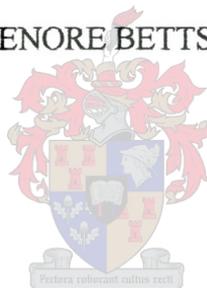


*PUFFBALL AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE: THE INFLUENCE OF
PREGNANCY ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY*

by

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

ABSTRACT

This thesis uses an analysis of Fay Weldon's *Puffball* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to explore the construction of identity, particularly female identity. It takes into consideration the influence of both biology and culture on identity and explores how, within the context of the patriarchal societies depicted by the novels, female identity is closely linked to reproductive function. It examines how the construction of female identity based on reproductive function further objectifies the female body in society, and how it can aid patriarchal domination and oppression of women. The analysis of the novels draws on both essentialist and social constructionist feminist approaches to oppression and female identity. The essentialist approach views female biological difference (reproductive function) as responsible for the way in which women are oppressed. The social constructionist view argues that female oppression stems from the social construction of female identity around concepts of motherhood and femininity. The thesis takes both approaches into account as it seeks to explain how patriarchy oppresses women through the construction of female identity.

The thesis also explores how control over the female body and identity can be exercised through reproductive technology. An examination of the role reproductive technology plays in contributing to patriarchal dominance, suggests that new technologies may compel women to conform to stereotypes of femininity based on pregnancy and motherhood. The thesis considers the impact infertility and the choice not to have children have on female identity and takes into account the options available to these women. The main focus, with regard to infertility and choice, is on the relationship between women who have children and those who do not. This thesis refutes the notion that there is solidarity between women based on shared childbearing experience, and focuses on the conflict that occurs between fertile and childless women. It finds that the conflict that occurs is a result of the socialisation of women into viewing motherhood as an essential aspect of 'normal' femininity. The thesis also considers what causes the desire to have children and finds that, as in the case of the conflict between women, it is as a result of socialisation *and* an innate/instinctual biological drive.

The thesis investigates options available to women in order for them to avoid constructing their identities solely around their reproductive function. It considers the alternatives women are presented with when constructing their identity and how these may contribute to or liberate them from patriarchal oppression. If they choose to identify themselves using patriarchal norms, then they are contributing to their objectification; but if they choose to construct their identity on their own terms, and offer some resistance to patriarchal constructions, they will be more liberated than women who conform to stereotypes. Evidence of such resistance can be seen in both novels in the narrative structure the respective authors have chosen: just as the main characters subvert traditional stereotypes through the construction of their own identity, embracing female experience on their own terms, so do both authors subvert traditional narratives.

ABSTRAK

Hierdie tesis is gegrond op die analisering van die novelle *Puffball* deur Fay Weldon en *The Handmaid's Tale* deur Margaret Atwood ter ondersoek van die konstruksie van identiteit, naamlik die vroulike identiteit. Die analise neem beide die biologiese en kulturele invloed van identiteit in ag, veral binne die konteks van die patriargale samelewing wat in novelles voorkom. Die wisselwerking tussen vroulike identiteit en die funksie van reproduksie word aangeraak. Die tesis ondersoek die wyse waarop die konstruksie van die vroulike identiteit gebaseer op die reproduksie funksie, verder die vroulike liggaam binne samelewingskonteks tipeer en hoe dit indirek patriargale dominansie ondersteun sowel as die onderdrukking van die vrou.

Die analise van die novelles steun sterk op beide die essensialistiese en sosiale konstruksialistiese feministiese benaderings ten opsigte van onderdrukking en vroulike identiteit. Die essensialistiese benadering blameer die vroulike biologiese verskil, met verwysing na die reproduksie funksie, vir die wyse waarop die vrou onderdruk word. In kontras hiermee, argumenteer die sosiale konstruksialistiese seining dat vroulike onderdrukking voortspruit uit die sosiale konstruksie van vroulike identiteit binne die konsep van moederskap en vroulikheid. Die tesis neem beide standpunte in ag daar dit hom ten doel stel om te verduidelik waarom patriargie die vrou onderdruk deur die konstruksie van die vroulike identiteit.

Die tesis fokus ook op die wyse waarop kontrole oor die vroulike liggaam en identiteit uitgeoefen kan word deur die reprodktiewe tegnologie. 'n Ondersoek na die rol wat reprodktiewe tegnologie speel ter ondersteuning van patriargale dominansie, argumenteer dat nuwe tegnologieë vroue kan verplig tot die konformering van stereotipes van vroulikheid gebaseer op swangerskap en moederskap. Die analise neem ook die impak wat onvrugbaarheid op die vroulike identiteit het, in ag, sowel as die besluit om nie kinders te hê nie. Verder neem dit ook die verskeie opsies wat beskikbaar is vir die vrou wat daarteen besluit om kinders te hê, in ag, sover dit die konstruksie van identiteit raak. Die hooffokus met betrekking tot onvrugbaarheid en keuse, is gebaseer op die verhouding tussen vroue wat wel kinders het en diegene

wat kinderloos is. Die tesis weerlê die idee dat daar solidariteit is tussen vroue gebaseer op gedeelde ervarings en gemeenskaplike doelwitte en begeertes en fokus op die konflik wat ontstaan tussen kinderlose en vrugbare vroue.

Die ondersoek ondervind dat die konflik wat ontstaan, 'n produk is van die sosialisering van vroue met die idee van moederskap as 'n essensiële aspek van "normale" vroulikheid. Die tesis ondersoek ook die oorsake van die begeerte om kinders te hê en ondervind dat, soos ook die geval met konflik, dit die produk is van sosialisering en instinktief biologies gedrewe is.

Die tesis ondersoek die opsies beskikbaar vir die vrou ten einde haar te verhoed om die konstruksie van haar identiteit te grond alleenlik op die reprodutiewe funksie. Die analise neem die alternatiewe waarmee die vrou gekonfronteer word tydens die konstruksieproses, in aanmerking, en bevraagteken die wyse waarop hierdie alternatiewe kan bydra tot , of die bevryding van, die patriargale onderdrukking. Indien die vrou verkies om haarself te identifiseer deur patriargale norme te gebruik sal sy bydra tot haar objektivering binne die tradisionele patriargale konteks; maar indien sy kies om haar eie identiteit te konstruktueer volgens haar eie norme en terselfdertyd patriargale konstruksie teenstaan, sal sy meer geëmansipeerd wees as haar eweknie wat tot die stereotipe gekonformeer het.

Deel van die weerstand wat voorkom in beide novelles, kan opgemerk word in die naratiewe struktuur gekies deur die skrywer. Parallele word aangetref tussen enersyds, die wyse waarop die hoofkarakters hulself aan die tradisionele stereotipes ondermyn deur die konstruksie van hul eie identiteit, terselfdertyd deur die koestering van vroulike ervarings, en andersyds die wyse waarop beide skrywers hulself aan tradisionele naratiewe onderwerp.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the influence of both biological and cultural¹ perceptions of femininity on female identity. It focuses specifically on how these perceptions influence the construction of female identity, centred around the association between femininity and maternity/motherhood. The thesis also considers the impact of sexual difference, gender and reproductive specificity on identity, as well as the role socialisation, ideology and discourse play in constructing an identity acceptable to society. It explores how each of the above-mentioned factors can aid patriarchal dominance and the oppression of women, in addition to the possibility that these factors can be used to resist such domination and oppression.

The thesis explores why “[m]otherhood is a central fact of many women’s lives” (Richardson, *Women* ix). It also interrogates the notion

[t]hat women should have babies and provide childcare [which] is generally regarded as the norm in our society....It is regarded as *natural*: the expression of a maternal instinct to want and care for children which all ‘normal’ women are deemed to possess. (Richardson, *Women* ix)

Is it because it is considered “natural” for women to have children and to desire to have children that it is assumed to be central to their lives and identities, or is it more complex than simply an instinctual issue? Is motherhood biological destiny or are women channeled into it through socialisation?

If a woman’s identity is to be so greatly influenced by her reproductive ability and she is able to construct herself as a “normal” woman upon entering motherhood (conforming to society’s views), what happens to those women who are unable to become mothers or choose not to? Are they considered abnormal? How do they

¹ Biological and cultural perceptions are discussed further in Chapter One.

construct their identities in a patriarchal society that places such an emphasis on motherhood and maternity as the embodiment of femininity? This thesis examines the influence infertility and choice have on the construction of female identity, specifically within the context of the two novels, *Puffball* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In the first chapter the thesis looks at some theoretical approaches to constructing identity, particularly in relation to feminism. It explores both essentialist and social constructionist feminist views related to the oppression of women, either as a result of their biological capacity to reproduce or, as in the case of the latter, as a result of social constructions of femininity. Constructions of female identity based on patriarchal ideologies are also explored in this chapter, as it examines the representation of identity and difference through the creation of binary oppositions. According to Madan Sarup, "identity is always related to what one is not – the Other. We should remember that identity is only conceivable in and through difference" (47). The thesis will attempt to ascertain whether "identity is [indeed] related [only] to what one is not" or whether it can also be defined solely by what one is. It will explore how the construction of female identity as Other impacts on women's position in society and how pregnancy contributes to the construction of femininity as Other.

An important question is whether the decision to be pregnant represents a conscious decision to be represented as Other? If so, then why would women choose to be represented in this way? Where does their desire to be pregnant stem from? Childless women, particularly infertile women, can look to reproductive technology for help, but through their desire to conform they perpetuate their representation as Other. This thesis explores how the representation of women as Other helps maintain patriarchal dominance. Similarly, it explores how reproductive technology contributes to this dominance and further objectification of the female body, since patriarchy dominates reproductive technologies and the medical profession. Thus, the first chapter also briefly discusses the potential role reproductive technology has, either in allowing women control over the construction of their identity and their bodies, or allowing patriarchy further control. The thesis's exploration of reproductive technology relates to

[f]eminist discussion[s] of the new medical interventions into reproduction [which look] at what effects these developments are likely to have from women's points of view; in particular it is asked who controls the new technologies, who is eligible to use them and what they are being used for? Will they aid women's liberation or will they further their oppression? Much feminist writing comes to the latter conclusion. Among some of the criticisms made are that the new reproductive technologies are being used to uphold traditional notions of motherhood and femininity. (Richardson, *Women* 87)

Through an examination of reproductive technology within the context of the two novels, the thesis hopes to discover whether reproductive technologies do uphold the "traditional notions of motherhood and femininity" or whether they may aid women's liberation from the body.

