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‘THESE CHICKS
ARE DAMAGED
GOODS’:

*The Abject Female Body in Fielding’s
Bridget Jones’s Diary and Warner’s
The Sopranos*

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Abject Female Body

Art and Literature



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The female body as a disruptive force was a dominant topic in the popular culture and literature of the 1990s, as well as in debates of the postfeminist theorists of the decade¹. As culture began to constantly scrutinise women's bodies and obsessively fixate on unhealthy thinness and perpetual youth, an idealistic model of the female body was conceptualised: self-contained, perfectly smooth, with no biological functions or needs (vide McRobbie 57-8). Due to the impossibility of meeting these voyeuristic standards, the uncomfortable biological reality of womanhood has been perceived as deserving of societal degradation and unyielding control. This essay will examine² the nature of Kristevan's abjection of female bodies in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1997) and Alan Warner's *The Sopranos* (1999). I shall follow the thesis of Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, which delineates the relationship between the physicality of the female body and the negative perception of women, outlined as such: 'the body has a propensity to leak, to overflow the proper distinctions between self and other, to contaminate and engulf. Thus, women themselves are, in the conventional masculinist imagination, not simply inferior beings whose civil and social subordination is both inevitable and justified, but objects of fear and repulsion' (3). I will argue that the female protagonists of these novels are unwilling to reject their corporeality despite its negative connotations; however, due to the all-encompassing nature of their patriarchal environments, they are unable to liberate themselves from the oppressive demarcations of female abjection.

The culture of the 1990s undeniably exerted a considerable amount of pressure on women. Due to the efforts of second-wave feminism, women (predominantly white and middle-class, the demographic at the forefront of the movement's concerns) no longer had to be financially reliant on their fathers and husbands.

Thus, they were encouraged to excel in the professional sphere; as Angela McRobbie notes, '[w]e might now imagine the young woman as a highly efficient assemblage for productivity. (This also marks a shift, women now figure in governmental discourse as much for their productive as reproductive capacities.)' (55). This observation draws attention to the simultaneous requirements of excellence in professional and personal spheres – as far as modern women as a group have become considered the locum of new opportunities for capitalistic growth, the expectations of raising children and maintaining a household have neither diminished nor been passed on to the men. Women were urged to perform the roles of supermodel, career woman, and caring mother all at the same time – as Stéphanie Genz explains, the postfeminist woman 'lacks a harmonious inner wholeness or balance and she is troubled by her fate as a "Superwoman" who strives to incorporate her careerism and her need for hearth/husband, her heterosexual femininity and her potentially desexualizing feminist agenda' (98). These demands are strongly dependent on the temporality of the physical body as women have also been judged as having 'female sell-by dates', as Bridget Jones herself angrily notices (Fielding 213)



and as her family friends point out on any occasion: ‘You career girls! [...] Can’t put it off for ever you know. Tick-tock-tick-tock.’ (Fielding 11). Thus, the biological clock of fertility is another unavoidable pressure as it is tied not only to motherhood itself but also to the attractiveness of the body as perceived by men. Furthermore, as Regina Schober explains, ‘[b]odily perfection often correlates directly with economic success [...] being attractive ensures a higher market value, both in a competitive job and marriage market’ (124). Therefore, both economic and romantic achievements are impossible to separate from physical appearance.

These demands of bodily perfection are intrinsically linked to Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection. She defines abject matter as something that crosses boundaries and defies social order, a part that must be cast off from the self in order to maintain its integrity – it can be exemplified through bodily waste, which is identified as the abject by the visceral revulsion it causes: ‘Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me’ (Kristeva 2). Kristeva demonstrates that the abject draws attention to boundaries, both physical and cultural, as she poignantly questions: ‘[w]hy does *corporeal waste*, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-parings to decay, represent [...] the objective frailty of symbolic order?’ (Kristeva 70). Kristeva emphasises that the existence of abject matter (and the irrationally strong revulsion it triggers) signals a threat to an idealistic order of rationality, one that must be repressed in order to maintain the status quo – and that this repression manifests not only on an individual but also institutional and ideological level. Due to the significance of menstruation and pregnancy, women are undeniably more connected to abject matter and are frequently identified with it, which is also discussed by Shildrick and Price: ‘The very fact that women are able in general to menstruate, to develop

another body unseen within their own, to give birth, and to lactate is enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason’ (3). These theories suggest that the very corporeality of women is threatening to the Symbolic patriarchal order.

