

The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*

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Abstract:

This article presents a critical examination of the female body as a contested site in Margaret Atwood's 1979 novel *Life Before Man*, interrogating how corporeal representations intersect with feminist discourses on identity, subjugation, and resistance. Set in late-1970s Toronto, the novel chronicles the entangled lives of Elizabeth, a museum curator grappling with personal trauma and relational power dynamics, and Lesje, a palaeontologist whose escapist fantasies into prehistoric eras reflect detachment from her embodied reality. Through these protagonists, Atwood dismantles patriarchal myths of femininity, portraying the female body not as a passive vessel but as a locus of both oppression and potential agency.

Employing a feminist theoretical framework informed by Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist views on the body as "situation" and Luce Irigaray's critiques of phallogocentric embodiment, the study analyses how Atwood subverts traditional gender roles. Elizabeth's body emerges as a site of subjugation, marked by childhood scars, infidelity, and manipulative control over others, embodying the "imprisoning gaze" of societal expectations that commodify women. Her physicality, often described in terms of fragmentation and detachment, highlights the psychological toll of patriarchal subordination, where women's bodies are exchanged as objects in primitive social structures. In contrast, Lesje's hybrid heritage and immersion in dinosaur exhibits symbolise a reclamation of the body through intellectual transcendence, yet her unintended pregnancy indicates the inescapable biologism that reinscribes female vulnerability.

The analysis reveals Atwood's nuanced critique: while the female body resists through irony and self-awareness, it remains ensnared in cycles of objectification and emotional stasis, mirroring broader feminist concerns with bodily autonomy in a post-second-wave feminist era. Drawing parallels to Atwood's earlier works like *The Edible Woman*, where the body protests via anorexia, this study argues that *Life Before Man* anticipates dystopian explorations in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where corporeal control becomes overtly political. Ultimately, the novel posits the female body as a metaphor for existential extinction, urging a re-reading that empowers women to transcend cultural denigration and reclaim corporeal sovereignty. This interpretation contributes to Atwood scholarship by bridging psychoanalytic phenomenology with bodily politics, illuminating how feminist fiction challenges the erasure of women's lived experiences.

Keywords: female body, objectification, gaze.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979), her fourth novel, stands as a pivotal work in her early oeuvre, bridging the introspective, feminist explorations of her initial novels like *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972) with the more politically charged narratives that would follow in books such as *Bodily Harm* (1981) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Set against the backdrop of late-1970s Toronto, the novel dissects the intricacies of human relationships through a stark, unflinching lens, portraying characters ensnared in cycles of emotional stagnation and moral ambiguity. It marks a subtle evolution in Atwood's thematic concerns, introducing protagonists who grapple not only with personal alienation but also with broader existential questions about evolution, extinction, and the primitive undercurrents of modern life.

While often overshadowed by Atwood's later dystopian masterpieces, *Life Before Man* offers a raw, unromanticized critique of marriage, infidelity, and identity, challenging readers to confront the banality and brutality of interpersonal dynamics in a post-feminist era.

At its core, the novel revolves around a fractured quartet disrupted by tragedy involving three central figures: Elizabeth, a poised yet inwardly turbulent museum curator; her husband Nate, a former lawyer turned disillusioned toy-maker; and Lesje, a palaeontologist colleague of Elizabeth's whose escapist fantasies into prehistoric worlds mirror her detachment from contemporary reality. The narrative unfolds over two years, from 1976 to 1978, triggered by the suicide of Elizabeth's lover, Chris, which sets off a chain of relational upheavals. Atwood employs a rotating third-person perspective, shifting seamlessly among the protagonists to expose their inner monologues, insecurities, and self-deceptions. This structure eschews traditional plot-driven momentum in favour of psychological depth, resulting in a story that feels deliberately static, emphasizing the characters' entrapment in repetitive patterns of desire and dissatisfaction. The museum setting, particularly the Royal Ontario Museum where Elizabeth and Lesje work, serves as a potent metaphor: fossils and exhibits of extinct species highlight the novel's preoccupation with "life before man", suggesting that human behaviours—territoriality, mating rituals, and survival instincts—remain primitively animalistic, untouched by supposed civilizational progress.