The body and its experiences are central to the focus of this thesis as it examines how these influence the construction of female identity. It is, after all, the female body that is constructed as Other and seen as a foetal incubator, or container to house the foetus. This thesis explores how the construction of the female body as a container influences the construction of identity and how this may be altered after the birth of the child. What happens to an identity based on the role of a container/vessel when there is no longer a use for the container, or when it has fulfilled its function? How does the birth of the child impact on this identity? Does the women regain her subjectivity or will she be further alienated, as she constructs her identity around her role as 'mother'?

The thesis also examines generalisations about childbirth and pregnancy that impact on the perceptions of relationships between women, within the specific context of the two novels. In addition, the thesis explores the notion that all women share common experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, and a common goal to have children. It considers whether this is indeed true in relation to the novels, and it challenges the notion of female solidarity, since not all women share the same experiences. This is done through an analysis of the relationships between women in the novels.

The second and third chapters deal specifically with the individual novels, exploring the concepts introduced in the first chapter. The second chapter analyses Fay Weldon's novel *Puffball*, with the focus on the role Liffey's pregnancy has in the construction of her identity. In its discussion of the construction of her identity the thesis explores notions of patriarchal dominance and the privileging of masculine insemination over the role of the woman in the reproductive process. It examines Weldon's appropriation of medical discourse and considers why the author would choose to use a discourse associated with patriarchy. The chapter also interrogates the notion of female solidarity in its examination of the relationship between the women in the novel, particularly in its focus on the relationship between Liffey and her neighbour, Mabs.

The third chapter analyses Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel which contains many of the same elements that are present in the patriarchal society depicted in *Puffball*, but represented far more overtly in this novel. It explores the roles women (and men) are assigned in this society where socialisation is taken to extremes, and forms part of the methods of control exercised by the government. As in the chapter on *Puffball*, this chapter explores the construction of female identity based on reproductive function, as well as the impact infertility has on it. Again, the focus is on the impact the female body and its experiences have on the construction of identity. More than in the chapter on *Puffball*, this chapter deals with the notion of choice and the process of resistance as depicted in the novel, and how these relate to female identity as defined by reproductive function. In addition, the narrative styles of both authors constitute a parallel mode of resistance. As in the second chapter, the focus is on the woman author's appropriation of a masculine tradition, and in this case it is Atwood's appropriation and subversion of the male linear literary tradition that is examined.

However different these two novels may initially seem, they deal with a number of similar issues. The thesis focuses particularly on the patriarchal societies presented in both novels and the way in which these attempt to confine the identity of women to their reproductive function. It is not only the restriction to reproductive function and

motherhood that is of interest here, but more specifically the reason women continue to choose motherhood. Through this decision they choose not only to fulfil their biological function, but also to conform to societal constructions of adult femininity. Is maternity “indispensable to [women’s] discovery...of the complexity of the female experience, with all that this complexity comprises in joy and pain” (Kristeva 205), or will alternative definitions of female identity liberate them from their oppression and thus deny them this “female experience”?

Chapter One

Feminism, Identity and Reproduction: A General Overview

This thesis considers how identity is constructed and what influences its construction.

According to Sarup,

[t]here exist many theories that inform us that identity is determined. They include socialisation (role theory), ideology (the state...), discourse theory..., discipline and the technologies of the self....In all [these] theories, institutions play a crucial determining role: there is the family, the school, the place of work and, increasingly, the media....Other factors which we must consider include how...what [Sarup]...call[s] 'commodity aesthetics' determines the direction that an individual's being takes. Commodity aesthetics is largely aesthetics based on our perception of the body, and on processes of sexualisation. (xv-xvi)

This thesis will explore how socialisation², ideology³ and discourse⁴ play a crucial role in constructing identity. The construction of female identity is the main focus of the thesis as it explores how women are socialised into constructing their identity around their reproductive function by dominant ideologies and discourses. This construction of female identity is greatly influenced by general perceptions of the female body. The thesis is aware that male identity (in both texts) is also influenced by socialisation, ideology and discourse, but in contrast to the women, the men are able to construct an identity that allows them to become part of the dominant ideology, the patriarchal order.

² Socialisation, as it is used in this thesis, refers to the way in which an individual is raised within a certain ideology and so, is brought up to conform to social norms and acceptability.

³ Glenn defines the term ideology as:

the conceptual system by which a group makes sense of and thinks about the world. It is a collective rather than an individual product....A dominant ideology represents the view of a dominant group, it attempts to justify this domination over other groups, often making the existing order seem inevitable. (9)

⁴ Discourse, in terms of this thesis, is what Roger Fowler defines as

speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs (etc.) constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience – 'ideology'. (Hawthorn 66)

However, according to Sarup

the identity of the human subject is, in some ways, an effect of... dynamics such as class, ethnicity, 'race', religion and nation, but the subject is not entirely determined by socialising institutions.... Through 'free-will' – the process of choice in interpretation, selection – we can, to some extent limit or adapt the external determinations. (Sarup 48)

So, there is an element of "choice" in determining identity. Sarup argues, then, that through "choice" the individual has a certain amount of control over the extent to which external factors construct his/her identity. Women can therefore choose to define themselves according to dominant views that limit them to their reproductive function or they can choose to define themselves in any other way if they wish to. Despite the element of choice, "[o]ne of the elements in our sense of identity is the body and its experiences" (Sarup 105). And so, an essential part of female identity will be the female body and this will be influenced by the experiences of that body, which may include or exclude pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. This does not imply a universal experience shared by all women. Women experience their bodies differently depending on their class, ethnicity, race, religion and nationality (to mention a few). It would be inaccurate to assume that all women share the same influences and experiences. As a thesis written in South Africa, the thesis and author are aware of the fact that women's experiences are determined by a variety of factors and race is one of these. So, black South African women will experience their bodies differently to white South African women, but as mentioned in this paragraph, race is not the sole factor here, as other factors come into play as well. However, the focus of the thesis is the way in which the white women in the texts experience their bodies and how this experience is influenced, and at times controlled, by their social position.

The women in the texts experiences are influenced by both public and private identities. Private identity is influenced by the way an individual feels and experiences their position with little interference from external factors, whereas a public identity suggests an identity that may be adjusted to suit external influences

and social norms. Public or shared identity may generalize or universalize experiences, while private identity allows for unique individual experiences. The co-existence of the public and private identity is most noticeable in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* where Offred is forced to share a public identity with the other Handmaids, while her private identity remains influenced by her own experiences and interpretations of events.

This discussion of the construction of identity does not deny the importance of the physical body in influencing identity, but chooses to examine the influence of both biology⁵ and culture⁶ in determining identity. An important aspect of an individual's identity is their perception of their gender. Most definitions of gender are based on sexual difference that is biologically founded and culturally perpetuated. The cultural values and ideologies of a society further enforce the biological differences between male and female through the creation of culturally constructed sex-specific roles. One of these sex-specific roles allotted to women is based on their biological difference from men, the reproductive division between male and female, and has, together with cultural influences, aided patriarchal oppression of women.

⁵ The term biology here refers to the physiology of an individual. Women's biology refers to the fact that women's bodies are able to conceive, support and carry another being during the process of reproduction, while men's biology does not allow the male body to conceive or experience pregnancy. Biology, in effect, restricts an individual's bodily experiences to that of their physiology.

⁶ Culture is a broadly used word and its meaning has become increasingly difficult to narrow down, unless it is used in a specific sense. In the context of this thesis culture refers to the external social factors, factors not determined by biology, that influence the way in which an individual constructs their identity. So, ideology, class, religion, education and socialisation are some cultural influences. In Chodorow's discussion of public and domestic spheres she argues that

women's primary social location is domestic...[and] men find a primary social location in the public sphere.

It is therefore assumed that the public sphere, and not the domestic sphere, forms "society" and "culture" – those intended, constructed forms and ideas that take humanity beyond nature and biology and institute political control. Men's location in the public sphere, then, defines society itself as masculine. (9)

This supports the binary opposition of male/female and culture/nature further, where male and culture are at times interchangeable, as are female and nature.

Arguments against essentialism consider an emphasis on biological difference as fundamental to creating representations of women based solely on their reproductive functions, another argument is that women's oppression stems from cultural and ideological representations. This may suggest that the oppression of women is the result of complex, multiple factors (ranging from sexual difference and class to education and religion) that influence the way in which women are represented. Schwartz considers the two theoretical approaches to sexual difference separately, though this thesis considers identity to be constructed around both essentialist and social constructionist views:

Essentialism... can be said to refer most generally to those theories of sexual difference that are primarily biologically determined, and so look to discover, define, and describe innate elements of the masculine and the feminine. Social Constructionists look to culture and the language and ideology embedded therein as the historically determined creators of gender and gender role. (241)

Grosz denies neither biology nor culture its influence on the construction of identity, and argues that "the male and female bodies are given meaning, and structured with reference to their relative social positions" (*Psychoanalysis* 305), social positions that reflect the influence of sexual difference in constructing identity. Yet both biology and culture can lead to marginalisation as they are areas where difference occurs. This thesis sees biology and culture as areas where difference occurs in the texts. In both texts biological differences occur between men and women, as well as amongst women, and society uses these differences to perpetuate gender stereotypes created by the dominant ideology. The biological difference between men and women is their sexual difference, while the biological difference amongst women is their varying ability to conceive and have children. Stanworth makes the point that

the lives of all women are shaped by their biological selves, and by their assumed or actual capacity to bear children, [their] bodies do not impose upon [them] a common experience of reproduction; on the contrary, [their] bodies stand as powerful reminders of the differentiating effects of age, health, disability, strength and fertility history. (485)

The thesis agrees with Stanworth's point to an extent, but considers culture to play an equally important role in the way women shape themselves and the way they experience reproduction. The cultural difference between men and women, and amongst women, is most notably related to the different roles ascribed to them by society. Cultural differences are not universal as different cultures allow different freedoms. Women from different cultural backgrounds will experience pregnancy differently because they have different influences and pressures. Liffey and Offred are women within different cultures and the freedoms they have access to are different, but within their own culture they must conform to the stereotypes and roles expected of them. Within Offred's society pregnancy is part of a Handmaids occupation, while Liffey is not forced to become pregnant as part of her occupation but chooses to become pregnant ('choose' is used loosely here, the thesis further explores Liffey's 'choice' in Chapter 2). Traditionally patriarchal society has viewed difference as something that supports notions of inequality: where something is not the same it is said to be less than, as opposed to simply being different. Difference has long been a tool for marginalisation as it has been used to perpetuate notions of superiority and inferiority.