Kristeva classifies two types of ‘polluting objects’ (the excremental and the menstrual), and asserts that ‘those two defilements stem from the maternal and/or the feminine’ as ‘[m]aternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body’ (71-2). She determines that the child will most likely learn the ‘polluting’ nature of bodily waste from its mother. The connection between maternal authority concerning bodily boundaries (especially those between waste and cleanliness) and the mother’s body itself as a representation of the ‘polluting’ matter determines that the association of women with the abject is often formed in early infancy. This suggests that women as individuals, not only as archetypal mothers, and cast-off parts of society and are exposed to shame and repulsion through that early connection with corporeality. This theory also finds its expression in the idea of Bakhtin’s ‘grotesque body’ as defined by Russo: ‘the open, protruding, extended, secreting body [...] The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism’ (63). This essay argues that the female characters depicted by Fielding and Warner are examples of abject, grotesque bodies – as the natural functioning of bodies in these texts is determined as repulsive in order to further the notion of achieving self-contained perfection, purged of any bodily fluids or biological needs, as a marker of societal merit.

Both Bridget Jones's *Diary* and *The Sopranos* are filled with images of female abjection. The former focuses on the protagonist's obsession with weight loss and attractiveness, which has been cultivated by her mother, her male romantic interests, and the popular culture surrounding her: 'I am a child of Cosmopolitan culture, have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices' (Fielding 59). Bridget is fixated on the conjectural repulsiveness of her body, which is shown by her repeatedly using the same images to describe it: 'I feel ashamed and repulsive. I can actually feel the fat splurging out from my body' (Fielding 18), 'unexpectedly repulsive notion: never before faced reality of lard splurging from bottom and thighs under skin' (Fielding 57). As she pictures the isolated fat cells transgressing the boundary of her skin, she blames her weight for all her misfortunes: 'Oh God, what's wrong with me? Why does nothing ever work out? It is because I am too fat' (Fielding 181). However, even when she achieves her weight goal, she is only perceived as 'tired' and 'drawn', and she can only conclude that '[e]ighteen years of struggle, sacrifice and endeavour – for what? [...] I feel like a scientist who discovers that his life's work has been a total mistake' (Fielding 106-7). Throughout the novel, Bridget's behaviour constantly fluctuates between self-denial and indulgence: she either starves herself or binge-eats, either swears to forsake smoking or smokes a pack in an hour, is frequently either intoxicated or hungover. This increases her association with the abject through bodily discomfort and fluids: '[t]his morning I definitely felt the beginnings of morning sickness, but that could be because I was so hungover [...] that I ate the following things to try to make myself feel better' (Fielding 115). Bridget defines her identity through the state of her body, and the representation of her self-doubt and emotional fluctuations through excessive ingestion contributes to her portrayal as grotesque; therefore,

her physicality is central to her self-perception as unacceptable in broader society.

In *The Sopranos*, Alan Warner portrays a group of teenage girls in a Catholic school choir, navigating the complex societal expectations of growing up in 1990s Scotland, in 'The Port – a thinly disguised replica of Oban, Warner's hometown' (Schoene 258). They perform their defiance through over-indulgence in alcohol, as well as provocative fashion and sexual promiscuity. The novel is full of explicit images of sperm, vomit, blood, urine and defecation, which are drastically discordant with the nuns' ideas regarding the girls' conduct. This contrast is demonstrated in an extended scene at the start of the novel – as the girls observe a couple in the middle of exhibitionist intercourse, the unaware Sister Condron proclaims: 'You will carry yourself with grace through this city today. [...] You are going to be on the television set so make-up will be respectfully applied' (Warner 94-5). The *Sopranos* embrace their status of the abject, as they 'appear hell-bent on squandering their talents' (Schoene 257) by proclaiming 'we stick together on this and there's no ways we'll win, won't even get in the second round! We'll be [...] back here in plenty time for the Mantrap slow dances' (Warner 1-2), prioritising opportunities for sexual conquest over the performance of their choir. This attitude is further explored later in the novel when the girls express disillusionment with their prospects: 'what good it is in being talented in this dump? Who's interested in talent here?', 'That's half of why we're getting the boot, a mean admit it, it's all sex and clothes that freaks those frigid old cows out at this fucking tip' (Warner 256-7). The *Sopranos* are dimly aware that the futures available to them in the Port are extremely limited, and conforming to the status quo can bring no reward; therefore, they find it more satisfying to prioritise risky behaviours which enable short-term emotional release such as extreme alcohol use and potentially dangerous



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sexual encounters. Their refusal to repress their corporeality demonstrates the threat they pose to the hypocrisy of the nuns' moral order – as Manda proudly states that twenty-seven of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour's girls were pregnant that year (Warner 46), it becomes clear that religious repression does not protect the girls from unwanted relegation to the abject status of teenage mothers.