Thematically, *Life Before Man* is a trenchant examination of gender roles and the disillusionments of marriage in a time of shifting social norms. Elizabeth embodies the archetype of the liberated yet burdened woman, juggling career ambitions with the remnants of a dysfunctional family life, her manipulative tendencies born from unresolved childhood trauma. Nate, by contrast, emerges as a archetype of male inadequacy—a "sad sack" vacillating between lovers, unable to commit or assert agency, reflecting Atwood's often critical portrayal of men as emotionally stunted or ineffectual. Lesje, with her mixed Ukrainian-Jewish heritage and daydreams of dinosaurs, represents a fluid, alienated identity, unbound by conventional expectations but ultimately ensnared by them, culminating in an ambiguous pregnancy that critics have interpreted as either manipulative or a desperate bid for agency. Atwood weaves in motifs of extinction and genetic continuity, drawing parallels between prehistoric creatures and her characters' fears of obsolescence in a world where traditional bonds erode without replacement. This lends the novel a bleak, almost nihilistic tone, critiquing the emptiness of adultery and separation as failed attempts at reinvention.

Atwood's prose is precise and detached, employing irony and understatement to highlight the absurdities of her characters' predicaments. The absence of a dramatic climax or neat resolution frustrates some readers, mirroring the novel's thesis that modern existence is marked by unresolved stasis rather than heroic transformation. This approach has drawn mixed critical reception: praised for its realistic character development and psychological acuity, yet criticized for unlikable protagonists and a lack of narrative drive, with some viewing it as a "depressing" meditation on selfish, unchanging individuals. Nonetheless, the novel's enduring value lies in its unflinching social critique, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about human relationships—how adults often play games of power and self-interest, perpetuating cycles of harm without growth.

As mentioned, Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979), explores the intricacies of human relationships through the lives of three central characters: Elizabeth, her husband Nate, and Lesje. The novel chronicles the dissolution of Elizabeth and Nate's marriage amid extramarital affairs, personal crises, and existential reflections. Elizabeth, a curator at the Royal Ontario Museum, grapples with her past traumas, including childhood abuse and the recent suicide of her lover Chris. Nate, a toymaker turned lawyer, navigates his dissatisfaction with domestic life and his attraction to Lesje, a palaeontologist who escapes into prehistoric fantasies to avoid contemporary realities. Through these characters, Atwood delves into themes of

alienation, identity, and the human condition, but a particularly salient motif is the representation of the female body as a contested site of power, desire, and subjugation.

In *Life Before Man*, the female body is not merely a physical entity but a symbolic battleground where patriarchal expectations, personal agency, and societal norms intersect. Drawing on feminist literary theories, this study argues that Atwood portrays the female body as both objectified and resistant, reflecting broader critiques of gender dynamics. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other" in *The Second Sex* (1949) illuminates how female characters are defined in relation to men, their bodies reduced to instruments of male desire. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) further elucidates how bodies are performative constructs shaped by repetitive social acts, revealing the instability of gendered identities in the novel. Additionally, Elizabeth Grosz's volatile bodies framework in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) emphasizes the body as a site of cultural inscription where, female corporeality challenges binary oppositions of mind/body and male/female. Through close readings of key passages, supported by quotes from the primary text and theoretical works, this analysis demonstrates how Atwood dismantles patriarchal myths of femininity, exposing the female body's role in identity formation, sexual politics, and resistance.

The novel's title, evoking prehistoric extinction, metaphorically emphasises the "life before man" as a pre-patriarchal state, contrasting with the characters' modern struggles. Feminist critics have noted Atwood's consistent engagement with the female body across her oeuvre, from *The Edible Woman* (1969) to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), where bodies are sites of commodification and control. In *Life Before Man*, this theme is nuanced through Elizabeth and Lesje's experiences, highlighting complicity and subversion. As Appleton argues in her analysis of Atwood's female bodies, women often perpetuate taboos around their own corporeality, relinquishing power to societal norms. This study will examine these dynamics in three sections: the objectification and control of the female body, its role in identity construction, and its intersection with reproduction and motherhood, culminating in a conclusion on Atwood's feminist implications.