In terms of this thesis, an important and obvious aspect of the sexual differences between men and women lies in their varying reproductive roles. "Between man and woman, there is otherness: biological, morphological, relational. To be able to have a child constitutes a difference..." (Irigaray, *The Other* 310) and this difference, the biological ability of women to bear children and the subsequent cultural construction of women as mothers, divides women from men within patriarchal societies such as those depicted in the texts. Patriarchy⁷ has used this biological difference as a way to

⁷ In the context of this thesis the notion of patriarchy is based on Glenn's description of it as a "term [that] technically means 'rule of the fathers,' but in its current practical usage it more often refers to any system of male superiority and female inferiority" (140). Similarly Grosz comments on how "some versions of feminist theory see patriarchy as the system of universal right to appropriation of women's bodies..." (*Volatile* 9), a system that allows men to be active and controlling while women must assume the submissive and passive role.

marginalise women (as both biology and difference have become tools of patriarchy) and has further marginalised them through constructing the identity of women around motherhood and childbearing. To further stress difference as a criterion for marginalisation, patriarchal society has used binary oppositions to reinforce the system of representation of difference. Consider the binary of male and female based on sexual difference. Traditionally female roles have been associated with mothering and so, women have been confined to the domestic, private, sphere. At the same time male roles were related to aspects of life outside the home and so, with time the public sphere became a male dominated area. Through the creation of gender roles based on sexual difference the binaries of male/female and public/private came into existence. These binary oppositions have aided the traditional work division based on sex, which confined women to work in the home.

Patriarchy has placed importance on relationships between binary oppositions as fundamental to understanding any kind of difference, where different is not the same as, but unequal to, where one term is the negation of the other. "In binarism, one term represents the dominant centre, the other term represents the subordinate margin" (Sarup 57)⁸. Binary oppositions help to reinforce difference by creating relationships in which one of the terms is both subordinate to – and a negation of - the other. For example, to be female is a term that is subordinate to the term "male", as "male" represents the "dominant centre" and female "represents the subordinate margin," and it indicates that female is not male, and so is Other. If we consider the male/female opposition in relation to other oppositions, the more privileged term is generally linked to "maleness", while the subordinate term is linked to "femaleness". Other binary oppositions used in this thesis are mind/body and culture/nature, where the

⁸ Binary opposition implies a particular way of seeing or thinking where there are only two ways in which to interpret something, either as the "dominant centre" or as the "subordinate margin". Other binaries discussed in this thesis also present this rigid way of seeing, such as, dominant/subordinate, male/female and culture/nature. Male/female binaries are unacceptable because they fix gender roles when the concept of gender is itself so unstable. The thesis in no way agrees with, or supports, these binary oppositions, but finds them helpful and necessary in discussing what has influenced female identity in the texts, as the women's identities, in both texts, are strongly influenced by notions of binarism.

“dominant centre” and privileged terms: male, mind and culture are interchangeable. At the same time the subordinate marginal terms: female, body and nature⁹ are also terms used interchangeably in this thesis. Binary oppositions only perpetuate marginalisation resulting from difference. A solution would be to:

[refuse] to accept the traditional Western separation of mind and body. As in so many other kinds of oppositional definitions, one term has historically been privileged at the expense of the other, and one has been linked with the male, one with the female....(Herndl 343)

In exploring the opposition between mind and body it becomes clear that this is a gendered opposition where mind is equal to man and “woman [is] cast in the role of the body...” (Bordo 5). Bordo continues by adding that “whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity...” (5). Similarly, Bordo comments that “women...[are] associated with the body and [are] largely confined to a life centered *on* the body (both beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others)...” (17). However, women should embrace their association with the body rather than consider it inferior to an association with the mind or view their association with the body as a negation. At the same time they should be allowed an opportunity to be associated with the mind if they so choose. Ideally there should be a refusal to accept the division between mind and body because the division based on difference aids patriarchy in trying to diminish the power of the reproductive female body by using these types of binary oppositions to assert its own apparent superiority. According to Grosz

[p]atriarchal oppression...justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women’s social and economic roles to...biological terms. Relying on essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological

⁹ Nature is a social construct and for this reason the term raises skepticism.

transformations, women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men. (14)

This thesis explores how this association between women and the body influences the way in which women experience pregnancy. It explores more specifically whether the associations Grosz mentions, the associations with biology and nature, influence the women in the texts desire to have children or to be pregnant.

The binary oppositions of male and female become interchangeable with those of mind and body, culture and nature. Bordo develops the mind/body opposition further as she considers the opposition between culture and nature, and comments that just as the body is often associated with woman, similarly “the body is located...on the nature side of a nature/culture divide” (33). This enables us to interrogate representations and identities of women, which further informs our understanding of the construction of female identity. Women’s involvement in procreation will influence her identity and this involvement has traditionally been associated with nature which is considered inferior to its binary opposition culture. It is this inferiority associated with nature that will have an effect on female identity. However, Bordo adds that:

the body has been forced to vacate its long-term residence on the nature side of the nature/culture duality and encouraged to take up residence...within culture. Karl Marx played a crucial role here, reimagining the body as a historical and not merely biological arena, an arena shaped by the social and economic organization of human life and, often, brutalized by it. (33)

This call to re-imagine the body beyond its biological capacity is not unique in its insistence on focusing on the cultural construction and historical experiences¹⁰ of the body and, in particular, the female body. Even though the female body is predominantly associated with nature the influence of culture on female identity

¹⁰ Cultural constructions and historical experiences both exert an influence on the way an individual experiences their body. Cultural constructions include gender, class, race and other aspects that are created and used by society to control and influence experience and identity. Historical experiences are related to context, the context within which you experience your body. Historical experiences are closely linked to cultural constructions because context is influenced by cultural constructs.

should not be ignored because the relationship between female, body and nature is a cultural construction. There are always a number of factors influencing the construction of identity at any given time and we cannot ignore the fact that the body is influenced by a number of constructs, such as biological makeup, culture and history. Bordo says, “the body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, [and] images of a cultural nature” (35). However, we cannot argue that any of these aspects is solely responsible for the way in which we experience or understand the body.

Similarly, Grosz argues that “the type of self-conception one has is directly linked to the social meaning and value of the sexed body” (*Volatile* 58). This takes into account both the biological and cultural constructions of the body and identity (though it is through the manipulation of these cultural constructions and binary oppositions that patriarchy maintains control). The sexed body Grosz discusses is one that is given meaning and value by society. She links it to her understanding of Freud’s notions of sexual difference, whereby the sexed body is a social construction, with the female body being constructed as lack, while the male body is constructed as phallic¹¹. Her point is that the representation of the female body as lack is important in maintaining patriarchal control. Yet, this notion of women as lack appears inappropriate if we consider the fact that women are more capable reproductively than men – able to have children with virtually no interaction with a man, through artificial insemination, if they so choose. It could be argued that in terms of reproduction and childbearing it is the male who should be constructed as ‘lack’, but patriarchy avoids this (especially the subject of male infertility) by objectifying the female body and constructing it as a mere container, an object. “[T]he relation between the objectification of the mother and the objectification of all women...acknowledge[s] that if the mother is treated as *less or more* than a person, then all women will be subjected to dread, devaluation, and ambivalence” (Bassin, Honey & Kaplan 8). The patriarchy’s view of the mother or woman as ‘lack’ only serves to add to the devaluation of the role of mother and/or

¹¹ In terms of this thesis, phallic is used to describe the access to power rather than simply meaning the possession of a penis, although within a patriarchal society to have a penis is to have power.

woman. It perpetuates the patriarchy's sense that women are Other, different, and so not the same and definitely not equal to men.

It is clear from the oppositions between mind and body, phallic and lack (as introduced in the previous paragraph), that the use of binary oppositions enables patriarchy to maintain control from a privileged position through inequality and objectification. However, when it comes to reproduction it seems that patriarchy uses these oppositions to disguise its own impotence, since, unable to reproduce without women, patriarchy is left powerless when it comes to reproduction. Traditionally patriarchal societies portray men as the active participants, the powerful and controlling participants in sex, while women are portrayed as submissive and passive, lacking any form of power or control. In a sense this is true, but after the sexual act men's active role ends and for this reason

[i]n a patriarchal system...the essential concept is the 'seed,' the part of men that grows into the children of their likeness within the bodies of women...It is women's motherhood that men must control to maintain patriarchy. (Rothman 141)

Once the woman is pregnant her body becomes the site of the action, the growth of the foetus, while men remain passive bystanders. So, the female body holds a certain power over the male body in that it is able to produce another human being: it can perform a function denied to the male body. Such power may intimidate men and their fear may lead them to behave in adversarial ways. Such fear, together with their own passivity in the childbearing process, can result in their attempting to control the power of the pregnant female body, with the aim of taking some of the value placed on pregnancy away from women. It is not just the fear and the passivity that lead to attempts to control the pregnant body, the need to control also stems from the view that the pregnant body simply houses what has grown and developed out of the male's sperm. The control is related to 'ownership' where the sperm and foetus are given preference over the woman and her body.

