be sacrificed if we are to be freed from the construction. Representing the Venus goddess, by consuming the cake herself, Marian might embody the goddess qualities of assurance and abundance. Representing the feminine mystique, by consuming the cake Marian sacrifices this construction in order to give birth to new possibilities. But Marian does not eat the entire cake herself; Duncan helps her in this endeavour. Ildiko de Papp Carrington offers the suggestion that Duncan is Marian's "Secret Sharer" that he is her mirror and therefore must share in the consumption. His sharing of the cake also indicates his support of Marian's transformation, whereas Peter does not. Unaware that she has decided to call off the wedding,

Peter enters Marian's apartment just as she is finishing the icing on her cake. He intends to scold her for her odd behaviour at the party but he is met with a Marian now unwilling to submit. As she offers him a piece of the cake she instead scolds him: "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you," she said. "'You've been trying to assimilate me. But I have made you a substitute, something you will like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork,' she added, rather prosaically" (271). Peter refuses to find any wonder in her creation or in any way partake of the cake. Representing the patriarchal order, in this act of refusal he is both resisting the deconstruction of the myth as well as resisting the acceptance of woman as the embodiment of the goddess, woman as the subject of her own life.

#### *v. Postmodern Proposals*

Atwood was writing in an era prior to the postmodern movement, but as research on anorexia has offered new readings of the text, so there are moments that can be illuminated by postmodern perspectives. Hutcheon observes that women writers might have come later to the postmodern scene because they could not question their subjectivity until they had affirmed it and could not begin to deconstruct ourselves until our identity had first been defined (6). She also asserts though that Canadian novelists in general have "milked realism for all its power, even while parodying and subverting its conventions. This is yet another paradox that defines the postmodern" (20). This milking of realism might explain Robert Lecker's reading of the goddess-cake scene, yet he seems to negate the possibility of subversion: "By eating the symbol of her own artificiality, then, Marian only reaffirms the fact that she still thrives on artifice" (183). I argue that once the myth has been destroyed and the goddess image embraced, the body can be read as a means to knowledge rather than a distraction or mere artifice. It is in this



visioning rather than literary strategies that bring *The Edible Woman* towards the postmodern. Bordo sees a postmodern visioning of the body as allowing it to “no longer (be) an obstacle to knowledge”, but to be seen instead as a “vehicle of the human making and remaking of the world, constantly shifting location, capable of revealing endlessly new points of view” (227). Bordo also speaks of the mythological Trickster and the postmodern shape-shifter that represent a body that is fluid, of indeterminate gender, floating through time, a body that is no body at all - a body such as Duncan’s - but “a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge” ( 229).

Reading *The Edible Woman* with an awareness of the postmodern allows for a more redemptive yet still ambiguous ending of the narrative, where the “periphery is also the frontier, the place of possibility” (Hutcheon, 3). Piercy criticises Atwood for this ambiguity, for although Marian resists convention, quitting her men, her job and home all in the same breath, there is no indication of “where the real work that presumably will replace the alienated labor is going to come from” (55). bell hooks makes a similar criticism of feminist literature that offers an “incomplete intervention” (35) by critiquing social norms without offering alternatives. If we wish to complete the intervention and inspire transformation it is important not only to detect acts of resistance in the text but to also explore whether the narrative offers alternatives that might help us resist objectification in our daily lives as women. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn both express the implication of literature in this transformation for “literature does more than transmit ideology: it actually creates it” by the reinforcement or transcription of “the rituals and symbols that make up social practice” (4-5). Grosz suggests that a pathway to subjectivity is through listening to and acting from our more intuitive body knowledge. She reiterates how significant the concept of body is to transformation: “If feminists are to resuscitate a concept of

the body for their own purposes, it must be extricated from the biological...appropriations from which it has suffered". She continues by suggesting that by "developing alternative accounts of the body (we) may create upheavals in the structure of existing knowledges, not to mention in the power governing the interactions of the two sexes" (20). Can literature help us develop these alternatives? Atwood herself is sceptical as she defends her Four Positions of writing to Robin Mathews in *Second Words*. She feels it is impossible to get Position Four writing, writing as a non-victim about society "until you have changed society" (149). Greene describes Atwood's characters in *The Edible Woman* as caricatures for this very reason, for "Atwood is making a point about the impossibility of transcending 'the system'" (96). Consequently "none of the three young women (in the novel) – Marian, Ainsley nor Clara – has escaped from their culturally defined gender roles; they are still producing cakes and babies" (Howells, 35). However, despite this circular nature of the novel Atwood does challenge the appropriations of the historically-based disparity between mind and body by parodying the association of woman with the volatile nature of the body and subverting the cultural and social tendency to devalue both.

The resistance Marian's body exerts both saves her and brings her to a precipice of potential destruction, literally and figuratively. After leaving her engagement party and spending the night with Duncan, she walks with him up to the Toronto ravine. Once at the top Duncan sits at the very edge, dangling his legs. At first Marian hesitates, but eventually sits down beside him, "although she did not trust the earth. It was the kind of thing that caved in" (262). But it does not cave in, and as Duncan says of the winter scene, "in the snow you're as near as possible to nothing" (263). Marian has been brought to a nothingness in her life, with no man, no job, no home. From this nothingness Marian is free to now create that selfhood, but neither she, nor the

author, can be sure what that will be in a society that continues to objectify and victimize the female form.

Carolyn Heilbrun stresses the impact women writers such as George Elliott and Virginia Woolf had on the literary scene because prior to this “all the role models were male” and “the only role models women could find were in magazines (and later) in movies and on television. The models were, of course, all beautiful, thin, young and exquisitely made up. What else was there?” (15). Although decades later, strong female models were still hard to come by in the 1960’s and Atwood was amongst some of the earliest Canadian writers that proposed a counter-narrative to patriarchal norms and the legitimization of the quest for our identity. Characters like Marian McAlpin offer an alternative role model for women, beyond the role of simply “being beautiful enough to become events in male lives” (Heilbrun, 15). Marian, ostensibly representing the virgin stereotype, eventually defies conforming to that stereotype and makes the transition from object to subject, and from a place of silence into a world of self-expression. At the end of the novel, having rejected Peter, Duncan asks Marian if she is eating again and she replies: “‘As a matter of fact I am,’ I said. ‘I had steak for lunch.’ This last remark had been motivated by pride. It still was miraculous to me that I had attempted anything so daring and succeeded” (280). Buying, cooking and eating her own steak, and talking in the first person once again, she has found her autonomy and her ability to make choices outside the pre-determined cultural and social norms. What Marian can still offer to readers more than three decades later is a reminder of the significance of the body and the knowledge it can provide in knowing ourselves. Susan Swan comments on this transition from the political to personal for both writers and readers alike in an article “Desire and the Mythology of Femininity” written in 1990: “I *do* think it is true that the struggle to free ourselves from the restrictions of men have placed us

throughout Western Culture is no longer a central subject for many white middle-class women writers. The struggles my female characters go through are mostly with themselves” (260). Swan brings up an important aspect of the novel that Howells also refers to - that the text is class specific. Marian rebels against her feminine destiny reflecting the “anxieties and frustrations felt by a whole generation of young, white middle-class women in America in the 1950’s and early 1960’s” (21). As with the majority of women suffering from eating disorders, Marian’s dis-ease is emblematic of middle-class society. But classism aside, our bodies continue to be objectified and commodified and the feminine is still associated with body. Thus perhaps we continue to struggle more profoundly with physical inscriptions, somatizing our dis-ease more readily than our male counterparts. Narratives such as *The Edible Woman* can help us gain an understanding of the connection between our minds and our bodies and the importance of establishing a healthy conversation between the two. It is from this communication that a clearer definition of self might be realized and recognized.

Grosz states that “the specificities of the female body, its particular nature and bodily cycles...in one case regarded as a limitation on women’s access to the rights and privileges patriarchal culture accords to men...in the other, the body is seen as a unique means of access to knowledge and ways of living” (15). Marian’s inability to eat during the course of *The Edible Woman* indicates the body’s rejection of the limiting, gendered, cultural construction prescribed by the male dominated society she is confronted with at the beginning of the novel, a construction she transcends by listening to her body, accessing her unique means to knowledge. The anorectic’s body remains disabled and silenced, rejecting only itself and continuing to be located in gender politics and the fear of transgression. Yet, at the same time, it cannot be denied that the image of femininity still remains culturally constructed, for, as Bordo concludes,

“whether externally bound or internally managed, no body can escape either the imprint of culture or its gendered meanings” (212).

## Chapter 2

### Resisting the Whore

#### **Desire and Corpulence: The Fat Female Body in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*.**

The exploration of contemporary slenderness as a metaphor for the correct management of desire must take into account the fact that throughout dominant Western religious and philosophical traditions, the capacity for self-management is decisively coded as masculine. By contrast, all those bodily spontaneities – hunger, sexuality, the emotions – seen as needful of containment and control have been culturally constructed and coded as female. (Bordo, 205-6)

Since World War II, when the diet and fitness industries burgeoned and fostered a mass obsession with weight and body shape, *fat* has been a four letter word. (LeBesco & Braziel, 2)

*Crackpot*, published in 1974, turned fat into resistance and the whore into female abundance. It is a narrative rich with the language of the body, its hungers, sexuality and expression. The fat body of Adele Wiseman's protagonist, Hoda, speaks a wealth of resistance against cultural and social constructions. Wiseman inscribed a legible text on the body well before theory on the body came to the foreground and gave voice to female subjectivity when feminist ideologies were just beginning to emerge. Despite its innovativeness the novel was received with mixed reviews. Some critics like Helen Rosenthal found Wiseman's second novel to be "the most alive, daring and tempestuous human literary creation in Canadian storytelling" (115). Others, as Ruth Panofsky states, "felt estranged from Wiseman's text" (*Vocation*, 93), not only due to the subject matter but the apparent lack of any moral judgment issued upon Hoda for her "crimes". Panofsky points out that in more recent readings of the text critics now "understand (Hoda's) spirited character as a rare example of a sex worker who is treated with empathy by her creator" (*Vocation*, 93). The polarities evident in the reception of *Crackpot* however might be attributed to the fact that Wiseman *was* ahead of her times, ahead of her

culture, presupposing feminist, corporeal and even postmodern ideologies that were just beginning to take form in the early 70's. In her study *Writing Beyond the Ending* published in 1985, Rachel Blau Duplessi proclaimed that it was "the project of twentieth-century women writers to solve the contradiction between love and quest and to replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy...by offering a different set of choices" (4). Wiseman was doing just that in 1974. Even though Hoda's story does still end with marriage, it is to Holocaust survivor Lazar, not to a romantic hero such as the Prince of Wales who fills her childhood fantasies. As Marcia Mack proposes, rather than marriage being *her* redemption, Hoda "offers Lazar resurrection through the possibility of a new life after his deathlike existence" (136).

Wiseman was writing at a time when female subjectivity was still contained and "othered" within a phallogentric framework that continued to present obstacles to women writers who wanted to explore this subjectivity. Panofsky points out how Wiseman's correspondence with Margaret Laurence helped both women "at a time when they often felt excluded from the patriarchal culture of authorship" ("Sisterhood", 61). Margaret Atwood, Patricia Smart and Linda Hutcheon have each in their own way declared the difficulty or even impossibility of authenticity, or as Atwood puts it, "writ(ing) as a *fully* liberated individual-as-woman-in-society" (*Words*, 145). Duplessi also gives her perspective on the relationship between writing and society, life and art: "When women as a social group question, and have the economic, political, and legal power to sustain and return to questions of marriage law, divorce, the 'covert status', and their access to vocation, then the relation of narrative middles to resolutions will destabilize culturally, and novelists will begin to 'write beyond' the romantic ending" (4). I believe Wiseman can be seen as one of the pioneers in venturing "beyond the ending" not only by

contesting the typical romantic ending but by resisting dominant constructions throughout the narrative.