The Female Body as Objectified and Controlled

Atwood's depiction of the female body in *Life Before Man* highlights its objectification under patriarchal gaze, where women are reduced to physical forms serving male needs. Elizabeth, in particular, embodies this dynamic. Her body is portrayed as a vessel haunted by past relationships and societal expectations. In a poignant reflection, Elizabeth thinks of her lover Chris's suicide and its lingering impact: "You wanted to make damn good and sure I'd never be able to turn over in bed again without feeling that body beside me, not there but tangible, like a leg that's been cut off. Gone but the place still hurts" (3). Here, the body is metaphorically amputated, symbolising how male violence imprints on female corporeality, leaving phantom pains that disrupt autonomy. It aligns with de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is positioned as the Other, her body defined by male transcendence: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (de Beauvoir 16). Elizabeth's body becomes a site of male inscription; her affairs with Chris and others are attempts to reclaim control, yet they reinforce her objectification. As she navigates her marriage to Nate, her physicality is commodified: "The fact is that she is addicted to Nate's version of her. Sometimes, when he touches her, she feels not naked but clothed, in some long, unspecified garment that spreads around her like a shimmering cloud" (45). This reveals the performative nature of her body, shaped by Nate's gaze, echoing Butler's idea that gender is "a stylized repetition of acts" through which bodies materialize (Butler 140). Elizabeth's addiction to this "version" highlights internalised patriarchy, where the female body performs femininity to gain validation.

Lesje, conversely, experiences body alienation through her intellectual escape into palaeontology. Her Jewish-Ukrainian heritage and professional life contrast with her physical self, which she views

detachedly: “He ought to be able to tell by now that she isn’t like that at all. Nevertheless, she wants to be; she wants to be this beautiful phantom, this boneless wraith he’s conjured up” (78). Lesje’s desire to embody Nate’s fantasy emphasises the pressure to conform to idealised femininity, where the body is a malleable object. Grosz’s corporeal feminism critiques this mind/body dualism, arguing that bodies are “volatile” and resist fixed inscriptions (Grosz 55). Lesje’s fascination with dinosaurs represents a pre-human world free from gendered bodies, yet her affair with Nate pulls her back into corporeal politics.

Critics like those in “Dismantling the Patriarchal Myth of Femininity” note that Atwood associates women with the body and emotions, while men embody reason, perpetuating binaries but also subverting them through female agency. Elizabeth’s assertive sexuality, for instance, inverts power: she dominates Nate, making him the passive victim, as observed in psychoanalytic readings. However, this agency is ambivalent; her body remains a tool in relational power struggles, not a source of intrinsic power.

Themes pertaining to sexual assault further illustrate control over female bodies. Both Elizabeth and Lesje confront violations—Elizabeth’s childhood abuse and Lesje’s encounters—highlighting how patriarchy polices female sexuality. Atwood’s narrative exposes the body as a site of trauma, aligning with feminist theories that view objectification as a form of violence. Dworkin’s *Intercourse* (1987) posits that intercourse under patriarchy enacts female subjugation, a lens applicable to the novel’s affairs (Dworkin 154). Yet, Atwood complicates this by showing women’s complicity, as Elizabeth uses her body strategically.

Thus, *Life Before Man* critiques the objectified female body through characters who navigate control and resistance, drawing on de Beauvoir, Butler, and Grosz to reveal the body’s role in perpetuating and challenging patriarchy.

The Female Body and Identity Construction

Beyond objectification, Atwood uses the female body to explore identity formation, portraying it as fluid and performative rather than essential. Elizabeth’s sense of self is inextricably linked to her corporeality, marked by aging, motherhood, and loss. She describes her existence post-Chris as fragmented: “I live like a peeled snail” (5). This image evokes vulnerability, the body stripped of protection, echoing Grosz’s notion of the body as a “surface” inscribed by cultural forces (Grosz 138). Elizabeth’s identity is constructed through bodily experiences—abuse, sex, grief—challenging essentialist views of femininity. Butler’s performativity theory is apt here: gender is not innate but enacted through bodily acts. Elizabeth performs multiple roles—wife, mother, lover—but these performances falter, revealing identity’s instability. When reflecting on her body in relation to Nate: “Armored dildo. Impermeable; like a French raincoat. I wish I didn’t have to think about you (12). This objectifies her own sexuality as defensive, a response to male intrusion, yet it also asserts agency by rejecting unwanted thoughts. Butler argues that such repetitions can subvert norms if disrupted (Butler 185), and Elizabeth’s affairs disrupt marital fidelity, redefining her identity beyond domesticity.