The use of binary oppositions assists patriarchal devaluation of the pregnant woman through the construction of her identity as Other, allowing patriarchal society to objectify both her body and its functions. Bordo examines how the “construction of women as fetal incubators, the bestowal of ‘super-subject’ status to the fetus, and the emergence of a father’s-rights ideology” (72) contribute to the objectification of the mother/pregnant subject. The construction of the mother as an object in which another being is grown impedes her ability to construct her own identity as a subject and the construction of the foetus as a subject further establishes the mother as object. The mother is objectified as a womb, a container, while the foetus gains subjectivity as it is prioritised. The foetus has also gained subjectivity through increased visibility while still in the womb with the aid of medical intervention through prenatal diagnostic techniques and ultrasounds. Does it seem then, that when a woman is pregnant, she is nothing more than a form of life-support for the foetus and that she has no real value apart from that function? Bordo comments that “[i]n fulfilling that function [as incubator], the pregnant woman is *supposed* to efface her own subjectivity, if need be” (79)¹². So, not only are the women in the texts expected to sacrifice their bodies for the well-being of the foetus, but they are also expected to sacrifice their position as subject and become objects instead. This must surely have a great impact on the way in which they then construct their identity during and after pregnancy. Are they able to regain their subjectivity after they have given birth or will they continue to sacrifice it as they fulfil their role as mother? Regaining subjectivity after the birth is a particularly Western middle class concern, rather than a shared or universal concern. This thesis focuses on the identity of the women during their pregnancy (as is Liffey’s case in *Puffball*) or within a society that places such pressure on women to have children (as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*) rather than on their identity

¹² Bordo comments that according to law, “subjectivity is the essence of personhood”, but in contrast to this “[t]he essence of the pregnant woman... is her biological, purely mechanical role in preserving the life of another” (79). This thesis argues that this calls for a re-examination of the way in which pregnancy is constructed. If it is constructed as a mechanical process any aspect of humanness is taken away from it and mothers can hardly be expected to maintain their subjectivity if they are no longer able to see themselves as people. This is what happens in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Handmaids lose subjectivity because their pregnancy is viewed as a “purely mechanical role”. Similarly, in *Puffball* Liffey loses subjectivity as the foetus gains status and subjectivity.

after birth or as mothers. The women in both texts are white and so the thesis does not explore the relationship between pregnancy and identity in relation to women of other races or cultures. This thesis does not attempt to imply that its argument concerns all women, as the issues dealt with are specifically related to the texts.

By taking subject status from the mother and giving the foetus 'super-subject' status patriarchal society makes it clear where its priorities lie. It is also apparent from this that society's preoccupation with the activities of pregnant women is linked to a greater concern or preoccupation with the well-being of the foetus. This preoccupation with the foetus assists a form of control by providing an opportunity and means of monitoring every action of the pregnant woman. Through the attention given to the well-being of the foetus, a great deal of importance is placed on the woman being healthy enough to provide a safe and healthy 'container' in which the foetus is able to grow. Bordo sees "the exclusive attention given to her physiological state..." as the reason behind the construction of women as "fleshy incubators..." (84). This is evident in both *The Handmaid's Tale* where women are referred to as "two-legged wombs" (Atwood 136) and in *Puffball* where Sister Davis mentions to Liffey that when Mabs gives birth "[t]he babies slip out like loaves from a greased tin!" (Weldon 217). Mabs appears to be the epitome of the 'two-legged womb' here as she produces babies with little effort, as if they are products off a production line in a bakery.

The construction of the pregnant woman as "fleshy incubator" has not been solely responsible for the construction of the foetus as "super-subject". It has, however, played an important part: "as the personhood of the pregnant woman has been drained from her and her function as fetal incubator activated, the subjectivity of the *fetus* has been elevated..." (85). Bordo's point is "not to deny protection or dignity to the fetus or to suggest that it is no more than tissue...", but she argues against the "construction...in which pregnant women are not subjects at all...while fetuses are *super-subjects*" (Bordo 88). Her view is that "[i]t is as though the subjectivity of the pregnant body were siphoned from it and emptied into fetal life" (Bordo 88).

Through the objectification of women by constructing them as foetal incubators, and viewing pregnancy as a mechanical process, as well as the use of binary oppositions, patriarchy is able to reduce the status of women. By referring to the female *body* as a mere vessel or container for the growth of its offspring and constructing the female as Other, patriarchy manages to maintain its privileged position and further subjugate women. It places greater value on its own role in reproduction and this enables it to confine women to the roles of mother and child-bearer. According to Rothman, “[i]n a patriarchy, because what is valued is the relationship of a man to his sons, women are a vulnerability that men have: to beget these sons, men must pass their seed through the body of a woman” (141). From this it is evident that the value ascribed to the woman’s body is due to her ability to produce sons. Her function has value, while the fact that men must rely on her to help them ‘beget sons’ is considered a vulnerability. By restricting the female role to bodily functions, patriarchy exercises control over women and create stereotypes of them that are highly influential in constructing female identity. “Women who are not mothers are seen as failed and unfeminine women, and achievements and pleasures gained outside motherhood are condemned within patriarchy as substitutes for ‘normal’ femininity” (Nicolson 202). Consider particularly those women in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* who are not mothers. Some of these women are termed ‘unwomen’ – they are not women simply because they do not or cannot have children. The women in privileged positions who cannot have children, but choose to be mothers are able to hire a handmaid as a surrogate mother. This is discussed in more detail in the chapter that deals specifically with the women in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Within the patriarchal societies depicted in the texts women are expected to bear children in order to conform to patriarchal stereotypes of femininity. Motherhood becomes central to women’s lives as they are socialised into the role. Patriarchal ideologies have shaped the way in which we think about mothering and motherhood: these “ideologies of mothering exist not in isolation, but as part of complex ideologies that buttress male dominance (patriarchy), the economic system of exploitation (capitalism), and the privileging of mind over body (technology)” (Glenn 12).

Reproductive technology¹³ has increased the rate of fertility and has reinforced the belief that pregnancy can easily be controlled, allowing women to fulfil the role they are socialised into, even when they are biologically incapable of it. Reproductive technology has created the impression that:

[W]omen now have a booming technology seemingly focused on fulfilling *their* desires: to conceive, to prevent miscarriage, to deliver a healthy baby at term. On the other hand, proponents and practitioners continually encourage women to treat their bodies as passive instruments of those goals....(Bordo 86)

Reproductive technology has created the impression that women have control over their bodies, but if this is true, who are they controlling their bodies for and who are they 'producing' children for? It could be argued that they control their bodies for themselves, but on the other hand it could be argued that they are simply controlling their bodies for the patriarchy. "New Reproductive Technologies *do* cater to women's desires...but only when they are the *right* desires, desires that will subordinate all else...to the project of producing a child" (Bordo 86-87). Reproductive technology has also altered the status of the foetus, allowing the foetus to move beyond being unknown and unseen until birth towards greater visibility. This greater visibility has allowed the foetus to gain more status as a subject in its own right, even while in the womb. Bordo feels that "the increasingly routine use of ultrasound *has* made the fetus seem more of a person, both to the doctor and to the mother" (86). This may have altered the representation of the foetus, but it has further complicated the expectations women have of themselves. They appear to have full control over their bodies and are apparently able to choose pregnancy at will, but they are increasingly represented as the passive recipient of this reproductive technology and are still denied their subjectivity.

¹³ Reproductive technology is a term used by this thesis to describe reproductive medicine. This includes prenatal diagnosis, artificial insemination, fertility control, improving health and genetic characteristics of fetuses and newborns, and the promotion of pregnancy by overcoming or bypassing infertility and enabling individuals to transcend their biological limits, to mention but a few. These technologies are constantly being further developed and new advances are being made.

Women go to great lengths to conceive, relying on reproductive technologies to aid them where biology cannot, despite pregnancy denying them their own subjectivity. Technological advances have not changed the way in which patriarchal societies such as those depicted in the texts treat or represent women who are childless. These women will have to find alternative ways to construct their identity considering the close association between femininity and fertility in these patriarchal societies. Although femininity is not an identity solely constructed from the notion of fertility or motherhood, as these are not the sole characteristics of femininity, fertility does play an important role in constructing female identity in a patriarchal society. If patriarchy constructs women's identity around sexual difference (particularly reproductive difference) then how does this sexual difference between men and women affect the relationships between women? The thesis explores how the importance placed on "fertility" and childbearing as fundamental characteristics of female/feminine identity impact on the way women see other women. Women with different abilities and experiences (in the area of childbearing) are forced to interact. These interactions could create solidarity based on their similar positions as non-males in their societies, or create conflict in their relationships because of their varying ability to conform to the stereotypical ideal created by the patriarchy of women as mothers and child bearers.

It is essential that the differences that occur between members of the same sex, amongst different groups of women are acknowledged. These differences, as well as those between the sexes, cause conflict rather than solidarity. As mentioned above, the difference that this thesis is concerned with is a sexual difference that results from a woman's ability to have children, her fertility. In a society that places great importance on the role of women as child bearers and mothers, it is apparent that when women are no longer able to carry out that role they will probably feel devalued and will be forced to reconstruct their identity. Consider the pressures on women in Gilead to have children, a society where the birthrate is below zero and women are assigned roles according to their ability to conceive. Those women unable to meet with the demands of their society either take up positions traditionally associated with women (such as housekeeping) or they are labeled 'unwomen' and must find an existence on the outskirts of that society and as individuals who are no longer

classified as women. The women who avoid this fate because of the positions their husbands hold in the society rely on Handmaids to give them the children they so desperately want and the status of motherhood, but this dependence on the Handmaids puts strain on the relationship between these groups of women (this is discussed in more detail in the third chapter). As a result of societal pressures placed on women to have children and to conform to traditional views of femininity, tension develops between groups of women who are childless (by choice or circumstance) and those women who have children and are able to meet the requirements that allow them to identify themselves as feminine.