In this chapter I locate instances where Wiseman contests dominant constructions by writing resistance on the obese, sexualized and carnival body of Hoda. Using feminist theory and theory on the body to reveal moments of resistance in the text offers a fresh reading of *Crackpot*. First I look at how Hoda's expression of desire and her fat body resist the construction of female denial and stereotypes of the sexually passive female body. Second I argue that Wiseman also challenges the dominant narrative by creating Hoda as a carnivalesque character that questions the given order and inverts the world of presumptions. Finally I acknowledge that dominant narratives have tended to devalue corporeal knowledge, knowledge linked to intuition, instinct and the body - knowledge historically attributed to the feminine - and ask whether Hoda actually does tap into a corporeal knowledge, gaining a better understanding of herself through an acceptance of and attentiveness to her body.

*i. The Abundant Body Beautiful*

*Crackpot* is a novel about the obese daughter of Jewish immigrants, living in poverty, who unwittingly becomes a prostitute. If Wiseman did not present her character as larger-than-life and imbued with the humor and irony that buoys Hoda through the text, this six fold marginalization could risk simply being tragic rather than humoristic and offering the opportunity of resistance. As a literary figure Hoda's gender, race, class and body politics challenge an array of cultural and social stereotypes but here I look specifically at Hoda's qualities and actions that resist female self-denial and sexual passivity, that create the carnival that allow her to find agency and those that emerge from the knowledge of her body.



Literature as subversion challenges the status quo and questions the relationship between cultural resistance and the realities of social change. While researching the fat body and sexuality I discovered American whore, pornographer and performer Annie Sprinkle, PhD. Sprinkle appeared to subvert dominant constructions in her day-to-day the way Hoda was in her fictional world. In the anthology *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* Linda Williams presents Annie Sprinkle in her article “A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle”. Annie Sprinkle is a prostitute who has welcomed her sexuality and transformed it into a performance art that both celebrates our sexuality and challenges assumptions, perceptions and prejudices. Williams begins her article: “The career of Annie Sprinkle is a particularly American success story” quoting Annie as saying: “My feminist mother used to come into my room and joke whether I would grow up to be a whore or an artist. She was exactly right!” (360). In this statement Sprinkle poignantly fuses the perpetuating body/mind, nature/culture disparities by integrating the duality of body as whore and culture as artist. Wiseman may not present Hoda’s survival and relative success as whore and business women as a particularly *Canadian* success story, nor can we imagine Hoda’s earnest Jewish mother, newly emigrated from the Old World, calmly contemplating whether her daughter would become whore or artist, but the connection between Annie and Hoda is that of life to art. As a “success story” of the 1990’s, Sprinkle gives non-fictional evidence to some of Hoda’s fictional experience as a character of the 1970’s. It could be argued that this 20 year time gap between art and life indicates literature’s potential influence on social change and cultural alternatives. Williams writes that her interest in Sprinkle “is that she represents one possible feminist position of agency” (363). In a similar vein I see Hoda representing such agency. In this light *Crackpot* could well have begun “The career of Hoda is a particularly *female* success

story”, for as Panofsky notes, “*Crackpot* is a novel of celebration, a record of the singular triumph of a Jewish prostitute” (“Complicity”, 44). It is this celebration that offers resistance.

Master narratives often stereotype the ideal woman as the self-denying woman. In “It Is Not Over Until the Fat Lay Sings”, Angela Stukator observes specifically of the fat woman that her “power is aborted or neutralized by privileging the pervasive (patriarchal) discourse of female denial” (202) while Cecilia Hartley in “Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship” suggests that “(w)omen are still raised in our society to be nurturers. They are taught to first tend to the needs of others and only then to themselves” (69). Feminist philosophy and theory help expose the ways these dominant structures have inscribed themselves on our bodies as women and how we tend to somatize that text and silence all desires - not simply sexual desire – repressing the potential knowledge within our bodies. Consequently we epitomize the docile bodies of Foucauldian thought. I argue that both Hoda and Sprinkle resist the narrative of denial as they accept their hungers, address their desires and embrace their natures from voluptuous and ample bodies.

Di Brandt describes Hoda’s nature in body terms as “this implausible grotesque lusty larger-than-life promiscuous female survivor of plagues, pogroms, police brutality, neglect and abuse, and nevertheless inheritor of and believer in grand dreams and dispenser of large portions of love and pleasure” (“Crazy”, 138-9). This chaotic portrait underlines Wiseman’s deviation from convention and places Hoda’s physical self at the centre of the text. On the first page of the novel Hoda commits her first transgressive action as Wiseman writes: “Hoda for her part enjoyed eating” (9). Women are disciplined to have delicate appetites and the svelte figures to accompany them. Hoda is an obese child who grows into an obese woman, a woman with a ravenous appetite for life, a woman who claims her space. In her 1975 review of *Crackpot*

Rosenthal is taken aback by Hoda's largeness, of both body and character. She describes Hoda as taking over the text "rather like a too-active yeast dough overflowing its pot" (115). Hoda seemed to claim her space even before she formed on the page, beginning as a stored image of a local prostitute in Wiseman's mind and growing until Wiseman says "I really felt her pushing out of me" (*Essays*, 159). In her article "Devouring Women" Sarah Shieff points out that "while there are few real-life examples of large, powerful women, there are at least some fictional examples of women whose great power matches their size" (216). She mentions Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, but I would also propose Hoda. Hoda's very size precedes her and shakes the structures that surround her. Her teacher Miss Boltholmsup represents the structure of institutional education and her name alone hints of the upside down nature of the system that triggers the upheaval Hoda causes in the classroom. Skeptical and cynical, Miss Boltholmsup nonetheless cannot ignore Hoda's undeniable size and power: "So far there had been no trouble from (Hoda); a certain blowsy eagerness, a super-abundance of physical presence, she was one of those bodies you felt was impinging on all your senses; you might not actually be able to, but you felt as though you might even smell her at a distance" (134). But behind these seemingly benign observations is a pervading distaste for, distrust of and sense of threat from this overwhelming young girl who insisted on telling her "twisted" family history while engaging Miss Boltholmsup's gaze: "(Miss Boltholmsup's) momentary weakness, the paralysis of will which had locked her eyes in baffling parody of communication with those of the fat girl, a contact which repelled and yet seemed to draw her like an obscene demand of flesh, had alerted her to danger" (135). Stukator's description of the typical social response to the fat woman offers an explanation for the teacher's response: "With her generous bulges and flabby flesh, the obese woman violates the cultural ideal of femininity and is therefore represented as an object of

fear, pity, or ridicule” (199). Hoda also violates the feminine ideal in this instance, for she does not back down from her teacher as cultural and social norms would have the polite young woman do. Rather she persists until order is, if not entirely shattered, at least threatened. The other students in the class follow Hoda’s story and become caught up in her growing distress at not being believed by Miss Boltholmsup. Finally the teacher tries to distract and appease them by introducing another subject. Although this re-establishes order to some degree, she still fears “some of them (were) far from pacified yet” (140).

Hoda is consistently marginalized in this way throughout the text and is relegated to what Charles Taylor describes as a “subaltern” group. Taylor notes that for those who are “othered” such as Hoda, the “demand for recognition...is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity” (Taylor, 25). He believes “(n)onrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (25). Hoda appears to either bounce back from or be oblivious to others’ distorted views of her, yet on occasion she does become painfully aware of the prison she inhabits as a fat, Jewish whore. Remorseful of abandoning her son to the orphanage many years earlier, she often fantasizes that she might retrace her steps and erase the now-seeming mistake. On a ridiculous impulse she does just this and finds herself, in the darkness of night, crawling backwards surreptitiously down her back stairs, sensing her isolation by

seeing suddenly the dead, still, darkened house looming up in front of her out of the night like some not quite substantial apparition, seeing it from without herself, all cock-eyed, all unreal, like some grotesque vision of her own existence, severed from herself...unable to tell for certain whether she was still inside there or standing out here staring at a separate existence that she could not comprehend and that did not comprehend her either.

She, who had experienced at times an electrifying sense of the unity of beings, now felt the jagged chill of dislocation, of separation even of herself from herself. (312-13)

More often than not though Hoda is able to exist within her vision of a “unity of beings” despite the characters that enter her isolated world and read her with the judgments and assumptions that stereotype the fat body. Acquaintances approach her saying “Hodaleh, how are you? You’re getting fat as a pregnant mare. Why don’t you go on a diet? You’d look nice if you lost a few pounds, and then the good boys would chase after you, not just the discards” (195). Aside from her father and political friend Mr. Polonick she is rarely recognized for the person within her body. She is quite taken aback by her encounter with Mr. Polonick as she is not at all used to be spoken to as an equal: “she hardly ever got invited places, especially this way, with a real ‘please come’ and ‘it would be a great favour’ in his voice, not like when a teacher speaks to a pupil, but like a grown-up speaks to a grown-up he respects and maybe admires a little” (203-4). Bordo offers further explanation as to why the obese are so harshly judged: “The obese elicit blinding rage and disgust in our culture and are often viewed in terms that suggest an infant sucking hungrily, unconsciously, at its mother’s breast: greedy, self-absorbed, lazy, without self-control or willpower” (202). Yet according to Jane Evans Braziel the fat body was not always an object of derision. In “Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body” Braziel sees pre-Victorian eras as times when the ample body was still considered desirable, when consumption was considered an indication of wealth and class. It was after the Victorian era that “sexual eroticism was split from corpulence; in this paradigm shift, carnal desire was inscribed onto the thin female body” (234). With this shift the fat body became inherently undesirable to the male gaze and society’s pen began to inscribe this discipline on the female form. Many feminist concur with the Foucauldian belief that docile bodies begin to regulate

themselves and agree that this ideology can apply particularly to women as we are conditioned to control our appetites in response to the male gaze (Booth, Diner). Cecilia Hartley comments on this self-regulation: “Thus a woman’s own gaze becomes a substitute for a man’s gaze, and she evaluates her own body as ruthlessly as she expects to be evaluated by him” (62). Hoda resists this gaze. She is certainly aware of her large size, yet never expresses a need to transform it in order to gain male acceptance. Her revelling in her body is actually a very significant point of resistance considering, as Hartley describes, how the dominant narrative has made many women feel about our bodies:

There is something wrong with the female body. Women learn early...that their bodies are fundamentally flawed. The restructuring process begins often as soon as a child is able to understand that there is a difference between the sexes. When the awareness reveals a female body, the realization soon follows that the body must be changed, molded, reconfigured.... Not surprisingly, self-hatred often becomes part of a woman’s body image. By the onset of puberty, a sense of body deficiency is firmly in place, and that sense of deficiency is exacerbated as the body matures. (3)

Hoda exhibits none of this self-hatred. Her mother’s encouragement and determination to “make sure that her child was bigger and more beautiful every day” (10) must have helped Hoda established a healthy image of herself for although she does experience some longings for cultural ideologies, she indicates no sense of deficiency concerning her body. She is comfortable showing and sharing it from an early age: “Hoda liked being a patient. She liked taking her clothes off and letting the other children examine her. She liked being touched” (36). It is also quite clear in this scene that this activity is for her own pleasure, not done only to please others. At one point she does imagine “everywoman’s dream” about body and appetite, thinking “when

the really good time came she would be thin and beautiful like everyone else, and have plenty to eat anyway” (113). This dream is a poignant reflection of our day-to-day interaction with the media where tantalizing food ads and luxurious recipes are set back to back with images of the slender fashion model and discussions of the latest diet. This reoccurring disparity between hunger and appetite, with size and normative beauty, female desire and its appropriateness are an indication that despite cultural resistance to these constructions such as is evident in *Crackpot*, the beauty myth, wealth and Hollywood romance remain dominant discourses that are a challenge to subvert.