The men in the novels clearly express that the only viable role for the female body is that of the sexual object. Daniel Cleaver, Bridget Jones's boss and love interest, suggests to her that 'the vain pursuit of an intellectual life is getting in the way of your true purpose' [...] to cook all my meals for me, of course, darling. [...] And walk around my flat with no pants on' (Fielding 166-7), and the old men in Edinburgh pubs ogle the teenage Sopranos: '[a]re yous trying to give us all heart attacks with these skirts, an old boy in a tweedy jacket yelled [...] Jeezo, none of us'll sleep the night, eh boys?' (Warner 143). The men only perceive the aspects of the female body that can be exploited for their gratification and deprive the women of their subjectivity. On the other hand, women are also judged for their explicit sexuality – as Orla embraces the sexual role she both desires and believes is required of her and tells Stephen: '[y]ou can do anything you want with me an that's what men wish for,' he is repulsed and thinks that '[t]hese chicks are damaged goods' (Warner 309). In the world of the Sopranos, there are no positive solutions; the only relative freedom that can be wrenched from the ubiquity of sexual objectification and moral contempt is a total embodiment of the abject, with all the social ostracism, pleasures, and dangers that come with it.

For Bridget Jones, however, the solution presented in the novel is more ambiguous. In one of the last sentences of the novel, she proclaims: '[h]ave finally realized the secret of happiness with men [...] do as your mother tells you' (Fielding 307), as she settles

down with Mark Darcy, the man her mother initially attempted to set her up with. The figure of Bridget's mother, similarly to Warner's nuns, represents the enforcement of the Symbolic order as the Kristevan maternal authority through impossible body image standards as she constantly criticises Bridget: 'What on earth do you think you're wearing, darling? You look like a common prostitute' (Fielding 170), 'Nobody wants a girlfriend who wanders round looking like someone from Auschwitz, darling' (Fielding 130-1). The mother construes Bridget's body as unacceptable by comparing her to the abject through figures strongly connected with taboo and rejection from society. Throughout the novel, Bridget attempts to reject her mother's lifestyle, expose her hypocrisy, and argue for the validity of remaining single (as shown in her conversations with Magda and the dinners with other married couples). However, although she is aware that the conventions of heteronormative marriage have often been the cause of her unhappiness, in the end, she remains constrained by them and accepts the narrative of gaining a male romantic partner as a symbol of ultimate success. Unlike the Sopranos, Bridget is willing to conform to the status quo and relinquish her individuality in exchange for the confirmation of being perceived as performing femininity in an attractive and acceptable manner.

In conclusion, the specific conditions of postfeminist culture create unrealistic expectations of female bodies, which in turn causes an increased association of women with the abject and the grotesque. The female characters in Fielding's and Warner's texts refuse to suppress their corporeality and explore their position in regards to the behavioural and aesthetic standards of the patriarchal order, assessing the alternatives of conformation, indifference, or active opposition – all of which expose them to scrutiny, objectification, and judgement. Both the men in

their environment and the older women enforcing the status quo denote them as repulsive because of their embodied nature and, thus, declare them as worthy of social degradation. Bridget Jones and the Sopranos are undeniable symbols of attempts to escape patriarchal oppression by embracing the abjection of the female body; however, they still remain subjugated within the societal demarcation of female bodies as transgressive and grotesque.



Footnotes

1. This essay will interpret the concept of ‘postfeminism’ as outlined by Rosalind Gill: an ‘entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes’ including ‘the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline’ (149). While the complexities of the multiple and contradictory definitions of the term lie beyond the scope of this essay, my focus shall remain on its exploration of expectations placed on female bodies.

2. While acknowledging that the cisnormative delineation of femininity as determined by biological sex is limiting and detrimental, this essay shall discuss bodily functions such as menstruation (which cannot be strictly equated with femininity as there are women who do not menstruate and people who menstruate but do not identify as women) in conjunction with societal perceptions of bodies gendered as female.



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