In a challenge to patriarchy's traditional notions of femininity Irigaray calls for women to find "value in being women, and not simply mothers. That [would mean] rethinking, transforming centuries of socio-cultural values" (*The Irigaray* 31) that impose gendered stereotypes on women. Irigaray does not reject motherhood, but calls for a re-examination of the "socio-cultural" identity ascribed to women. She hopes this will allow women to find worth beyond the traditional value ascribed to roles of motherhood and childbearing. Whereas Kristeva, who has been criticised for "reduc[ing] the feminine to the maternal and thereby essentializ[ing] the feminine" and of "mak[ing] maternity compulsory for women" (Oliver 48), is critical of feminist views that reject motherhood altogether and chooses to focus on the effect of pregnancy on female identity.

Kristeva, in accepting reproduction as having an important influence on female identity, examines how pregnancy affects the identity women construct for themselves. "Kristeva claims that she is concerned with discourses in which identity breaks down... with discourses that call up a crisis in identity. For her the discourse of maternity is such a discourse" (Oliver 48). According to this view the way in which the pregnant body facilitates a crisis in identity is that "the pregnant woman or mother is an incarnation of the split subject. The pregnant maternal body is a split body" (Oliver 49). The maternal body splits into two individuals after birth and according to Kristeva's view, this has an immense impact on the identity of the mother. Her argument stems from her notion of the otherness and doubleness of maternity where the maternal body houses an "other", the foetus, which is not part of the maternal

“self”. So, the maternal body is both self and other, having something like a double and at the same time a conflicting identity, until after the birth when there is a breakdown from one body to two, a splitting where the other is no longer part of the woman’s body. This conflict that occurs within the self where there is a progression from being at one moment one “body” and then becoming “two” is what causes the breakdown in identity which Kristeva finds interesting. The woman must reconstruct her identity after birth, as she is no longer only a woman but is also a mother, and this carries a number of other socially constructed connotations for her.

It is clear that Kristeva attributes the breakdown of female identity to both the cultural construction of the ‘split body’ and the biological process of giving birth. Like Kristeva, this thesis considers both biology and culture to be important factors in constructing identity. To allow biology (and so, also sexual difference) to play too great a role in determining identity may be seen as essentialising but, at the same time, placing too great “an emphasis on culture will obscure powerful...aspects of women’s experience” (Bordo 36). To concentrate on the social construction of pregnancy would be to deny that

the unique configuration of embodiment presented in pregnancy – the having of an other within oneself, simultaneously both part of oneself and separate from oneself – constitute a distinctively female epistemological and ethical resource. (Bordo 36)

What is this “distinctively female epistemological and ethical resource”? It could be a female knowledge and morality grounded in the potential of their bodies to reproduce or a resource based solely on experience. Is it this resource that drives women’s desire to have children, the knowledge that you are capable of “having an other within oneself, simultaneously part of...and separate from oneself”? This is beyond cultural inscription and somewhat more abstract than the biological process of pregnancy. Bordo may well be referring to instinct, a drive to continue the species. If indeed it is an instinctive desire to have children, this instinct has been manipulated and controlled by the patriarchal societies within the texts to benefit themselves.

Despite the shared task of traditional conception (advances in reproductive technology may see this task becoming more individual in the future), women are the only sex

capable of experiencing pregnancy and it is an exclusively female “resource”. “[A]s women, we all have an ‘authority of experience’ that men lack” (Bordo 95) but this experience is as diverse as women’s cultural, economic and historical positions. However, different women have different access to this ‘authority of experience’ depending on their cultural, economic and historical positions. Some women will never experience pregnancy because they voluntarily choose to remain childless or they are infertile. As a result,

[f]eminists may be made queasy...by the idea of emphasising the experiential significance of pregnancy and birth, out of fear of the conceptual proximity of such notions to constructions of mothering as the one true destiny for women. (Bordo 95)

This is not to say that women have not been provided with alternative ‘destinies’ to mothering. Rather, it makes the point that motherhood should not be seen as the only option available to women. Women have entered the workplace and have gained relative equality with men in a number of previously male dominated areas, and yet women still choose to have children. Irigaray argues that another option available to women would be to “assume the feminine role deliberately...[and] convert a form of subordination into an affirmation” (*The Irigaray* 124) of feminine specificity. Have women chosen to have children because they want to do as Irigaray has suggested or is there another reason? This thesis argues that the women in the texts do not assume the feminine role deliberately, but are persuaded by social norms and expectations (the women in Atwood’s novel are persuaded by the occupation they are assigned).

Then, is the desire to have children a desire to gain value within a specifically feminine sphere, or is it simply another condition of patriarchal/phallogocentric culture? According to Irigaray, Freud argued that “the desire to have a child, for a woman, signifies the desire to possess...the equivalent of the penis” (*The Irigaray* 119). For him, “the penis derives its value from its status as reproductive organ” (*The Irigaray* 120). Freud maintains that the penis has the highest value (consider, for example, the fear of castration), and so women desire it, because of their own lack, and have children as a substitute for that “phallic value”. But if this were to be inverted and the womb were given greater value, then perhaps the value placed on the penis would be

seen as a substitute for male deficiency when it comes to pregnancy. However, this thesis maintains that the women in the texts desire to have children has little to do with “penis-envy”, but is a result of patriarchal constructions of female identity.

Chapter Two

The Influence of Pregnancy on Female Identity in Fay Weldon's *Puffball*.

This chapter focuses on the role reproductive ability has on the construction of identity, particularly for the female characters in *Puffball*. The novel explores the internal and external influences on identity, and these influences will be examined within the specific context of the novel. Within the patriarchal society (a society where the public sphere is predominantly a male one) depicted in this novel the men place a great deal of emphasis on their own role within the reproductive process, as well as the role of women as 'mere' containers for their offspring. By emphasising the male role patriarchy attempts to control the paternity of the child by ensuring the woman has only one sexual partner and by placing an emphasis on the importance of men's role and their "seed". This emphasis on the male role supports patriarchal structures, contributing to the devaluation of the female role and the objectification of women's bodies.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, such devaluation and objectification are made possible through the emphasis placed on the gendered roles of men and women, determined by their biological differences. Here a woman's ability to have children is inscribed as an essential aspect of female identity and femininity through the social construction of her role as wife and mother. Essentially "mothering, [is] like other relationships and institutions, [it] is socially constructed, not biologically inscribed." (Glenn 3). Yet, this thesis also insists that the role that biological difference plays in aiding the social construction of identity cannot be denied. Mothering is a social construction that stems from women's ability to have children. It has become socially inscribed as a woman's role because women are so closely linked to the child and the care of the child through their bodies. Women are able to carry a foetus and lactate, so the bulk of the responsibility for child-care has fallen on women.

In Fay Weldon's novel, *Puffball*, the social meaning and value of the sexed body¹⁴ is apparent in the way women are given meaning and value through pregnancy and motherhood, while men are able to gain value and meaning through other activities unrelated to their reproductive functions. Through restricting female roles to pregnancy and motherhood patriarchy is able to exercise greater control over society and maintain its position of authority. Similarly, through asserting the importance of its role in the reproductive process patriarchy is able to maintain a dominant position by devaluing the role of the woman.

Liffey's life in the country is central to the action of the novel. She and her husband Richard are ideal examples of stereotypical masculinity and femininity: "[s]he [is] small and bright and pretty; and he [is] large, handsome and responsible" (Weldon 8). Their country neighbours seem to be a direct contrast to them: "[Mabs is] a large, slow, powerful woman and Tucker [is] a small, lithe man" (Weldon 9). Despite their obvious physical differences, these two couples have similar desires that stem directly from the way in which men and women are constructed within their society. The reader is given insight into these desires when Richard and Liffey discuss moving to the country, and they reach a compromise that compels Liffey to choose motherhood.

'If you would have a baby,' said Richard to Liffey... 'there'd be some point in living in the country.' Liffey did not want a baby, or at any rate not now. She might be chronologically twenty-eight, but felt eighteen, and eighteen was too young to have a baby....

'All right,' said Liffey, 'let's have a baby.'

Panic rose in her throat, even as she spoke.

'All right,' said Richard, 'let's live in the country.'

He regretted it at once. (Weldon 11)

It is clear from this conversation that Liffey is not embracing the possibility of motherhood and pregnancy. The exchange of the country for a baby is hardly an equal trade-off and Liffey is choosing life in the country rather than choosing to have a

¹⁴ Sexed body in the context of this thesis refers to a body that is given meaning within a social context simply because of its 'sex' (male/female).

baby. Later when they move to the country and Liffey exclaims “ ‘Goodbye, you horrible town....Hello country! Nature here we come!’”(Weldon 39) she is in fact embracing her new life in the country, but at the same time she is moving toward the patriarchal construction of femininity based on reproductive function, female ‘Nature’. She has chosen her ‘nature’ as a means to get what she desires – a country cottage – but “[t]he getting of the country cottage, not the wanting – that was the trap. It was a snare baited by Liffey’s submerged desires and unrealised passions...” (Weldon 7). The ‘trap’ here is a biological one, as she uses her body and her biological ability to have children as negotiating tools with Richard for the cottage. It is a ‘trap’ baited by ‘submerged desires’ and it seems that the narrator implies that Liffey’s submerged desire is to have children. Liffey, it would appear, is in denial of this desire while Mabs has come to terms with it although she may not understand what drives the desire.

Is the desire to have children and enter motherhood an internal desire or is it socially constructed? Consider, for instance, the way in which pregnancy is represented and the notions people have surrounding what it means to be pregnant. Richard and Liffey fall into a conversation loaded with clichéd perceptions of pregnancy.

‘You won’t mind when I swell up like a balloon?’ Liffey was saying to Richard.

‘I’ll love you all the more,’ said Richard. ‘I think pregnant women are beautiful. Soft and rounded and female.’ (Weldon 18)

Richard’s notion of pregnant women as soft, rounded and female is echoed by Ray’s description of the cows as “[p]lump and female” (Weldon 21). This link between Richard and Ray’s words expresses the patriarchal view of femininity as well as the patriarchal view that women, like cows, serve a function. Their function, in keeping with this view, would be to reproduce and nurture.