The fat female body in particular is seen as a cultural eyesore and a socially repellant and abhorrent. Braziel states that North American cultural and social politics see “*fat is pollution*” (239). The fat body is the abject body. Le’a Kent’s article “Fighting Abjection” expands on ideas from Kristeva’s *Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* and concludes: “Within mainstream representations of the body, the fat body functions as the abject: it takes up the burden of representing *the horror of the body itself* for the culture at large” (135). Again Hoda, although perceived as the abject by school mates, Uncle, the communities that surround her father at the Temple and his basket making, is able to see the beauty in her size and her being, saying “she’d rather be a fat discard thank you very much than someone who went around discarding other people” (195). Where other characters see the abject, Hoda sees richness. The ladies from the church come to fulfill their obligation of offering their sympathies to Hoda after her mother’s death and Hoda gives them a detailed description of the various medical aberrations her mother may have died from, concluding by uncovering a pot of stuffed spleen and potatoes she had prepared for supper. The description and sight of internal organs is too much for these women, bringing them too close to the abject. Kent goes on to describe the abject as “that

revolting physicality, that repellent fluidity, those seepages and discharges that are inevitably attached to the body and necessary to life, but just as necessarily opposed to a sense of self” (135). In this scene of medical revelations and boiling spleen Hoda is enraptured, sharing in an “eager, positive voice” (90) while the ladies only see the revolting and repellent: “Hoda is unaware of the effect which the sight of the grey skinful of spongy, stringy purple stuff in the pot, well spiced-up, of which she was so proud...had on her father’s guests” (90), and “(m)ixed though her feelings were towards these strange ladies, they did not crystallize to the point where Hoda consciously knew her guests were recoiling from her” (92). Hoda’s response here is typical of her and somewhat unsettling. Brandt comments on how Wiseman “would have us believe in Hoda’s essential innocence” (139) and I believe Wiseman at times pushes our sense of credibility with Hoda’s apparent naivety and complete obliviousness to any judgment that is directed at her. She reads concern in the faces of the church ladies that are so repelled, interest from the teacher that is so disgusted and like from the boys that ridicule her behind their lust. Mack believes this behaviour originates from Hoda’s unique, personal view of the world:

Her character continually reacts to this world of order and attempts to escape it through her private vision. If she accepts the dominant world view, then her own position as prostitute and near destitute immigrant would make her despise herself. Instead of accepting this ordered vision, she resolves her position by reacting against it. She saves herself through her personal vision. (140)

It is her unbound faith in others and uncontained desire to love and be loved that allow her to become, as Panofsky says, “resourceful, independent and heroic” (“Complicity, 45) rather than abject. As a consequence she remains undaunted by the admonishing gaze of others.



*ii. The Sexual Body Unbound*

Hoda's unbound nature and lack of containment that are in opposition to the feminine ideal are expressed in an enthusiasm that permeates her every interaction, yet it is her joy in sexual expression first as a woman, then second as a fat woman that particularly resists dominant constructions and causes her much ridicule. Bordo offers an explanation as to why the obese are so ridiculed - "particularly those that claim to be happy although overweight" for they are "perceived as not playing by the rules at all. If the rest of us are struggling to be acceptable and "normal", we cannot allow them to get away with it; they must be put in their place, be humiliated and defeated" (203). Hoda violates the feminine ideal by listening to her sexual desire despite being ridiculed. Interactions with others sometimes confuse her but she does not question her visceral response: "Even though these three big boys from the dumb class...called her Fatso, they really liked her because they kept talking like that about her things they couldn't even see naked under her clothes, though she herself could feel them all separately swelling when they talked that way" (108). She acknowledges her arousal, claiming her sexuality, desire and power, but the question is do these boys "really like her" or simply like what they hope to get from her? Although Hoda senses her own subjectivity, it is fairly obvious the boys do not. Ultimately then, does her swelling desire, her resistance to denial, actually give her any agency in this scenario? After an afternoon tumble in the leaves with several boys, full of laughter and abandon, Hoda realizes she did not ask for, nor have they offered payment. She becomes concerned:

Afterwards she worried about it and warned herself not to do it too often that way.

If she didn't take payment, then it was as though she didn't have to do it, and was doing it for her pleasure only, and she didn't know if that was right, unless you

were married and with your one-and- only. She was pretty sure that was the way it was supposed to work. (161)

In this moment Hoda is not questioning her profession, deliberating the monetary value of her work or worrying about her need for money. What she is questioning, deliberating and worrying about is the appropriateness of her own desire and sexual satisfaction – her own agency.

Although she seems to enjoy the game and the flirt, I would not say she yet realizes the empowerment that Sprinkle expresses in her experience. Williams quotes Sprinkle saying:

I was working in a massage parlor. For 3 months I worked and didn't even know I was a hooker – I was having such a good time! The men I saw were referred to as “clients” or “massages”. But finally, after about 3 months one woman used the word “trick” and I realized, “Ohmigod – they're *tricks!* Oh shit – I'm a *hooker*.

When it finally did occur to me that I was a hooker, and I got over the initial shock, I enjoyed the idea. (364)

Hoda also enjoys the awakening of her sexuality and unknowingly slips into her profession, but as a prostitute her sexual satisfaction is not a consideration for her clients and what Hoda often enjoys beyond the physical is the fantasy it allows her, the opportunity to dream. This fantasy world contradicts the model of resistance her character elicits and indicates how she is nonetheless influenced by the romantic constructions of heterosexuality and the illusive promise of a happily-ever-after:

Hoda still surrendered herself to the movies, sat alone in the darkness with her eyes glued to the magic light and shadows of “if only”, yearned and suffered and thrilled as the “why not” romance moved inevitable to the point where she knew, with an exquisite sense of illumination, ever new, that now...now...they're going

to...and for real, not for money...She knew it was all a cheat and false and that wasn't how things happened as she surrendered herself, and yet, she fell, each time. (292)

It seems evident that Hoda counters the cultural norms that encourage women to deny their hungers, needs and desires, but her agency is still limited within those cultural dictates.

Hutcheon says of postmodern culture that it “has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label the dominant...culture. It does not deny it.... Instead, it contests it from within its own assumptions” (*Theorizing*, 246-7). *Crackpot* may not be defined as a postmodern novel, yet Wiseman’s strategies at times do foretell of postmodern questioning. Hutcheon also surmises that if “women have not yet been allowed access to (male) subjectivity, then it is very difficult for them to contest it” (*Postmodern*, 5-6). In this fantasy scene we see the influence of the patriarchal fairy tale, yet also see Hoda hovering between active subject and passive object. Hoda actively expresses her appetites and pursues them, but given the novel’s time frame and her social positioning within the narrative, the only place for this expression is as a professional sex worker on the periphery of society. Her dream-fantasy at the movies harkens of Snow White and Cinderella, yet while they passively wait for that chaste kiss from Prince Charming Hoda fantasizes “beyond the ending”, wanting Prince Charming on her terms, with her own agency, even though she knows “that’s not how things happen”. Still operating within the dominant structures that surround her, Hoda is not one to deny her desires.

Williams also observes this duality of agency repressed by social and cultural forays in Sprinkle’s performance art. Sprinkle counters sexual norms from within:

(H)er sexual performances, firmly rooted within the specific conventions of pornography and the persona of “whore”, are provocative instances of agency that draw upon the

performative traditions of the sexually saturated “woman”, without simply duplicating them. By performing sex differently, though still within the conventional rhetoric and form of the genre, Annie Sprinkle demonstrated a provocative feminist agency that would fruitfully contribute to her later feminist performance work. (363)

According to these examples, despite functioning within patriarchy, both Annie and Hoda choose to feed their hungers thus offering a counter-narrative to the dominant constructions that declare that “women’s sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male” (Bordo, 117). It is clear that these women can successfully express their desires while actually leaving the men intact.

Hoda further counters the norm of sexuality and the fat female body. Braziel asserts that the fat female body is often configured within one of two sexual stereotypes, “either as benignly asexual or the site of sexual masquerade” (232). As has been seen thus far, Hoda is certainly not asexual, benignly or otherwise. Here is further example of her sexual nature as she experiences her first fully sexual encounter: “Suddenly, those great hearty gusts of something like laughter burst from her, unexpectedly, shooting out from somewhere way down there in the very centre of her” (140). But her lover/client is disconcerted by her hearty response: “Morgan was kind of mad at her for making so much noise like that, and got himself buttoned up fast” (149). Indeed he would rather have screwed a more benignly asexual creature. As she grows more experienced in her trade, she finds Morgan is not the only trick who would prefer a more asexual body, a more passive object. At one point while at work Hoda’s mind wonders:

Could you train yourself, if you tried hard enough, to go in and out of people at will?

What if she practiced with her customers, really concentrated. If you could time it right, could you manage to jump into him just as he was jumping into you, and feel exactly

what it felt like to be him pumping it into you? She'd often thought it would be nice to feel what they were feeling too. (274-5)

As Hoda experiments with these thoughts her own sexual climax bursts forth in orgasmic laughter which in turn distracts her client from his own satisfaction. As a result she concludes that if she is to make a living she must restrain her own sexual expression; she must *appear* asexual when appropriate.

### *iii. Corporeal Leap to the Carnavalesque*

The alternative to reading the fat female body as void of a sexuality, is the assumption that the fat body is “licentiously saturated with sexual masquerade”, masquerade synonymous with “unbound carnality” (Braziel, 235). Hoda and Sprinkle take the risk of falling into the stereotype of this masquerade, yet I believe they both resist. Sprinkle uses the masquerade to tantalize, but she also throws a raw sexuality at her audiences as a means to have them question their tantalizations and sexual assumptions. Williams confirms this resistance saying “there is enough of a Mae West-style exaggeration in this persona to alert us to an element of parody. The gap-toothed, big-breasted, slightly chubby woman who addresses us in her sexiest voice...presents herself as an effect of performance (...) she invites us to admire a performance the truth of which is always elusive” (372). Where Sprinkle provides parody thus countering the stereotype, Hoda does so by avoiding the carnality of the masquerade and transforming it into the social commentary of the carnivalesque. Stukator states: “Carnival culture can be appropriated to sustain marginality or it can be used to subvert and challenge the dominant official culture and its representations” (201). Hoda is a child of Jewish immigrants, she is poor, she is a prostitute who is a mother, she is fat and she is a woman. Does Hoda’s carnival nature sustain or challenge

these marginalities? In “When the Carnival Turns Bitter: Preliminary Reflections Upon the Abject Hero”, Micahel Andre Bernstein confirms that it “is largely from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin that we have learned to apply terms like ‘carnivalization’ to the collapse of hierarchal distinctions...and it is a major part of Bakhtin’s legacy to have taught us better how to value the liberating energy of the carnivalesque” (99-100). In creating Hoda, an expressive, obese, sexual woman, Wiseman confronts the cultural system that denies the possibility of female desire and appetite, and reinforces the stereotype. Following Bakhtin’s theory of resistance through the celebration of carnival, Mary Russo, in her article “Female Grotesques” says, “Bakhtin enumerates three forms of carnival folk culture: ritual spectacles (which include feasts, pageants, and marketplace festivals of all kinds); comic verbal compositions, parodies both oral and written; and various genres of billingsgate (curses, oaths, profanations, marketplace speech)” (323). As Hoda’s largeness fills the text, it is possible to trace these three aspects of carnival culture.

Hoda has a habit of randomly attending weddings and funerals, of people she does not know. These celebrations bring in the pageantry of feast and festival, and Hoda’s large presence brings with it the carnival. These celebrations satiate Hoda’s appetite for food as well as the corporeal jubilation of dance. That she turns the odd trick with out-of-breath, somewhat drunk husbands offers its own social commentary. Hoda is also well arrayed in comic verbal expression, often parodying the structures of class that cause intolerance. Hoda must have regular check-ups at the Public Health Clinic. At first she dreads these visits for they often make her wait long periods of time, sometimes making her wait the entire day and finally making her return the following day. Hoda decides to embrace the situation with laughter. As she swirls her urine sample unabashedly in the waiting room, she engages the other patients in humorous

though embarrassing banter. To a young couple she nudges “You two been playing around?” or to a young man she smiles “Don’t I know you from somewhere?” and to another, “What do you do for a living?” (299), as, with a wink of her eye she responds back, “Oh, I get along...”. She soon realizes the clinic staff are now rushing her through as quickly as possible. Michael Greenstein cites this scene at the clinic also speaking of the resistance it offers as “Hoda uses any orifice to lay bare artifice” (“Fissure”, 22). His assessment of resistance is from a postcolonial perspective as he says “Hoda artistically strings phrases together and strives for the ambiguity which disturbs her immediate audience” (22). Hoda is older and more mature here, as well as a little less naïve, yet it is evident she does not address the prejudices apparent at the clinic as victim or with hostility – she uses the power of carnivalesque humor. Through her loud, comic expression she subverts the social system that categorizes her and the many “isms” it reflects.