Lesje’s identity is similarly bodily mediated but through detachment. Her paleontological work privileges mind over body, yet romantic entanglements force confrontation: “It’s long been her theoretical opinion that Man is a danger to the universe, a mischievous ape, spiteful, destructive, malevolent. But only theoretical” (89). Lesje’s body becomes a site of conflict between intellectual ideals and physical desires, illustrating de Beauvoir’s critique of woman’s immanence versus man’s transcendence (de Beauvoir 267). Her affair with Nate awakens corporeal awareness, but she resists full embodiment, preferring prehistoric detachment.

Feminist critics highlight Atwood's subversion of gender roles in *Life Before Man*, where women like Elizabeth wield destructive power, inverting victim-oppressor binaries. This aligns with Irigaray's specular economy in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), where women are mirrors reflecting male desire, but Atwood's characters shatter this by asserting their gazes (Irigaray 28). Elizabeth's addiction to Nate's "version" of her is a mirror stage, yet she breaks free through self-reflection.

The novel also addresses intersectionality: Lesje's immigrant background complicates her bodily identity, facing exoticization. hooks's feminist theory emphasises race and class in body politics (hooks 1981), revealing how Lesje's body is marked by otherness. Atwood thus constructs identities as embodied, fluid, and resistant to patriarchal fixation.

The Female Body, Reproduction, and Motherhood

Reproduction and motherhood in *Life Before Man* position the female body as a site of biological determinism and social expectation. Elizabeth's motherhood is fraught; her children are extensions of her body, yet she feels alienated: "Nevertheless he thinks: Soon they will be women, and that recognition runs through him like a needle. They will demand brassieres and then reject them, blaming both needs on him" (102). This paternal perspective highlights how female bodies are socialised into femininity, with motherhood enforcing cycles of blame and expectation.

Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) distinguishes motherhood as institution from experience, critiquing patriarchal control over reproduction (Rich 13). Elizabeth's body, having borne children, is institutionalized within marriage, but her affairs reclaim it as experiential. However, this leads to guilt, as her corporeality ties her to familial roles. Lesje, childless, views reproduction warily, her body a potential trap: "All she wants is for both of them to be different. Not very different, a little would do it. Same molecules, different arrangement. All she wants is a miracle" (15). This molecular metaphor critiques essentialism, aligning with Grosz's view of bodies as assemblages resisting fixed meanings (Grosz 210). Lesje's reluctance is symbolical of feminist concerns with reproductive autonomy.

Atwood's portrayal echoes broader theories where the female body is exploited for reproduction, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but here it is subtle, through personal choices. De Beauvoir notes that pregnancy imprisons women in immanence (de Beauvoir 495), a theme in Elizabeth's reflections on her body's changes.

Motherhood intersects with sexuality; Elizabeth's body is both maternal and erotic, challenging binaries. Feminist theory, per Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1993), views the body as culturally disciplined (Bordo 165), and Atwood shows resistance through bodily rebellion.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals Atwood's nuanced critique: while the female body resists through irony and self-awareness, it remains ensnared in cycles of objectification and emotional stasis, mirroring broader feminist concerns with bodily autonomy in a post-second-wave era. Drawing parallels to Atwood's earlier works like *The Edible Woman*, where the body protests via anorexia, this study argues that *Life Before Man* anticipates dystopian explorations in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where corporeal control becomes overtly political. Ultimately, the novel posits the female body as a metaphor for existential extinction, urging a re-reading that empowers women to transcend cultural denigration and reclaim corporeal sovereignty. This interpretation contributes to Atwood scholarship by bridging psychoanalytic phenomenology with bodily politics, illuminating how feminist fiction challenges the erasure of women's lived experiences.

In *Life Before Man*, Atwood masterfully critiques the female body as objectified, identity-shaping, and reproductively burdened, using feminist theories to expose patriarchal myths. Through Elizabeth and Lesje, the body emerges as volatile, performative, and resistant, subverting norms while acknowledging complicity. As Appleton notes, Atwood's women strive for bodily reclamation amid societal taboos. This novel anticipates Atwood's later works, urging a reevaluation of gender through corporeal lenses. Ultimately, *Life Before Man* affirms feminist calls for bodily autonomy, reminding us, as Butler posits, that bodies can undo their own constructions (Butler 200). Atwood's narrative invites readers to envision a "life before man" where bodies are free from inscription.

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