However, if they were no longer able to perform their function, their value and meaning would be drastically altered as they could no longer be constructed in terms of their reproductive ability. The fear of infertility has a great impact on their relationships with each other and with the men in their lives. The fear of infertility and the desire to become pregnant create rivalry and jealousy amongst women and will be

dealt with later in this chapter. For the moment, though, let us consider the impact that female infertility has on the men in the novel. How do men react to female infertility and, for that matter, to the possibility of their own infertility?

Soon after Liffey stops taking her contraceptive pills both she and Richard fear that she may be infertile. They never say as much to each other, but both fear that she cannot become pregnant because she is infertile. It seems that “[i]t was a matter of time, nothing else, before she conceived” and

[h]ad Liffey known all this, she would perhaps not have lain awake at night, fearing – for although she did not want a baby she certainly did not want to be infertile – that she was barren and that some cosmic punishment had been visited upon her. (Weldon 29)

She is not alone in feeling anxious about her infertility. Richard becomes concerned about her fertility, but never questions his own. His anxiety is prompted by questions by his secretary:

‘If Liffey can’t have children,’ asked Annie, Richard’s secretary, ‘would you stick by her?’
‘Of course,’ said Richard immediately and stoutly. But the question increased his anxiety. (Weldon 32)

Female infertility is more readily dealt with than the possibility of male infertility as the men in the novel tend to emphasise the importance of their seed and so, they are never faced with the possibility that they have a minor role in reproduction. Their role diminishes after the sexual act.

Richard’s view of his role as a father is very closely linked to the notion that the male seed is of great importance and the woman is merely the container that bears the proof of the male life-giving force:

But to be a father! There was a pride in that, and pleasure in looking after Liffey, and wonder in the knowledge that a man was not just himself, but so stuffed overfull with life that there was enough to pass on – and here in Liffey was the proof of it. (Weldon 133)

Richard neglects Liffey's experience of pregnancy and considers her role as one that simply provides the proof of his own ability, the abundance of his potential and his seed. He places greater value on his own potency than on her part in the conception and her ability to carry a child. Tucker, similarly, places a great deal of importance on his potential and

[sees] the world [as] composed of virgin ground: of furrows waiting to be ploughed. Seed to be dropped, watered, nourished: then to grow... Perhaps if Mabs [were] to have her baby, visiting Liffey again was not a good idea. Perhaps a man used his fertility up: burying himself too often in already fertilised ground might weaken his capacity. (Weldon 163)

Tucker never considers the possibility that his fertility may dwindle with age, what concerns him is that he may be using his potential inappropriately. He does consider that he may be the reason Mabs is unable to fall pregnant, and if he is the reason it is not because he is infertile, but because he has used his seed somewhere else. In contrast to Tucker's view, Richard sees the women he has affairs with as "the users-up of surplus seed, not of intended seed..." (Weldon 101) and this makes it clear that he, too, has no doubts about his own potency.

Just as Richard has no doubt about his own fertility he has no doubt about his position in society and how this position relates to those of other people. He has very traditional notions about the relationship between men and women, though this is somewhat disrupted by his secretary Annie. "She had spent a year working in the States and had lost, or so it seemed to [him], her sense of the nuances of respect owing between man and woman, powerful and humble, employer and employed" (Weldon 32). This expresses Richard's patriarchal sense of himself as in the more powerful position while women should take the humbler, subservient position. As a man he can be the aggressor while the woman should be passive. Yet Annie does not conform to this notion of a woman's position and Richard seems to find this attractive, as is evident when he is caught in a compromising situation with her at their office Christmas party.

Further evidence of how Richard, as a representative of patriarchal values, views his position and the position of women is apparent in the role he expects Liffey, as wife and mother, to fulfil and in the way in which he justifies his infidelity.

Richard wanted Liffey to be the mother of his children. He wanted her, for that reason, to be separated out from the rest of humanity. He wanted her to be above that sexual morass in which he, as male, could find his proper place but she, as wife and mother, could not. He wanted her to be pure, to submit to his sexual advances, rather than enjoy them: and thus, as a sacred vessel, sanctified by his love, adoration and respect, to deliver his children unsullied into the world. It was for this reason that he offered her all his worldly goods, laying them down upon the altar of her purity, her sweet smile. And he wanted other women, low women, whom he could despise and enjoy, to define the limits of his depravity and his senses, and thus explain the *nature* of his being and his place in the universe. (Weldon 94-95. Emphasis added)

It is clear from Richard's view that being assigned the role of wife and mother separates you from the rest of humanity, as you are expected to remain pure and submit to your husband's sexual advances without finding pleasure in them. Pleasure seems to be withheld from the wife and mother, as it is associated, in Richard's view, with the sexual morass of men and 'low' women. Initially it seems that through separating mothers from the rest of humanity they are given a higher and somewhat more respected position, but on closer examination it appears that this is done for patriarchal benefit. Female sexuality here appears to be something associated with pleasure and 'low' women and it carries connotations of filth and contamination. Mothers and wives are separated and denied this female sexuality and pleasure to ensure that they are not contaminated, this is not an act of concern for the wives and mothers, but rather a means of protecting patriarchy. Through this separation patriarchy is able to have 'unsullied' children delivered from pure and sacred vessels, and at no time is the position of father and provider of seed threatened. And through it all, it is implied that it is the 'nature' of the man, 'his place in the universe', to have affairs. It is easy to see how Miss Martin's mother is able to accuse Richard of having the best of both worlds, "[b]achelor life all week, and country cottage at the weekends" (Weldon 81) and everything that the country cottage symbolises.

Richard cannot move beyond the notion that as wife and mother, Liffey should be pure and that his position in relation to her is one of duty, as her husband and the father of their child, rather than one of inclination or desire. This is made even more apparent in the way that he sees sex.

There were, Richard thought, three kinds of women, and three kinds of associated sex. Liffey's kind, which went with marriage, which was respectful and everyday...Bella's kind, which went with extra-marital sex, and self-disgust, and was anal and oral and infantile....

Miss Martin's kind, which involved seduction: the pleasure of inflicting and receiving emotional pain: in which the sexual act was the culmination not to physical foreplay – for orgasm was in no way its object – but of long, long hours, days, weeks, of emotional manipulation. (Weldon 115)

So, Bella and Miss Martin are the low women and part of the sexual morass. The type of sex he has with them he does not associate with his wife, Liffey, as it may sully his child. He considers sex with Liffey to be “an expression of affection and a mark of dedication, not of need fulfilled, or passion gratified, or desires sated” (Weldon 186).

When he is confronted with Liffey's pregnant belly and the realisation of his "duty" – as a father and husband – to her he reacts somewhat anxiously, despite the enthusiasm he showed when encouraging Liffey to become pregnant. “[He] had become suddenly afraid that out of the once beloved, wholesome Liffey, a monster would emerge” (Weldon 194). He seems to have lost his faith in the notion that his pure wife would deliver him an unsullied child. Do his doubts come from the knowledge of his own impurity or from a suspicion that Liffey is not the sacred vessel he once thought she was? As Liffey's pregnancy advances and she begins to take more pleasure in it, Richard continues to distance himself from it. After placing such importance on his own role and his seed, he has become reluctant to behold the proof that he is ‘overfull with life’.

Liffey placed Richard's hand on her stomach, but he withdrew it as soon as he tactfully could...He did not want to be a father. He did not want to join the grown-ups. He wanted to be a boy-husband and have a girl-bride. Liffey was making him old beyond his years. (Weldon 197)

It is clear that Richard is afraid of being a father, as he associates it with age and he wants to remain young and virile. But Richard and Liffey can never go back to being the boy-husband or girl-bride they once were. Richard chose to take the step towards 'adulthood' by encouraging the pregnancy and, as it turns out, "pregnancy has certainly made [Liffey] look more like a woman and less like a boy" (Weldon 205) according to Ray.

Richard wants to remain a "boy-husband", but in Liffey's eyes he has in fact grown-up and aged. Perhaps this is not a direct result of her pregnancy and his approaching fatherhood, but rather as a result of his experiences during his time away from Liffey. In part, it could be a result of his altered view of his relationship with the other women when Ray finds out about Richard's affair with Bella. Richard now takes a different approach, as he "[realises] that he was a bit-part player in Ray and Bella's drama: and he feared he had much the same rôle in Miss Martin's life..." (Weldon 220). Once Richard is "free of Bella, Helga and Miss Martin, he [can] concentrate on loving Liffey" (Weldon 221) because, being free of these "low women", he is able to escape being trapped by his male nature. Richard seems to have grown through his affairs, and Liffey notices that:

He had grown from a boy into a man and she was not sure she liked the man. But she had to. He paid the rent. He bought the food. She and the baby had to have a home. And he was the baby's father. (Weldon 229)

It appears that Liffey has become aware that Richard's position is one of father and provider, despite the fact that it seems she is no longer inclined towards him, he still has a duty to her and the child. She too has a duty to the child, to allow him to have a father. Liffey is also restricted by her economic dependence on Richard. Her confinement to the home is a traditional role where women have been confined to the domestic sphere because of their position as mothers and caregivers, while men's roles are within the public sphere. Richard and Liffey's relationship seems to have changed from the lust exhibited in the first chapter of the novel, when they make love in the field, to a more mature relationship that parallels their individual progression into adulthood during Liffey's pregnancy. Both Richard's impending fatherhood and

his life experiences appear to have aided Richard's progression into adulthood, from boy to man, while Liffey has matured during her experience of her pregnancy.

Similarly, has motherhood freed Liffey and made her more of a woman, and if so, in whose opinion? The patriarchal construction of female identity around the biological capacity to reproduce and women's socialisation into motherhood is considered to be, "particularly by radical feminists,...the key means of women's oppression in patriarchal societies[. But despite this, many young women see it as a means of liberation from the prospect of dreary paid employment" (Nicolson 201), an option Liffey finds inviting. So, motherhood could be considered to be either oppressive or liberating. Liffey seems initially to find it oppressive, as she is not all that eager to become pregnant, "[s]he might be chronologically twenty-eight, but felt eighteen, and eighteen was too young to have a baby" (Weldon 11). At the same time she finds it liberating that she has no need to be confined to a regular job once she lives in the country where she can "get down to writing [her] novel" (Weldon 10). She gradually starts to feel that her pregnancy has given her a sense of purpose. She comments on her pregnancy during a conversation with her mother (Madge):

'I suppose because it's natural,' said Liffey, brightly.