The third form of the carnival refers to the use of curses, oaths and profanations. Curses and oaths tumble spontaneously from Hoda. At one point her uncle suggests she must be sent to an orphanage and her father to a senior’s home after her mother’s death. She explodes at her uncle, a “yelling, swearing, fat adolescent” screaming for her life, and he is “amazed and taken aback both by the passion of her feeling and the bad language of the natives that she, mere child that she was, had amassed....” (99). In the traditional narrative such an outburst by a woman would be met with punishment not reward. Duplessis argues the punishment is usually death:

Death comes for a female character when she has a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relation to the ‘social script’ or plot designed to contain her legally, economically, and sexually.... When a character is undernourished and underemployed by the social rules defining her place, she may protest, but even a feeble protest may lead to her doom. (15)

Rather than meeting her doom, Hoda shines. In keeping with the grotesque, Russo points out that “the masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society” (325). And in this instance, Uncle’s gaze is destabilized. In her tirade, Uncle is faced with the grotesque of the carnival:

*Grotesque*, he raged internally, fighting the impulse to do violence to all this blubber, grotesque offspring of that cunning little humpback (Hoda’s mother, Uncle’s sister)...But Uncle’s anger wavered slightly before the yammering of this four-square creature. There was something of his own in her, something of the largeness of mother and sister, dimly remembered worlds of another self. (98-99)

Something in the mask and voice of the grotesque destabilizes, however momentarily, the organized society Uncle has created for himself. Something in the grotesque makes him acknowledge his own unauthenticness. Hoda is rewarded – she remains in her own home with her father by her side.

#### *iv. Narrative and Body as Knowledge*

Up to this point Hoda has expressed her appetites, and confronted the stereotype, but has she gained some deeper understanding through this resistance and her corporeal experience? In *Volatile Bodies* Elizabeth Grosz proposes that the body may well provide a means for previously unacknowledged and unrepresented forms of knowledge to finally find their place and be heard, countering the traditional view of the body as functioning “as the repressed or disavowed condition of all knowledges” (20). At the same time many feminist philosophers – most notably Luce Irigaray – see the importance of moving away from the Freudian world of mother-daughter



separation. Literary critics Lori Saint-Martin and Louise Forsyth both remark on the transformation that has taken place in literature regarding the mother–daughter relationship. Saint-Martin observes that female psychoanalysts “have denounced the many ‘blind spots’ of Freudian theory – its normative and narrow definition of femininity, its total ignorance of the specificity of female sexual pleasure and especially the wedge it drives between mother and daughter” (“Mothers”, 307). Consequently women writers have moved away from this Freudian discourse towards the specificities of female sexuality and often stress the possibility that “(m)others give life and identity to daughters” (“Mothers”, 306).

According to these views, there is a knowledge that has been devalued over the last two centuries that is accessible through the body and further knowledge available through a communication and passing-on of wisdom between mother and daughter. Interestingly enough, it is the father, Danile that connects to his daughter Hoda through stories. We see a similar strategy in Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* as Christie passes legend and oral history onto Morag. This might signify that change must involve the transference or at the very least a sharing of the dominant narrative from the patriarchy (men) to the other (women) *as well as* a sharing of knowledge between women. The latter cannot instigate change in isolation. Yet, in both these examples, the men are in some way broken. Christie is marginalized by the community for his poverty and his profession as the Town garbage man while his storytelling tends to become expansive in conjunction with his expansive indulgence in scotch. Danile too is marginalized for his poverty as well as his disability, not only by the larger community, but by his own Jewish community, who see him as a fool, blind not only physically, but to the actions of life around him – and particularly the actions of his daughter. Brandt observes that Wiseman herself offers no criticism of Danile “whose steadfast refusal (or is it simply inability) to look

reality in the eye, so to speak, or to contribute in any substantial way to his own keep, essentially catapults the young Hoda into her life of prostitution” (141) yet his blindness is perhaps at times all too encompassing to be completely forgiven. However, both Danile and Christie represent both the imperfections inherent within the patriarchal order and the intolerance the same order holds for any display of male sensitivity, judging sensitivity merely as a sign of weakness (read femininity). Danile does nonetheless transfer knowledge and history to Hoda through stories that are both mythic and fantastic. But it is Hoda’s mother, Rahel, who, perhaps unwittingly, is implicated in Hoda’s obvious corporeality, her classic grotesqueness. As a baby and small child Rahel takes Hoda to work with her cleaning houses and provides Hoda with a constant flow of food to “forestall trouble”, for “(t)hings can’t go in and out of the same little mouth simultaneously” (9). But the result is a child of ample size. For Rahel, though, having spent a life time impoverished and starving in a slightly deformed body, Hoda’s perfect-ness and rotundness are a sign of health and strength. Consequently, while Danile provides Hoda with a sense of her cultural roots, Rahel, through the grotesque, has provided Hoda with some strategies of resistance. By helping to create and then celebrating in Hoda’s large body Rahel has provided a means of knowledge for Hoda, a knowledge that women learned to silence - the silencing of hungers and appetites; in other words their corporeal knowledge. In a celebration of her body Hoda engages with this knowledge and once again is rewarded rather than punished for this expression. In the dominant narrative it is the virgin that marries and lives happily ever after. In *Crackpot* it is Hoda the whore who marries and is allowed love, rather than ending buried beneath a flurry of judgmental stones.

Despite this detour from the dominant narrative here is evidence once again of the author as woman not being able to write from Atwood’s Fourth Position of liberated non-victim. Hoda,

although resisting, must act within the structures that still exist. Wiseman does not subject her to death as she does Laiah, the prostitute in her first novel *The Sacrifice*, and although it may also be Lazar's redemption, a certain social redemption is evident in Hoda's being wed. That Hoda marries in the end indicates she is still very much part of our culture, yet that she marries a Holocaust survivor, a mate as scarred and "othered" as herself, might offer a critique and counter the romantic ideal.

In keeping with Brandt's observations in *Wild Mother Dancing* that mothers often seem to depart early in dominant narratives, Rahel does not live very long to encourage her daughter. Hoda grows up from an early age without the presence of her mother, who dies a painful death early in the story. But unlike in the traditional narrative, Hoda does not find solace or identity in a man. Rather, with no mother there to pass on any knowledge, she listens to her body in order to realize her self and as Wiseman herself said, Hoda becomes "an active player in her own life" (*Essays*, 154). But perhaps due to the absence of a mother's guidance, the fulfillment of her desire is misplaced, and she slips into the sex trade, relationships destined to be one-sided, encounters that do not value or accept her desires, her true self. Needing to discover her corporeality from experience alone, she also lives through a pregnancy unaware at first of what is happening to her body. But by allowing her body to speak, to follow its own course, she is able to birth the child unassisted by the medical (male) world, alone in her bedroom. In this case the absence of the mother can be seen rather as a critique of the patriarchal structure inherent in the medical world, a world that has dogmatically silenced the female voice and influenced the growing absence of shared knowledge between women. Before birthing was taken over by the men and their medicines "women were in many ways...more scientific than the men; they knew female anatomy as men did not, and they were more often than not dealing with a physical

process which they themselves had experienced” (Rich, 134). Once men took over the world of obstetrics this female knowledge grew silent causing a devaluing of that knowledge as science and technology gained ground and unquestioned respect.

Hoda is a woman isolated, with virtually no community of women to turn to, depend on or learn from. Without a circle or community of women we have no models to emulate. As a woman of appetite and abundance in a culture dictating feminine denial and silence, Hoda painstakingly creates herself offering readers an alternative model - a model still lacking in many ways for women today. That Wiseman offers Hoda no female community resonates on various levels. Similar to Marian’s fate in *The Edible Woman*, the quest for subjectivity is often still a lonely one as women are set against each other, conditioned to compare rather than collaborate – as Rich notes: “Women are made taboo to women” (255) and until we can “reunite” we cannot break the taboo. Yet it is clear Wiseman knew the power of female relationship and the irreplaceable support it could offer. Her long-lasting friendship with Margaret Laurence indicates this. As Panofsky stresses in “‘Sister Friend’: The Correspondence of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman”, their letters created for them “a woman’s world” (59) that helped “sustain their vocational commitment to writing” (58) providing a “sheltering sense of sisterhood” (65). That Hoda lacks this “woman’s world” or “sense of sisterhood” makes her survival all the more admirable yet her ultimate success as a married business woman risks placing her squarely back into the dominant narrative, despite Wiseman’s other strategies of “writing beyond the ending”.

v. *Colonial Bodies in Postmodern Times*

Hoda's deviations offer a text of resistance. She resists the culture of denial that is expected of Western women by eating her fill, metaphorically and otherwise, and finding power in her size. She resists the stereotype of the fat female body by being neither asexual nor the site of sexual masquerade. And Hoda lives in desperate poverty, marginalized on many levels, yet she finds abundance and wisdom by listening to the rumblings of her body. The moments of resistance that I have located in the text from a feminist perspective also speak to postmodernism and postcolonial experience. Greenstein defines this link in "The Fissure Queen: Issues of Gender and Post-Colonialism in *Crackpot*":

*Crackpot* belongs within a post-colonial tradition where the reader has to perceive *realism and fantasy* as a threshold into *evolution and alchemy*.... (P)ost-colonialism destabilizes the fixity of borders and centres, (and) we may immediately recognize the common terrain shared by feminism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism. (20)

Mack also proposes that a postcolonial approach to *Crackpot* "allows a discussion about the manner in which the text reacts to fixed "right" ideas and, through its reaction, destabilizes the naturalness of these ideas" (154). Hutcheon declares that "what postmodernism has done is show how the 'natural' is in fact the 'constructed', the made, the social" (12) while Bordo supports the postmodern notion that the body can be seen "as the vehicle of human making and remaking of the world, constantly shifting location, capable of revealing endlessly new points of view" (227). I suggest that with her resistance Hoda represents the postcolonial and the postmodern body, for she demonstrates a certain intuitive knowledge that is often in conflict with the knowledges inscribed by culture and society. Wiseman brings this problematic to the foreground in the encounter between Hoda and her orphaned son. At the beginning of this

chapter I proposed that Annie Sprinkle poignantly fused the body/mind dichotomy by being whore and artist. Hoda challenges this dichotomy in being whore and mother, but realizes a possible fusion of the two is not quite so evident. Eighteen years after she has left her newborn son on the steps of the orphanage, he presents himself, their identities unknown to each other, as an eager client. Before she realizes this is her son, she has turned the trick. The upside down nature of this scene between mother and son hints once again of the carnivalesque, and as Brandt surmises “the appropriate response to carnival is laughter rather than judgment, since morality above all is shown to be artificially & arbitrarily constructed & therefore negotiable” (*Crazy*, 142). Panofsky proposes that Hoda’s own typically humorous response to events is curtailed here. She writes: “Solemn reactions are reserved for those situations that warrant them. Once she does deduce the fact that she has had sex with her son, her first reaction is revulsion” (“Complicity”, 46). In her moment of solemnity we see Hoda’s mind, her intellect, attempting to come to grips with her body, her intuition:

There was never enough time to think things through, to consider what was right, to figure out what was best. Always there was only time enough for regrets. Always she had wanted to do what was right. At first she thought what felt good, must be right. Well, how was she to know? And how was she to know what felt just awful, what aroused in her a revulsion of loathing at the very thought was wrong? If it wasn’t right when it felt right, was it wrong because it felt wrong?  
(352)

Here Hoda’s corporeal knowledge is in conflict with the morals and ethics of her society, her cultural knowledge. In exploring this mind/body conflict, Hoda chooses what feels wrong – wrong because it has been culturally encoded so - but what is also culturally suspect; she decides

to continue with the incestuous relationship, “knowing, if she did it again it was for a reason, and because she was a person...and because it was the only thing she could think of that she could do, that maybe she was fit to do for him” (352). With Hoda’s dilemma Wiseman comes to the heart of the tug-of-war between what we sense intuitively of the body and what culture and society have inscribed upon us. These cultural and social inscriptions can cloud our ability to know clearly whether what we feel originates from our authentic selves or whether from the dictates of convention; one is so imperceptible influenced by the other. Although writing prior to Foucault’s publications, this situation offers another example of his docile, intelligible and useful bodies. Bordo says of the intelligible and useful body:

The intelligible body includes our scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic representations of the body – our cultural *conceptions* of the body, norms of beauty, models of health, and so forth. But the same representations may also be seen as forming a set of *practical* rules and regulations through which the living body is ‘trained, shaped, obeys and responds’, becoming, in short, a socially adapted and ‘useful body’. (181)

The “practical” rules Hoda has learned is that we do not have sexual exchanges with our offspring. There are many practical arguments for this rule, but if we have never known our child, if there is no risk of pregnancy or other physical risks, is Hoda’s revulsion instinctual or merely a response from the “useful” body. I would argue that Hoda’s choice to accept her son as a client challenges the construct of the useful body and resists the docile body. In this instance, as Panofsky points out, “incest becomes an act of compassion” and her “decision to succumb to his request for sexual relations is prompted by maternal concern” (“Complicity”, 46). From such a perspective Hoda’s action can be seen as prompted by instinct and intuition over the external influence of social and cultural constructs.

In an interview with Bruce Meyer and Brian O’Riordan Wiseman expresses her interest in testing boundaries and wanting to explore the “borderline, or cliff, between what is humanly possible and what is socially permissible” (*Essays*, 150). In the relationships between mother and son, between woman and whore, desire and denial, fat and feminine, Wiseman explores the borderlines between social acceptance, cultural agency and self-knowledge with sensitivity and grace. She intuits the complexities of feminist theory along with Foucauldian and Bahktinian thought with a crisp humor and simplicity that does provoke the reader to question the given boundaries and celebrate the power of desire, knowledge of the body and resistance.



## Chapter 3

### Reinstating the Mother

The ideologies of patriarchy, technology, and capitalism give us our vision of motherhood while they block our view, (they) give us a language for some things while they silence us for others. (Rothman, 140)

Throughout most of the world, there is archaeological evidence of a period when Woman was venerated in several aspects, the primal one being maternal; when Goddess-worship prevailed, and when myths predicted strong and revered female figures. In the earliest artefacts we know, we encounter the female as primal power. (Rich 93).

The first two chapters of this study deal with the polarities of virgin and whore. I explored ways in which narratives resist female stereotypes, self-denial and our silenced sexuality and stories. This resistance seemed to originate from a knowledge based in the body, through an acknowledgment of what has been coded “women’s ways of knowing”. In this chapter I read Gabriele Roy’s 1971 text *La Rivière sans repos* for resistance to the dominant constructions that codify “motherhood” and devalue the more feminine, body-based construction of “mothering”. Roy’s protagonist Elsa steps in between Inuit and White cultures, placing herself as a mother in between paradigms. Following Elsa as she moves from innocent child, pregnant teen and young mother to an abject old woman we see her lost between cultures and constructions. This place is an ambivalent middle ground and it is this ambivalence that can offer a form of resistance. What might arise from this unexplored territory between constructions is a possible reinstatement of the feminine beyond the devalued state of body, nature and emotive eruptions – beyond object - towards pre-patriarchal imaginings when the Virgin-Mother-Goddess communicated to women that “power, awesomeness and centrality were theirs by nature, not by privilege or miracle; the female was primary” (Rich, 94). A time when we were subjects of our own experience.

In narrative contexts, like virgin and whore, mother has its classical constructs. In order to place Roy's text in time and space I first explore the images of mother that were dominant in literature up until the mid-1900's, particularly in Quebec. What becomes evident is a construction of motherhood that does not necessarily speak to our experience of mothering. Elsa's ways teeter between White culture's consumer-based view of mother and Inuit culture which is a much more human-based tradition. In this chapter I read Elsa's experience of sexuality, pregnancy, mothering and her relationship with her own mother as problematized in her ambivalent position. I argue that Elsa does not clearly transgress norms but nonetheless enters a "paradoxical and problematic" space where "loose ends are not tied up neatly", a situation Linda Hutcheon describes as a "place of possibilities" (*Postmodern*, 15) - a place of possible transition. As women today we still find ourselves in this place, striving for subjectivity in a patriarchal society, realizing only moments and instances of transgression while operating within dominant structures. We still hover somewhere between Atwood's victim position two, believing our situation is the fault of fate, and position three, where we may know we are victims, but refuse to accept that this is necessarily inevitable (*Survival*, 37). Like Elsa, we have no real idea yet what position four will look like.

*i. Textualization of the Mother in Quebec*

*La Rivère sans repos* offers resistance but in a different guise than in the narratives of Atwood and Wiseman. In *The Edible Woman* Marian is able to resist dominant constructions because Atwood diverges from a purely realistic text giving Marian's body literally a mind of its own and at times allowing her mind to have skewed perceptions of reality which awaken her to a new awareness. Wiseman uses the carnivalesque in *Crackpot* and writes Hoda as a character larger-than-life in order to tackle life and subvert its social and cultural conventions. Roy on the

other hand stays close to a realistic style, writing of the day-to-day struggles of existence.

Roxanne Rimstead argues in *Remnants of a Nation: on Poverty Narratives by Women*, surviving everyday struggle can be seen as a form of resistance (77). The very specific and corporeal female experiences of pregnancy and birth involve everyday struggle and day-to-day acts of heroism such as overcoming hormonal changes, surviving childbirth and nursing infants through childhood maladies to name but a few. Brandt points out how these acts of heroism have traditionally been lost, ignored or silenced in narratives, hidden behind the heroism of wars, other such male-centred life and death crises and material accomplishment (*Wild*, 5). But as women were categorized as either virgin or whore and destined for marriage or death, Mothers too were categorized. Subsequently mothers were seemingly allowed only one of two destinies in the dominant narrative: they either disappear for one reason or another at an early stage in the text or they were idealized as upholders of hearth and home. Patricia Smart comments on this phenomenon in the traditional Quebec novel. Here mothers are often brutally murdered or relegated to the private sphere, *la revanche des berceaux*. In *les romans de la terre* mothers were portrayed as all encompassing forces, held up as the mythical mother, to the point that “(t)raditional Quebec has often been called a ‘matriarchy’”(12). Yet Smart goes on to point out that this mother, although apparently a powerful figure, wielding authority within the family at least, is a mere fabrication:

In reality...this solitary and powerful mother figure was an ideological construct created by a male centred hierarchy based in the catholic church...where power descended from God the Father to the king of France to the Father of the family to the oldest son – the wife and other children being relegated to the status of ‘others’. (13)

Smart also offers an explanation for the frequent disappearance of mother by murder in the Quebec novel, for the mother represented the powerful “mythical mother” that was “overwhelming and ‘castrating’ to the patriarchal mind” (190) – and was thus particularly threatening to her sons. Of these texts written by men Smart posits that “the revolutionary project is that of the son rebelling against the mother and seeking a ‘virility’ seemingly achievable only at women’s expense” (190). Early in the twentieth century Quebecois women writers began rewriting and reinventing the mother in their narratives. At this stage they often portrayed the mother as monster, but rather than as threatening to the male order she was monstrous for perpetuating the patriarchal values that brought her into existence. This portrayal is evident in earlier narratives by women such as Françoise Loranger’s 1940 novel *Mathieu* or Anne Hébert’s story “Le Torrent”, where the monster-mother attempts to consume the questing son. However, in these scenarios the son is able to escape the bitterness and authoritarianism of his mother. He achieves his own identity through separation, which at times, as in the case of “Le Torrent”, involves the violent murder of the mother.

Shortly after this period the mother-daughter relationship begins to find its place in the Quebec novel, yet the daughters are far less likely to find their place. Mary Jean Green makes this point in *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text*. Citing Marie-Claire Blais’ *Une saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel* she states that daughters are much more likely to succumb to their mother’s influence and are “ultimately driven to self-destruction” (75). As with the mother-son predicament the mother becomes a figure of alienation that the child must reject if she is to find liberation, yet given that these texts are “centred around the strong pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and child, the daughter can never fully disentangle herself from the mother” (Green, 80). This point is reiterated by Louise Forsythe in “The Radical

Transformation of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Some Women Writers of Quebec". She observes that many women writers in the 50's and 60's wrote of mother-daughter estrangement and that this "was a period of separation and refusal, a refusal that is still a starting point for many women today" (44). But she goes on to suggest that by the 1970's some women writers "succeeded in going beyond that separation to new affirmation and solidarity. They came to realize with great urgency that without continuity from mother to daughter, women remain detached from their origins and fragmented in their being" (44).

Manitoba born, Gabrielle Roy is nonetheless claimed as a Quebecoise writer and in accordance with other Quebecois women writers she explores the mother, her role in family, in society and in self and acknowledges the urgency around the mother-daughter relationship. But unlike the majority of women writers from Quebec who were not only exploring feminist ideologies but were also consciously "contributing to the national project" (Green, 28), Roy was seen as more concerned with the individual than the political (Hesse, 66). Phyllis Webb concurs with this perspective in "Gabrielle Roy's *Windflower*" suggesting that "what fascinated (Roy) as a writer was the flawed and various human spectacle seen at close range" (30). Yet unlike most of her other writings, *La Rivière sans repos* is a more overtly political text as it typifies not the national struggle in Quebec, but the colonial power relations between the White and Inuit cultures. But in the light of Roy's interest in "human spectacle", she helped pioneer the re-visioning of the mother in the contemporary Quebecois narrative by, as Lori Saint-Martin claims, placing "the mother at the heart of her writing" ("Gabrielle", 303) and giving a central focus to mother-daughter connection and transformation. Saint-Martin points out a common strategy that Roy employs to indicate this continuum between mother and daughter, where "the mother actually becomes the daughter, and the daughter, the mother" ("Gabrielle", 306)" Elsa in the end

does become the image of her mother, a nomad, wandering along the edge of the river. Actually mistaken for her dead mother one day, she recoils from the image: “Elsa...fit l’effort de se redresser pour ne pas tellement ressembler à sa mère qu’elle comprit pourtant alors comme jamais, dans sa chair délabrée, dans une sorte de honte de l’âme” (305). Significantly Elsa does not have a daughter, but a son, thus eliminating the possibility of this continuum as described by Saint-Martin. Consequently, although her devotion to her son Jimmy takes a large place in the narrative I focus on the separation and fragmentation in the mother-daughter relationship between Elsa and Winnie as a place between loss and locatedness, between the old and the new.

Roy had a strong bond with her own mother but the relationship was often fraught with volatile emotions. In his biography of Roy, François Ricard recounts that as the youngest in the family Gabrielle was left alone at home with her mother Méline and thus was included in most of her mother’s activities and travels: “C’est ainsi, du seul fait qu’elles sont toujours ensemble et la plupart du temps seules, que se crée entre Gabrielle et sa mere un lien...étroit” (45). Méline provided Roy with a constant flow of stories which “formeront bientôt une vaste matière orale” (46) for Roy, grounding her in her past while orienting her for the writer she would become. Roy was from an era when women who wanted to write felt they had to make a choice between writing and becoming a mother. Roy had no children of her own and according to Saint-Martin, Roy’s narratives communicate that children are a woman’s downfall because “dès la venue de l’enfant, la femme oublie la réflexion, le progrès, les velléités d’indépendance” (172). Despite this belief that children limited women’s potential, Roy seemed to insist in her writing that women could realize a continuity and transgress limitation through the relationship between mothers and daughters, between aunts and nieces, between women friends.