'So are varicose veins,' said Madge.

'It's not as if I had a career,' said Liffey tentatively, over the crackling line to her mother far away. 'It's not as if I was good at anything else. I might as well use up my time having a baby. I might even be a born mother.' (Weldon 144)

Liffey's comment seems to endorse the patriarchal notion that women choose motherhood because it is their nature ("it's natural" for them to do so) and the traditional view that women cannot be both mothers and career women: they are forced to choose between the two. Her comments also stem from a desire to meet with her mother's approval, as she does not have a close relationship with her mother. Yet, her comments clash with her mother's character, as her mother confesses to Liffey that she would have opted for an abortion when she found she was pregnant with Liffey, but it was too expensive and unsafe. Liffey was an illegitimate child and this may be part of her reason for claiming her own pregnancy as 'natural' because unlike

her mother's, it complies with social norms. After their conversation Liffey realises that "she would never, ever, receive her mother's whole-hearted approval" (Weldon 144). Liffey seems to have forgotten that she once saw living in the country as an opportunity to find fulfilment in writing a novel, as she argues in favour of motherhood. She even used the fact that she had no career as a reason why she should not be denied a life in the country. Her argument was that Richard has "[his] career and [his] fulfilment...and what [does she] have?" (Weldon 10). Yet, her argument that she has no career inevitably traps her in motherhood, as she "might as well use up [her] time having a baby". Her argument supports traditional patriarchal views that have been contested, that women should not have careers and should find fulfilment as mothers. The fulfilment Liffey finds in the country comes in the form of motherhood rather than through the writing of a novel, and so conforms to this view. In arguing for a life in the country she is actually arguing, unknowingly, the patriarchy's case that women are born to be mothers and, as it is an integral part of their biological make-up, they should find contentment in it.

Traditional patriarchal notions have also created the myth of natural childbirth as a painless experience. Weldon subverts these traditional notions of "the primitive woman", who is able to give birth in a field and then continue with her work, by appropriating the images and language used in relation to this concept. Liffey sarcastically addresses this concept when Richard accuses her of "making ever such heavy weather over [her] pregnancy" (Weldon 229). Liffey apologises insincerely and adds that "[she supposes] London's full of girls just dropping their babies in a corner of the office, and going straight back to the typewriter..." (Weldon 229). Her attack on the primitive woman myth presents a slightly more modernised scenario compared to the one Richard presents later in the text:

‘[Birth’s] an entirely natural process,’ said Richard. ‘Nothing to worry about. African mothers go into the bush, have their babies, pick them up and go straight back to work in the fields.’

They all looked at Liffey, to see how she would take this.

‘And then they die,’ said Liffey, before she could stop herself. (Weldon 241)

However, despite the different scenario Richard has used, Liffey's reaction is the same. She may not be sarcastic, but she is a great deal more realistic about the experience of childbirth than Richard is. Perhaps the myth of painless childbirth was created to encourage women to have children. Richard certainly uses it here in a poor attempt to put Liffey's mind at ease, and perhaps even as an attempt to put his own mind at ease.

Weldon is critical of views of natural childbirth that create myths of painless childbirth. This is evident during Lally's labour where she is encouraged by her sister to avoid a hospital, doctors are in Helen's opinion "an essential part of the male conspiracy against women, and [Helen would see] Lally through her pregnancy" (Weldon 91). Helen tells Lally that "[a]ll that stuff about pain is part of the myth. Having a baby is just a simple, natural thing" (Weldon 91). The myth Helen refers to is a myth about painful childbirth that requires medical assistance and her view that doctors form part of a 'male conspiracy against women'. The baby is still-born and Lally's fertility was thought to be "somewhat impaired, but Lally did not mind, at least not for the moment" (Weldon 126). Lally's experience of childbirth as presented by Weldon destroys any myth that it would be a painless and safe procedure. The notion of the 'natural' mother as it is linked to the notion of natural childbirth is also criticised by Weldon. Cosslett argues that "Mabs could be taken as a satire on the 'natural' mother – she is only happy when pregnant, and she produces her babies 'like loaves from a greased tin' (Weldon 1980 219)" (35). Mabs seems to be a prime example of the patriarchal myth of the primitive woman who is able to experience painless childbirth. One could go so far as to argue that it is because she is in touch with nature - making homeopathic remedies and her apparent link with the Tor – and so, more 'natural' than Liffey, who has come from the city and must rediscover her link with nature through her pregnancy. This is apparent through the constant comparisons between Liffey's pregnancy and Mabs' previous pregnancies, which seem to imply that Liffey is not a natural mother. In this particular instance Mabs is commenting on the fact that Liffey had to have her baby by Caesarean section.

‘I never had to have a Caesar,’ said Mabs. ‘Perhaps you have narrow hips? You should have taken some of my rosemary tea. I always drink it when I’m pregnant and never have any trouble....Where’s the baby?’
...‘In the special care unit, I suppose?’ went on Mabs. ‘....No baby of mine ever went into special care.’ (Weldon 258-259)

It is evident from Mabs’ comments that she feels that Liffey is not a natural mother, but these comments stem from her view that she should be pregnant and that Liffey has taken the pregnancy that should have been hers. If this is true, and not all women are ‘natural’ mothers, what implications does that have? If not all women are ‘natural’ mothers then it disproves the notion that women should have children and follow their biological destiny. It also implies that women should not be bound by their ‘nature’ and should be free to have the choice to become a mother or not.

Weldon does not dismiss the natural childbirth model totally, but supports the fact that it “draws attention to the subjective experience of the birthing woman, not just her objectified body. Her state of mind is the key to a successful birth” (Cosslett 14), and this is apparent in Liffey’s experience of birth, as her state of mind gives her the determination to continue against all odds. The relationship she develops with her foetus after its ‘Annunciation’ draws attention to Liffey’s subjective experience of her pregnancy and it puts her in the right state of mind to have a successful birth, even though it is not “natural” but by Caesarean section. Her baby, while still in the womb, constantly reassures her, gives her hope and instructs her how to act in both their best interests. He tells her at one point to “[e]at, smile, hope” (Weldon 241) to avoid an unpleasant situation. This type of ‘leadership’ from the foetus aids the creation of the perceived bond between mother and child. Through this Weldon allows the reader an insight into Liffey’s experience of pregnancy, though at the same time her having to rely on medical intervention during the birth process shows the important role of medical resources. From this it appears that Weldon is supportive of aspects of the natural childbirth model (particularly as it involves less interference from outside the mother-child relationship), but also attempts to show the importance and positive aspects of the medical profession. Had Liffey opted for natural childbirth and not arrived at the hospital the fate of her child might have been the same as that of Helen’s sister Lally’s stillborn baby. Weldon presents Lally and Helen’s notion that

hospital birth is part of a wider male conspiracy¹⁵ as an extreme view, but does not attempt to deny that medicine is a male dominated field. In her review of Weldon's novel *Brookner* considers both the novel's construction of the natural mother (earth mother) and Weldon's use of medical discourse. Brookner views Weldon's use of medical language as "an inexorable accumulation of physiological detail" (202). This clearly indicates that Weldon has spent a great deal of energy researching the physiological processes that occur within a woman's body before and during pregnancy, documenting the experience carefully. Brookner argues that "*Puffball* seems to establish pregnancy as the only experience a woman can rely on for authenticity or indeed for validation" (202). This statement essentialises Liffey's experience and the content of the novel, but this thesis considers *Puffball* to be an exploration of pregnancy and the female experience of pregnancy from more than just a biology-is-destiny perspective. *Puffball*, through its depictions of the men (particularly Richard and Tucker) and the women in the novel, offers a glimpse at social pressures that persuade women to have children. Brookner also feels that it "is a great leap backwards for the stereotypical feminist... [as i]t argues in favour of the old myths of earth, motherhood and universal harmony: a fantasy for the tired businesswoman" (Brookner 202). It certainly does come across as supportive of these stereotypical associations between earth, motherhood and natural harmony, but at the same time Weldon supports the intervention of a predominantly masculine medicine. Brookner neglects to see the relevance of the medical intervention that allows the heroine to give birth in the end, with Weldon attempting to provide the reader with a balance between the natural 'earth-mother' and the extreme control of male medicine.

Weldon creates contrasting characters to illustrate her ideas about natural childbirth. "By caricaturing *both* the naïve feminist opponents of the male medical institution *and* the malevolent earth-mother, Weldon has covered the spectrum of natural childbirth stereotypes" (Cosslett 35). Weldon presents Lally and Helen as the naïve opponents of male medicine. "They had given up doctors, who [they thought] were an

¹⁵ Lally and Helen "had given up doctors, who were an essential part of the male conspiracy against women" (Weldon 91). Their view of doctors and hospitals as part of a "male conspiracy against women" is extreme.

essential part of the male conspiracy against women, and were seeing Lally through her pregnancy themselves” (Weldon 91). Lally’s baby is stillborn and Weldon uses this to further “[endorse] the life-saving power of the medical institution” (Cosslett 55). This incident lingers in the memory of the reader when Liffey’s condition requires medical intervention if both the mother and child are to survive. Through this, Weldon’s endorsement of the intervention of medicine, “[t]he primitive woman, Mabs, is defeated and tamed by modern male medicine. The medical establishment is life-saving, even though it is presented as largely male and somewhat misogynist...” (Cosslett 66). Mabs is defeated by modern male medicine when it saves both Liffey and her child. Mabs is somewhat tamed when she experiences the life-saving power of medical intervention when her daughter Debbie’s life is saved when she suffers from appendicitis. She is tamed by this incident because it proves to her that she is not always able to resolve things using her herbal remedies. It is interesting to note that at this stage Mabs is preoccupied with Liffey’s pregnancy and is not particularly concerned the well-being of her daughter.