In *La Rivière sans repos* however Roy steps beyond her own world of experience and draws inspiration for this novel from a short visit to Northern Quebec and a brief encounter with a Métis mother and her son. In *Remnants of a Nation: On Poverty Narratives by Women* Roxanne Rimstead discusses authorship in Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*. Rimstead argues that Roy can be positioned as "one who narrates poverty from inside rather than outside the place of exclusion" (78), but in writing of Inuit experience here Roy embarks on the challenging path of writing from the outside looking in. Ricard describes how Roy would often seem to almost idealize the image of this Métis mother and child saying

ce qui est le plus intéressant, c'est de voir combien l'image, en devenant matière littéraire, va s'enrichir et se moduler dans l'esprit de la romancière. Chaque fois que (Roy) parlera de son voyage en Ungava lors d'entrevues à propos de *La Rivière sans repos*, elle évoquera cette scène de la mère et d'enfant, mais sans jamais dire que la mère était métisse; seul l'enfant sera présenté comme tel, et cet enfant n'aura plus seulement les cheveux bouclés : il deviendra une sorte de chérubin blond aux yeux bleus. (408)

In response to this encounter Roy sets the novel in the bleak, isolated tundra of Ungava Bay and Elsa becomes the Inuit mother and Jimmy her blond, blue-eyed Métis son. Rimstead remarks in "Used People: *La Rivière sans repos* as Postcolonial Poverty Narrative", "the novel teaches very well because it is a textured story of material lives and...is among those rare sustained fictional treatments in Canadian literature of how wealth, technology, and consumerism in the guise of progress shape indigenous subjectivity" (69) – and shapes our concepts of mothers and motherhood.

A first step towards becoming a mother is an acknowledgment of our sexuality along with its varied cultural and social constructions. This is where Elsa's journey begins.

*ii. Mother as Sexual/Reproductive Being*

A dislocation between Elsa's mind and body can be seen in her first sexual experience. Before her pregnancy Elsa appears confident and at home in her body. We first meet her with her friends after their trip to the cinema: "Depuis leur sortie de la Mission catholique les jeunes filles, tout en marchant à bon pas, n'avaient cessé de rire, de se luntiner, de babiller avec entrain" (118). Their laughter and romantic fantasies as they leave the cinema remain with Elsa as she leaves her girl friends to make her way home. This élan buoys her on as she is approached by a young GI. The ensuing scene between the GI and Elsa is an ambiguous one for it does not really stem from mutual consent but nor is it fraught with violence and easily defined as rape: "Le GI la fit taire en lui mettant la main sur la bouche (de Elsa)... Il n'était ni rude, ni brutal, seulement pressé. Même les parents d'Elsa n'allaient pas plus vite" (127). The postcolonial theme that runs through the text mingles with Elsa's sexual experience in this scene. As Elsa's curiosity and innocence draw her into the grasp of the GI, so is the marginalized culture drawn to the new and intriguing ways of the dominant one. As North American culture encroaches on Inuit ways the outcome is at times ambiguous as well. Winnie for example, despite her confusion over White ways, defends many of the apparent advantages of "progress" such as the church, the movies, the supermarket and finally "les arrivées sur la piste d'atterrissage, pars les beaux soirs d'été, des envoyés du gouvernement" (186). Rimstead remarks on the "contaminated" text "in which a white author ventriloquizes the thoughts and lives of Inuit and mixed-blood subjects" and how the "ethics of speaking for the Other is raised" (71). If Roy ventriloquize Elsa's response to the GI as well – her lack of struggle and acceptance of his advances not necessarily an accurate reflection of a young Inuit girl's response.



Saint-Martin cites this scene as one of the rare occasions where Roy expresses sexuality in her female characters. She asserts that in Roy's texts it is far more common that "the daughter's sexuality is (as) equally absent" ("Gabrielle"307) as the mother's. Yet this scene between the GI and Elsa provokes some questions as to sexual viewpoint. Elsa consents passively and with no obvious resistance and no apparent pleasure or displeasure to the GI's advances. Is Roy in any way suggesting that Elsa's lack of resistance is culturally based? Is Roy basing her assumptions on White or Inuit culture? Speaking of Western culture in "Rape : On Coercion and Consent" Cathrine MacKinnon asserts "that women are socialized to passive receptivity" (48) but is this what motivates Elsa's passivity? Elsa's initiation into sexual experience is not an active choice but Roy infers that Inuit sexuality is "privé de mystère" and reduced to the "essentiel", concluding that "ce qui est des parents esquimaux d'un naturel tout plein d'indulgence, ils n'auraient sans doute pas fait grand obstacle à la rencontre de leurs filles avec les jeunes homme des U.S.A." (117). This freedom to experience intimacy might offer Inuit girls a certain agency regarding sexual expression, yet the young girls are not seen as active or passive, but simply acting out a basic human function, "comme les bêtes, s'accouplaient au hasard des rencontres" (117). As well the absence of any passion in this scene reflects Roy's tendency to side-step female desire and loving male/female relationships. Saint-Martin observes: "Aucune œuvre publiée de Gabrielle Roy...ne prend pour sujet l'amour entre hommes et femmes ou le désir sexuel" (*Voyageuse*, 134). Saint-Martin admits that there are moments of sexual expression in Roy's novels, but they are "rarement heureuse" (136). Elsa's body appears unmoved by sexual penetration as her intellect is struck more by the GI's battle with the bugs: "Il dut en aspirer par les narines, en avaler peut-être, car il fut pris d'une quinte de toux. Il s'étranglait. Elsa ne put se retenir de rire un peu" (127). Elsa's sexual position is ambiguous

here as her body allows the sexual act yet her mind is disconnected. This ambiguity marks another possible space for transformation. Elsa lays unresolved between innocence and corruption, virgin and whore as the GI deliberates whether to leave her with simply “un merci”, an “un adieu”, or a payment. In the end “il lui mit vite dans la main quelques billets chiffonnés” (127). As a result of this encounter Elsa becomes pregnant and must face the frontiers of mothering and motherhood, reminding us that, as Dimen points out, “sexuality is inextricably entangled with reproductivity” (43).

Once they have become mothers, women are rarely represented as sexual beings. Saint-Martin notes that, particularly in the Quebec novel, “the only remote hint of the mother as a sexual being is the large size of her family” (“Gabrielle”, 301). Yet departing from her tendency, Roy does allow Elsa sexual expression as a mother. In her brief stay with her uncle in Old Fort Chimo, they come together sexually and Elsa’s drive is as desperate as his: “A peine à moitié dévêtus, ils s’unirent dans une hâte qui projetait au plafond une immense ombre agitée” (241). Here Roy is addressing female sexuality, but within the context of incest. As Wiseman does in *Crackpot*, Roy offers a certain resistance to conventional morality in the relationship between Elsa and her uncle by imposing no judgment on the situation. White man’s morality becomes blurred in light of the mutual respect, simple fulfillment of a human need and intuitive response that put Elsa at ease as she returns briefly to the old ways and the traditional world of her uncle.

Pregnancy is not the outcome of this sexual encounter, but pregnancy does follow her encounter with the GI turning her private experience public. Pregnancy involves dramatic corporeal transformation for women and as Rothman argues, it is the

physical embodiment of connectedness. We have in every pregnant woman the living proof that individuals do not enter the world as autonomous, atomistic, isolated beings,

but begin socially, being connected. And we have in every pregnant woman a walking contradiction to the segmentation of our lives: pregnancy does not permit it. In pregnancy the private self, the sexual, familial self, announces itself wherever it goes.

(146)

Elsa's response to this connectedness is confusing. She goes inside herself, remorseful, despite, or perhaps due to, her family's passive acceptance of her pregnancy. Once a carefree young girl she is now ill-humoured: "Il y avait tout de même ceci de changé: de rieuse qu'elle avait été, elle devenait morose et renfermée" (130). In her conversation with the pastor she does not seem particularly bothered by being pregnant but expresses no anticipation either. Hesse says "Elsa is characterized by ambiguities and tensions that derive from a conflict she largely poses on herself" (70). I propose that this statement dismisses the cultural and social influences that are often at the root of our "ambiguities and tensions". From a feminist standpoint Grosz sees that the body is not a "tabula rosa" but rather it

becomes a 'text' and is fictionalized and positioned within myths and belief systems that form a culture's social narratives and self-representations. In some cultural myths, this means that the body can be read as an agent, a laboring, exchanging being, a subject of social contracts, and thus of rights and responsibilities; in others it becomes a body shell capable of being overtaken by the other's message. (119)

So Elsa becomes such a "text", caught between the belief systems of her parents, of her Inuit background and the overriding messages she receives from the Beaulieus and their consumer culture.

### *iii. Mothering and Motherhood*

Adrienne Rich was among the first feminist writers to question the place mother as person took between the patriarchal construction of motherhood and the feminine body of knowledge known as mothering. In her introduction to *Of Woman Born* Rich attempts to distinguish one from the other. Mothering she sees as “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” while motherhood “aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control”. She then goes on to elaborate on this reasoning:

At certain points in history, and in certain cultures, the idea of woman-as-mother has worked to endow women with respect, even with awe, and to give all women some say in the life of a people or a clan. But for most of what we know as the “mainstream” of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities. (13)

Rich wrote this in 1976, but the view that the institution remains dominant and “ghettoizes” women continues to fuel discussions on feminism, mothering and the alienation we can still experience from our bodies. In her 1994 article “Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Ideology in a Patriarchal Society”, Barbara Katz Rothman writes: “American motherhood now rests on three deeply rooted ideologies that shape what we see and what we experience, three central threads of motherhood: an ideology of patriarchy; an ideology of technology; and an ideology of capitalism” (139). In *La Rivière sans repos* Elsa confronts each of these three ideologies revealing the struggles not only of a young, single, Inuit mother living in poverty in the unforgiving environment of the North, “le rude pays nu sous son ciel insistant” (117), but of most mothers as we attempt to balance the experience of mothering with that of motherhood as

institution. In Western culture we strive to find a respected and valued place between mothering as feminine creation and motherhood as a masculine construct (Kitzenger, Chodrow). Likewise Elsa is hung in that ambiguous territory between her Inuit roots (mothering) and her aspirations to the White Man's ways (motherhood).

Roy's text is intent on revealing the decline of a people and their traditions but the narrative is also rich in symbol and metaphor of this tension mothers experience between the institution of motherhood formulated around patriarchy which is regulated by technology, capitalism and consumerism and our own corporeal knowledge of what it means to be a mother. The opposing positions of nature and culture, of mothering and motherhood are the borders of Elsa's two frontiers, frontiers represented by Winnie and Mme. Beaulieu. As "nature" Winnie appears at home and at ease in her family, community and her traditions. As "culture" Mme. Beaulieu is trapped and alienated within her meticulously structured, middle-class home. As mother and grandmother Winnie abides by the rhythms of her body while motherhood actually denies Mme Beaulieu her role as mother. In this construction her body is not her own for as Rich argues motherhood as institution "has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them" (13). This incarceration can lead us to question our worth and purpose and historically manifests itself as corporeal dis-ease. Elizabeth Beaulieu's depression reveals this:

(Elsa) ne pouvait plus se défendre contre l'incompréhensible peine de sa patronne.

Pourquoi Madame Beaulieu souffrait-elle autant? Elle avait tout : de beaux enfants, une riche maison sur son roc lui servant de piédestal pour voir le pays en entier, un intérieur douillet, des tapis de laine, des images au mur, et surtout un mari aimant qui chaque soir, en rentrant, s'informait avec sollicitude: "Est-ce que tu ne vas un peu mieux aujourd'hui, ma petite chérie? (191).

M. Beaulieu is very aware of his wife's pain and Elsa reads M. Beaulieu's concern as devotion and love, which it may well be – but within that concern there seems little of the respect Rich sees as essential if women are to reclaim their worth and value. M. Beaulieu patronizes his wife. Mme. Beaulieu has no responsibilities in the home; her husband pays Elsa to take care of all the domestic tasks – thus Mme. Beaulieu has fulfilled her role as reproducer but is denied her role as mother. What then is her role, her purpose beyond entertaining other white, middle-class women with tea parties and adorning a room with her presence? Mme. Beaulieu is “ghettoized” in what Bordo refers to as an historical moment where the “new machine economy” that “turned many of the most valued ‘female’ skills...out of the home and over to the factory system” – and, as in the case of the Beaulieu's, over to maids and servants - leaving the lives of middle-class women “far emptier than before” (157). Consequently women in this position found themselves bored, powerless and depressed.

Where the institution of motherhood denies women recognition, mothering recognizes the transforming and informing nature of pregnancy, birth and childcare. In Roy's text Elsa's family and their Inuit culture reveal a day-to-day rhythm of mothering as they accept a simplicity of being, value personal relationships and individual potential. Theirs at least *was* a culture closely connected with nature and attentive to an internal voice that helped establish a more coherent relationship with self, whether that self was masculine or feminine. Elsa returns home early from work one day and sees her family in this place of simplicity and natural rhythms:

Le visage barbouillé, Jimmy farfouillait à son goût, avec des chiots, dans un plat de poisson malodorant. Aussi par terre, censément pour avoir l'œil sur enfant, Winnie fumait avec placidité, tout en regardant couler la Koksoak... Thaddeus, adossé à un amoncellement de tonneaux vides, qui se laissait réchauffer par le soleil. Le jeune frère

d'Elsa lançait des cailloux dans l'air, pour le simple plaisir. De longtemps Elsa n'avait vu des gens aussi contents de leur sort. (160-1)

Winnie is simply being, not busy cleaning or consuming and is content, yet Elsa, already drawn to the consumer society she visits each day while working at the Beaulieu's, derides this air of contentment: "Elsa la dévisageait. Sa mère avait beau, elle demeurer placide; toute sa vie apparemment elle s'était contentée de ce qu'elle avait, jamais n'avait cherché à s'élever" (154). In her desperate attempts to follow the White, consumerist model Beaulieus she rejects her own traditions and customs, placing herself in the world of in-between's. She continues to emulate the Beaulieu family despite the dysfunction she witnesses and the depression that alienates Mme. Beaulieu from both her husband and her children. Elsa believes them to be an idyllic, autonomous family unit. Consequently despite the apparent ease and contentment in her own family she is determined to push both cultural values and mother away in her quest for the material-based culture of the Beaulieu's.

North American culture encourages both parents to find work outside the home in order to feed the consumerist structure. This becomes Elsa's reality while the rest of her family integrates work with a way of life that values the ordinary and listens to their own, each other's and the environment's natural rhythms. While Elsa is away at work Winnie lays aside the ridged schedules Elsa has learned at the Beaulieu's and slips into her own rhythms. At one point, not ready to wake from her own rest, Winnie decides to not rouse Jimmy for his bath given that "il n'avait même pas eu le temps de se salir..." (155). Elsa's whole world has become tenuously balanced on the structure of motherhood and such deviation could crumble her world, thus the rejection of her mother and her ways becomes primary. In so doing Elsa is denying herself the mother-daughter bond Saint-Martin says can actually "give life and identity to

daughters” (“Gabrielle”, 306). Saint-Martin suggests that Roy usually wrote against the grain regarding the influence Freudian thought was having upon the literary world, where division was of the essence. Instead Roy is “at odds with traditional psychological theory respecting the mother-daughter relationship” for she demonstrates a “close bond between women which allows for reciprocity” (“Gabrielle”, 306). But here Roy does separate Elsa from her mother, situating her in a lonely and alienated space. She is separated from her mother and her culture, yet is neither granted membership into the Beaulieu’s culture nor a reciprocal relationship with Mme. Beaulieu as a surrogate mother. No matter how hard Elsa may try she will never achieve the material stability and purchasing power of the Beaulieus, yet she nonetheless seems to experience the emptiness such a lifestyle can invoke. Elsa is so busy working and idealizing the Beaulieus’ lifestyle she cannot understand the boredom and depression Mme. Beaulieu is living. But when a similar emptiness is written on her own body, as she slips into a consumer modality, Elsa’s tearful state is equally incomprehensible to her own family. Shortly after observing Winnie, Jimmy and the rest of her family in their simple contentment, Elsa bursts into tears, for she realizes she no longer has a role, purpose or place in their unit. Her grandfather adverts his glance – “(il) détourna la tête et regarda au loin les vieilles montagnes érodées, comme pour leur demander ce qu’il fallait penser d’un si grand chagrin a propos d’on ne savait trop quoi” (161). I suggest that Elsa’s corporeal response to this gentle scene reflects her sense of dislocation and alienation - her lonely and unfamiliar position between mothering and motherhood.



*iv. Narrative Body: Resistance and Transcendence*

In Elsa, Roy offers us a strong woman, successfully raising her child alone yet placed in an ambiguous position. As women we attempt to find our balance between feminine knowing (body) and masculine norms (mind), perhaps beginning to blur dividing lines and dispel dualistic perspectives. Literary models of strong mothers and female solidarity share our potential knowledge and suggest that an identity can be found through connected mother-daughter relationships as well as non-biological female relationships and female communities. Nonetheless dominant constructions prevail and we are still left to create ourselves anew with often distant myths to draw from, when the feminine and the body were valued knowledges. In her dissertation *Wild Mother Dancing* Di Brandt discusses what kind of effect the absence of mothers in the Victorian texts she was studying had on her when she became a mother: “It was like falling into a vacuum, narratively speaking. I realized suddenly, with a shock, that none of the texts I had read so carefully, none of the literary skills I had acquired so diligently as a student of literature, had anything remotely to do with the experience of becoming a mother” (3). With the increasing number of women writers being published mothers began to reappear and endure in works of literature. Although Roy can be seen as “writing beyond the ending” in that none of the three mothers in the text die or disappear early in the narrative nor are they the monsters described by Smart and Green, the three mothers in this text are not encouraging role models. Roy narrates three maternal experiences in Winnie, Mme. Beaulieu and Elsa but they cannot be said to be mothers with a strong female connectedness. Winnie does represent a more intuitive way of knowing that ancient cultures revered for its wisdom but she is a sad parody of the mythical wise woman, twisted by the encroachment of progress and consumerism. We see this deterioration through Elsa’s eyes, “une Esquimaude bouffie de sommeil et de trop manger,

toujours à fumer ou à rouler quelques bouchée entre ses gencives usées, l'être humain auquel elle tenait le moins à ressembler, peut-être même sa pire ennemie" (162). At the other end of the spectrum is Mme. Beaulieu, a different product of progress and consumer culture. In a rare instance Monsieur Beaulieu is able to observe the emptiness his wife inhabits:

(A)ssise é sa table basse pour server ses invitées, si elle élevait les yeux vers la baie panoramique par laquelle entrait chez elle le ciel rigoureux, aussitôt elle se sentait comme jugée et trouvée ridicule à être vue par lui verser du thé, é papoter, é tâcher, comme on disait, de se distraire. (156)

As this landscape of alienation closes in on her she reflects, "du moins en vint-elle à accorder à Elsa l'attention d'une prisonnière à une autre prisonnière dans la même cage" (152). The disease written on these maternal bodies is born of historical inscriptions and these women are tragic models of feminine angst. Elsa is no less tragic. She flounders as she is not completely within or without one culture or the other: "Toutefois elle maigrissait à vue d'œil et en venait à prendre l'air un peu harassé de sa jeune patronne et d'autres jeunes femmes blanches toujours préoccupées de ne pas encore assez bien faire et qui ne cessait de se proposer des buts de plus en plus difficiles à comprendre" (165). As these women feel in some way flawed, so Elsa adopts this sense of inadequacy.

Some of this inadequacy is dispelled for Elsa as she finds paid work she can do at home. In "Mothers Are Not Workers: Homework Regulations and the Construction of Motherhood, 1948-1953" Eileen Boris asserts that "homework has reflected the sexual division of labour and the construction of gender that defines women's subordinate positioning both in the family and the labour market as 'natural'"(161). Boris also suggests that when "earning wages at home, women seemed not to be breadwinners but rather mothers making good use of their extra time"

(161). Elsa takes on this homework but does not seem subordinated and Roy makes it clear it is not an activity that Elsa places in any “extra time”. Her sewing becomes a true outlet for her creativity and a talent she becomes admired for in her own community. Sadly it also appears to remove her one more step away from this community. She becomes “l’Esquimaude la mieux logée, la plus fortunée et la plus enviée de Fort Chimo” (164). Elsa quickly completes other daily tasks so she can sink herself into her sewing: “Tôt levée, elle lavait et peignait Jimmy qu’elle envoyait à l’école... Elle rangeait la hutte et se donnait la peine de passer jusque sous le lit la serpillière humide. Ensuite, installée à son travail, elle commençait à pédaler” (255). Elsa appears to find satisfaction in creating animals and dolls and this task seems to connect her to an inner knowledge. To create the dolls her inspiration does not come from intellectual imaginings, but from an internal wisdom: “Pour les poupées, cependant, elle n’avait eu à écouter que son propre sentiment et sa chaude imagination” (256). For the animals “elle avait demandé conseil à Thaddeus” (256), her grandfather, for whom the forms and shapes of the world about him are integrated into the movements and understanding of his body. This is evident when asked to sculpt a portrait of Jimmy and Thaddeus explains to his grandson why he is not able to: “Tu as des traits et un nez comme je n’ai jamais appris” (182). Through the creative experience of sewing, a reconnection to her heritage, pleasure in the activity and adequate remuneration, Elsa finds some self-worth and resists the subordination and lack of value that usually accompanies this work and brings value to day-to-day creations. She brings a value to the work women do. Saint-Martin notes that Roy often introduces this theme into her narratives in order to “revalorize traditional female crafts such as paper flowers, sewing, decorating and embroidering” (“Gabrielle”, 318), bringing this work from the margins towards a more valued centre. But

Elsa's art remains a mere craft in the white market place and no longer has a practical use in her Inuit community, making it impossible for her creations to be truly respected and valued.

*v. Abject Body: Potential Transformation*

Elsa's transition from her nomadic stay with Uncle Ian in Old Fort Chimo to the domesticated existence in her hut exemplifies the historical shift from mothering to motherhood and the family itself from producers to consumers. Rothman states that "the family has always been an economic unit as well as a social and psychological unit. What is new, perhaps, is the shift from children as workers to children as commodities, accompanying the change in the family from its role as a unit of production to its new role as a unit of consumption" (140). Elsa opts for the latter, scared and desperate after her experience with Ian and Jimmy's near-fatal illness in the wilds of Old Fort Chimo. With no remedies available and knowledge of the old ways lost, she returns to New Fort Chimo, "pour se mettre de nouveau carrément du côté des Blancs" (253). Although going through all the actions of the White way of life, her body and being will always be Inuit and this causes a profound dislocation: "Entourée des siens qui l'aimaient bien, ayant auprès d'elle son enfant, elle parut néanmoins à tous seule et accablée" (269). But Elsa continues to live her isolation until she becomes an abject body in the eyes of both communities.

To begin, it is Winnie who becomes the abject, growing more and more repulsive to Elsa with her puffy body, so-called lay-about ways and her perpetually dangling cigarette with its endless trail of yellowing smoke. Kristeva describes why the abject body makes us feel uncomfortable: "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system and order. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Winnie, still

inhabiting the old ways to the best of her ability has, like Elsa, become in-between, ambiguous and composite at the hands of progress. Winnie's acceptance of new technologies disturbs the identity and order Elsa once experienced in her Inuit community and Elsa perhaps then turns to the new system, believing she can find new order and identity. From the moment of Jimmy's birth Elsa begins to find fault with her mother and gradually distances herself as much as possible.

In her rejection of Winnie as culture she rejects the wealth of knowledge that connects her to nature and *her* nature. Oral tradition and role modeling have often been the mode of transference of feminine-coded knowledge, and the same is true of Native cultures that are more closely connected to body and earth. In *La Rivière sans repos* Thadeus is the family storyteller and Elsa does her best to pass stories on to her son. Despite the perpetuation of this tradition though Elsa's "vie s'usait à lui acheter d'aussi riches vêtements et d'aussi charmants jouets qu'en avaient les enfants de madame Beaulieu" (168), the lure of consumerism more powerful than the familiarity of tradition. Elsa recounts stories of the old ways to Jimmy, but part of his own truth, the story of his father becomes an invention. Admittedly all stories are given to invention, but it could be argued that Jimmy's eventual violent rejection of his mother is due to this imbalance between memory and mythical wisdom. Elsa realizes her own memory has been tainted by the invasion of progress and it has influenced her re-telling of the traditional stories to Jimmy. When she sees the beauty of the trees at Old Fort Chimo she wonders: "On lui avait dit tant de mal du vieux Fort-Chimo. Pourquoi ne lui avoir pas parlé aussi de ses arbres" (200). Such a faltering in their oral tradition threatens the strength of the Inuit community and the solidarity it once had.

Theorists and literary critics alike claim the urgent importance of shared knowledge if there is to be a coherent sense of community and culture. Frye asserts that “culture is born of leisure” (222), yet culture can also be seen as being born of necessity, the necessity to express and belong to a common experience, common stories, a shared language of imagined communities. Heilburn suggests, “as long as women are isolated one from another, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be part of any narrative of their own” (45) while Atwood proposes that literature is like a mirror and if a culture lacks these mirrors “it has no way of knowing what it looks like” (*Survival*, 16). Charles Taylor believes it is not enough to simply have a language a specific community recognizes, it must be recognized from the centre as well, for what “we are looking for here is that we all *recognize* the equal value of different cultures; that we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their *worth*”(64). As Quebec women writers were producing narratives such as *Kamouraska*, *La BelleBête* and *Une Saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel* and Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion* they were giving women an alternative discourse, powerfully vocalizing the feminine experience and creating a pool of stories that spoke to a silent history and strengthened a conscious female “we”, moving from Other to Mother. As feminism and nationalism traced parallel lines in Quebec, these novels spoke to a nation in a language that felt like home, a language that formed a sense of “here” also enabling Quebec to move from Other to a strengthened cultural self-perception (Green).

The images of the Virgin-Mother-Goddess of ancient times portrayed a female body that possessed mass and interior depth. Adrienne Rich describes these images as “charged with an awareness of her intrinsic importance, her depth of meaning, her existence at the very centre of what is necessary” (93). This Virgin-Mother-Goddess emanated sexuality, creativity,

reproductivity and a nurturing wisdom, “sources of knowledge long excluded from our dominant traditions” (Jaggar, 6). In our culture these images have been replaced by icons of cosmetic beauty where our sexuality is commodified, our bodies objectified and our wisdom devalued. Elsa experiences her sexuality, creativity and reproductivity, yet finds herself standing abject and alone on the banks of the Koksoak at the end of the novel. This is an uncomfortable space of abjection and ambiguity but it is a space that also allows an opportunity to face this discomfort, challenge it. Here lies possible transgression towards a transformation of patriarchy and consumerism. Within this transformation, this shift of paradigms, our bodies as innocent and sexual, needy and giving - the polarities of virgin and whore – might find union, solace and recognition in a reinstatement of the ancient awe and respect of Mother. This hope might be read in Elsa’s final smile as she watches the seeds of the windflower “monter at se répandre dans le soir” (315).

### Conclusion

Comment le corps est-il devenu aujourd'hui un objet de recherche historique?

L'interrogation semble d'autant plus légitime que, dans une tradition philosophique dominée par le cartésianisme, tout contribuait à lui conférer un rôle secondaire, jusqu'à la fin du XIXe siècle du moins. Au tournant du siècle, cependant, la relation entre sujet et son corps commença à être définie dans autres termes.

Jean-Jacques Courtine, *Histoire du corps*, 7

In the course of my research on gender, body politics, and feminist literary criticism, my understanding and awareness of the cultural constructions that limit us within the physical context of our bodies became increasingly acute. I realized that limited within any one of these constructions, whether it be the innocent nymph, the hungry whore or the embodiment of mother as selfless love or the actual corner stone of patriarchal order, we inscribe on our bodies the silences and denial that dominant cultural and social norms dictate. Susan Bordo sees our era as a “time of great backlash against changes in gender-power relations”, and her primary interest regarding this backlash is “the changing meaning of female ‘otherness’ for women, as we attempt to survive...within our still largely masculinist public institutions” (232). My primary interest in this study has been to explore ways in which our relationship to and with our body might help us navigate these institutions and the norms and conventions they construct. Grosz asserts that there is “no ‘natural’ norm; there are only cultural forms of body, which do or do not conform to social norms” (143). The definitive boundaries of these norms that dictate femininity in the classical cannon are no longer so clearly delineated. Boundaries have become blurred and definitions systematically questioned. In uncovering these blurred boundaries in the narratives



of Margaret Atwood, Adele Wiseman, and Gabrielle Roy I look to reading strategies that take into account postmodern views on knowledge. Among other strategies, the postmodern questions definitions and assumptions yet does not necessarily offer viable alternatives or solutions. Although this may then seem an “incomplete intervention” as bell hooks suggests in *Feminism Is for Everybody* (21), Hutcheon proposes “that challenging and questioning are positive values (even if solutions to problems are not offered), for the knowledge derived from such enquiry may be the only possible condition of change” (*Theorize*, 248). In the postmodern text, characters are brought to the edge of the unknown, perhaps even to a seeming void, but this edge can also be seen as the precipice of possibility, the possibility of subversion and change. Although none of the three texts are definably postmodern either in era or style, I conclude that they challenge social and cultural norms and conventions in a similar way, revealing contradictions within these structures and believe that Hutcheon’s argument, that narratives “might be able to dramatize and even provoke change from within” (248) has proved helpful in an analysis of *The Edible Woman*, *Crackpot*, and *La Rivière sans repos*. In my reading of the three narratives, none of the protagonists face predictability and their ends are precariously left open-ended. Atwood, Wiseman and Roy offer resistance to dominant constructions and gendered assumptions, yet they offer no neatly packaged solutions for how we might actually recontextualize ourselves while still framed within the context of patriarchy. Applying postmodern reading strategies it is possible to see this open-endedness representing transition rather than a fearful void.

By transgressing the feminine norms of virgin and whore, Marian and Hoda arguably dramatize such an attempt to provoke change from within. Marian resists the system that channels her to a dead-end job and prescribes marriage as she discovers the agency of her body.

Hoda, being all that women are not allowed to be – obese, loud, sexual, autonomous - brings with this her laughter and dance that shout transgression. Elsa characterizes an ambiguity that is also transgressive. She inhabits that ambiguous ground Western women face as mothers as we balance between consumerism and the family world of human relationship.

In each of these texts polarities based on gender become evident and the result is that the protagonists find themselves isolated on the periphery. In her research on the way children play, Carol Gilligan concludes that young girls give priority to human relationships, whereas boys are more concerned with the rules of the game. Boys enjoy the debate and readjusting the rules as much as the game itself, while girls, rather “than elaborating a system of rules for resolving disputes, subordinate the continuation of the game to the continuation of relationships” (10). Consequently, girls are then often left outside the game unless they “learn to play like a boy” (10). I find each of the female protagonists in *The Edible Woman*, *Crackpot* and *La Rivière sans repos* must function outside the game. Marian cannot aspire to a management position because of her gender and she is required to subordinate her own needs if she is to nurture a relationship with Peter. Hoda is definitively outside the cultural and social games that circulate around her, but as a carnival character she subverts the various norms. The norm of the whore-trick relationship is turned upside down as she generally finds pleasure in each experience and also establishes a human relationship with her clients. The character of Elsa allows for a more tragic reading as her position outside the game is a lonely and dysfunctional one. Nonetheless, from a feminist viewpoint, her final abandon to the banks of the river Koksoak can be read as a potential liberation if the text is to suggest possible transformation.

Jean-Jacques Courtine suggests that it was actually the 20th century that “a inventé théoriquement le corps” (7) and this suggestion supports my reading of the three works in this

study as emergent feminist texts that acknowledge the importance of corporeal experience and its wisdom. In this revaluing of the body it would be encouraging to believe we may be moving into an era of a general revaluing of what is human, not simply the revaluing of women.

Through the course of my research I realized that many feminist theorists and literary critics attribute women's position as less-than and object to the fact that the body has long been associated with all that is base, uncontrollable, and abject and that women remain associated with the body and these qualities due to a lingering attachment to dualism. It is in part this dualism that I see the three narratives attempt to deconstruct, allowing for polarities to merge. In their introduction to *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Constructions of Being and Knowing*, Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo claim:

Contemporary feminist epistemology shares the growing sense that the Cartesian framework is fundamentally inadequate, an obsolete and self-deluded world view badly in need of reconstruction and revisioning. In its rejection of this framework, feminism borrows from the insights of other traditions, including Marxist historicism, psychoanalytical theory, literary theory, and social knowledge. (4)

What this view suggests, though, is that despite contemporary challenges to dualism such as the narratives by Atwood, Wiseman, and Roy, we are far from free of dualistic structures.

Reflecting on the Canadian zeitgeist in *Survival*, Atwood proposes that if "a country or culture lack (literary) mirrors it has no way of knowing what it looks like" (15-16) and that Canada was lacking such literary mirrors. Likewise for women, the only mirrors available to us were male constructs of our experience. The dominant images of women we have grown up with are the virgin who is all containment, the whore who has none, or the mother who is either absent or upholder of the patriarchal home. Atwood goes on to say that if "the viewer is given a

mirror that reflects not him but someone else, and told at the same time the reflection he sees is himself, he will get a very distorted idea of what he is really like” (16). I believe that the three women writers included here write their female characters outside the classical representations and constructs of virgin, whore and mother in an attempt to mend some of the distorted ideas we hold of ourselves by offering alternative mirrors. They wrote counter-narratives that defy the norms of appearance, comportment, adornment and self-denial that limit women within our bodies and provided models that speak to female potential. Yet regardless of this progress, it cannot be denied that our culture still promotes the female body as object. This can be seen by simply scanning images in movies, advertising and the music industry. This persistent objectification problematizes Courtine’s potentially progressive perspective of a new “inventing of the body”.

In “The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?” Nelly Furman reminds us that when

feminist critics focus their interest on women’s experience of life and its ‘picturing’ in literature, what is left unquestioned is whether literature conceived as a representational art is not *per se* a patriarchal form of discourse. What is taken for granted in the study of images and their relation to experience is that the ‘picturing’ of experience is gender-neutral or free of ideological value. (67)

The limitation of our potential seems to continually return to the socially and culturally gendered environments that surround us. A common postmodern conclusion is that if the body is going to help us transcend the boundaries of gender, as well as race and class, it must somehow become the non-body. Courtine sees this as “un autre enjeu” particular to our era, for we no longer necessarily deny the significance of the body, but now ask: “Mon corps est-il toujours mon

corps?” (11). Bordo also reiterates this position where the postmodern body is a reconceived body: “No longer an obstacle to knowledge...the body is seen as the vehicle of human making and remaking of the world, constantly shifting location, capable of revealing endlessly new points of view” (227). She continues by stating:

The epistemological fantasy of becoming multiplicity – the dream of limitless multiple embodiments, allowing one to dance from place to place and self to self – is another. What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel anywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all. (228-9)

Here postmodern perspectives present a dichotomy where the body is “no body at all” yet corporeal knowledge seems essential to gaining an understanding of our existence as well as offering a means to resistance.

Culture forms our constructions of gender, yet our biology determines that gender. It seems that this biology - our breasts, our hips, our wombs - still limits us even as cultural and social constructs shift and stimulate an ebb and flow in the valuing of what is coded as the feminine. Art and politics have changed our cultural and social positions over the decades and centuries. But as I conclude this research, I understand it is perhaps change from within, within our community as women that will strengthen an understanding and reconnection of feminine ways of knowing and in turn bring value and worth to that knowing. Narratives are an essential means to establish a culture as well as to share and transfer this knowledge from mother to daughter, from woman to woman. In *Survival* Atwood explores the Canadian quest for identity in the shadow of Europe and the States and her words about nation well suit woman’s quest for self

within patriarchal constructs. She claims literature is not only a mirror, it is a map of our personal geography that consists of shared knowledge, and that this shared knowledge “is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive” (19).

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