However, Weldon’s use of medical discourse, a discourse considered to be deeply embedded in patriarchal discourse because medicine is a male dominated field in the novel, cannot be left unquestioned. In *Puffball* she incorporates a great deal of medical/scientific discourse and, despite what seems to be an attempt to show the usefulness of medicine, the reader cannot help suspect that Weldon’s use of it is more subversive than it initially appears to be. Cosslett comments on this a number of times:

Technological intervention in birth can be presented as an emanation of patriarchal science and its need to control women’s bodies. Nevertheless, medical discourse can also be used by women to empower themselves in surprising ways, and it too can be subverted. (7)

Cosslett discusses Weldon’s use of medical terminology throughout *Puffball* and feels that it is used both to illustrate the usefulness of medical technology, and to subvert it in an empowering way.

Weldon subverts the predominantly male medical establishment by appropriating its language, making it her own and making it accessible to other women. Cosslett calls Weldon's use of medical terminology a "subtle take-over and subversion of scientific discourse" (69). Cosslett supports Weldon's appropriation of the language and argues that "[i]t is not possible to read the medical descriptions as some kind of coldly clinical objectification of the heroine's body – they are part of her 'self', and she should be more aware of them" (70). Similarly, Alexander points out that "*Puffball* sets out to talk about the way in which Liffey cannot be separated from her body, even if she wishes it" (14). Even though "Liffey...like most women, had never cared to think too much about what was going on inside her body. She regarded [it]...with distaste..." (Weldon 22). The inability to separate Liffey and her pregnant body is particularly evident in the chapters that explore 'inside Liffey'. In these chapters, Weldon shows clearly how the individual cannot be separated from their body:

Liffey's pituitary gland had pursued its own cycle: secreting first...the hormones which would stimulate the growth of follicles in Liffey's ovaries. These follicles...would all grow until...the biggest and best would drop off into the outer end of one of Liffey's fallopian tubes....(Weldon 23)

Despite these physiological descriptions found in the "Inside Liffey" chapters, her body is not objectified as it always remains "Liffey's". This creates a greater sense of the female body as something more than a reproductive machine. If it is not a machine, it may be a "pawn in nature's game" (Weldon 13) or even "a blind and restless procreative spirit" (Weldon 13). However, "[n]atural childbirth writers see motherhood as the essential attribute of womanhood; [and] in the discourse of medical expertise, all women are reduced to their bodily functions" (Cosslett 77) and so are unable to escape their bodies.

Weldon tries to overcome this by subverting constructions that make the female body an undesirable object with which to be associated and tries to represent autonomy for the female body. She subverts the traditional view that the female body is a passive recipient while the male plays a far more active role during reproduction. According to Bordo

the male contribution has been portrayed as the 'effective and active' element in reproduction, the female as passive, unformed matter, waiting to be individuated and vivified by the valiant sperm who wins her. (90)

In Weldon's novel this view of the active male sperm is demystified by the notion that it is not only the sperm which are active participants in conception. When Liffey has sex with Tucker his sperm are described as "good strong sperm" but they "had all inevitably perished, since no ovum had arrived within the forty-eight hours of their life span" (Weldon 100). It is clear that, despite the portrayal of the sperm as active, they rely quite heavily on female activity as well, as they die while waiting for the arrival of the ovum. Weldon creates an awareness that the traditional view is indeed biased and that in fact, both male and female are equally responsible for conception, as is evident when Richard and Liffey finally conceive: "[t]he female nuclei of the ovum and the male nuclei of the sperm... *both* moved towards the center of the ovum, where they fused to form a single nucleus" (Weldon 107. Emphasis added).

Weldon further subverts the male medical profession through her character, Mabs. Mabs acts subversively in relation to male medicine and Cosslett compares her to 'the filthy peasant crone,' a stereotype constructed by Adrienne Rich. Cosslett describes this stereotype as follows:

In Rich's formulation, she is the tradition of midwifery, whose opposing stereotype is 'the aseptic male obstetrician'....The men are associated with the increased use of instruments...and consequentially increased intervention....[Whereas] the peasant crone and her ancient female wisdom [are]... a more 'natural', instinctive approach, a faith in the female body and its power....She has her own ideas, a competing tradition, a knowledge or 'witchcraft' which can challenge male domination of the birth-scene....(31-32)

Mabs comes from a long line of women who subverted and challenged male medicine. She would make up herbal concoctions

with which, as her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother before her, she dosed her children, doing them one damage or another. It was a local custom

to do so. Dr Southey would suggest to mothers that they keep it for cows, but they politely agreed and kept on dosing. (Weldon 238)

In fact, Mabs constantly undermines any advice the doctor may give Liffey. Unlike more conventional women in this position of “ancient female wisdom” (yet another stereotype Weldon undermines through depictions of Mabs’s less than wise administering of her herbal concoctions), Mabs does not use her position to aid the pregnant mother, but rather uses her knowledge and power against the pregnant heroine. Mabs is in no way a midwife, as she works against Liffey, but she does have the knowledge of an experienced woman. Liffey acknowledges this as “[s]he...look[s] to [Mabs], as a pregnant girl will look to an older and more experienced women, for advice, company and reassurance” (Weldon 165), unaware of the ill will Mabs wishes upon her and her child.

The narrator comments on a similar dependence Liffey has on the advice Dr Southey gives her, but the narrator also generalises about pregnant women who “[lean] upon [their] advisor, [and] no longer [think] for [themselves]” (Weldon 183). Liffey’s dependence on both Mabs, as an experienced mother, and Dr Southey, as a medical doctor, creates a balance between two traditions of childbirth, between medical discourse and an experiential female discourse.

Both these discourses seem to show a particular preoccupation with the health of the mother, while the underlying preoccupation is actually with the foetus. Mabs has a preoccupation with Liffey’s health, based on a greater preoccupation with Liffey’s unborn child. Mabs’s attempts to put Liffey’s health at risk are, in fact, attempts to jeopardize the health of the foetus. According to Mabs “there are only so many babies to go round, and...if Liffey [is] pregnant, she would not be” (Weldon 128). By being pregnant Liffey has, according to Mabs, stolen her baby from her and Liffey is just the container that houses the foetus. Mabs’s preoccupation is with the foetus and “Mabs felt that once Liffey’s baby was delivered she would start her own” (Weldon 230). Thus she feels it is in her best interests to interfere in Liffey’s pregnancy by putting Liffey’s health at risk and so also the foetus’s well-being. Here her failure to consider Liffey as more than a container that houses a foetus that should have been hers is apparent.

Similarly, the medical profession shows a great deal of concern for the well-being of the pregnant woman, though this preoccupation with the health and activities of pregnant women is linked to a greater concern or preoccupation with the well-being of the foetus¹⁶. Bordo argues that the foetus is given ‘super-subject’ status and so its well-being is of greater importance than that of the pregnant woman. Bordo argues further that, within the institutional framework, “Western legal and medical practice concerning reproduction in fact divides the world into human subjects (fetus and father) and ‘mere’ bodies (pregnant women)” (Bordo 14)¹⁷. This notion of the foetus as a subject and the pregnant woman as body and object links to the opposition between Self and Other, where the Other is objectified. The foetus is given subject status by the patriarchy and the self here refers to the patriarchal self. Patriarchy, not the foetus, objectifies the pregnant woman. The link between the foetus and patriarchy is made more apparent by the way Weldon uses a male foetus to highlight the division between subject and object, Self and Other, male and female. It stresses the way in which society constructs pregnant women as objects and Other, while the foetus is constructed as both subject and self. The construction of the foetus in such a way links it unmistakably with the patriarchy. The preoccupation with the foetus and its association with patriarchy has allowed the foetus to be constructed as a ‘super-subject’, allowing the pregnant woman to have no subjectivity of her own. According to Bordo “[i]t is as though the subjectivity of the pregnant body were siphoned from it and emptied into fetal life” (Bordo 88), which parallels the channeling of Liffey’s body’s energy and nutrients into the body and development of the foetus. At seven months pregnant Liffey’s energies have been depleted and “[t]he placenta took

¹⁶ On Liffey’s visit to Bella’s doctor in London, when the doctor examines Liffey he asks her to take care of herself and expresses concern for the baby. He is not only concerned about her health, but also her activities.

The doctor said her blood pressure was up, what was she doing gadding about London, she should be safely at home in the country, and with placenta praevia anyway she should try not to be too far from the hospital where they had her records.

‘I’m not trying to frighten you,’ said her doctor, ‘I just don’t want you to be silly. You have to think of the baby.’ (Weldon 206)

¹⁷ The Western legal and medical practice Bordo mentions here is framed by Western society. This is a patriarchal society and so legal and medical practice will be greatly influenced by patriarchal ideology.

priority over the normal demands of Liffey's system. Liffey, as she vomited, suffered from lack of calcium, vitamins, proteins, fats and carbohydrates – but the baby did not" (Weldon 185).

The subjectivity of the pregnant woman (in this case, Liffey) is 'siphoned' from her by the manner in which society constructs her. The doctors play an important role in siphoning off her subjectivity, as they are the predominantly male representatives of the medical institution that is influenced by the patriarchal ideologies of their society. On Liffey's first visit to Dr Southey the narrator makes it clear how the doctor perceives Liffey and most pregnant women.

[H]e reproached Liffey for not having attended earlier [and] she made no reply,...he took her reluctance – how could she say that she had not wanted the baby frightened away – as a sign that she was unenthusiastic about her pregnancy. (Weldon 153)

It is clear that he does not allow for her own subjective experience of her pregnancy and does not take into account that each woman's experience of pregnancy is unique to that woman and to that pregnancy. He assumes, rather, that all women who are reluctant in making their first appointment with their doctor are unenthusiastic about their pregnancy. He ignores the notion that these women are perhaps reluctant to let male medicine interfere in a female experience.

Liffey's experience of this initial visit shows that it can be humiliating and that she fears that future visits will be equally degrading.

'Is it going to be like this all the time? One indignity after another?' she asked presently and he replied yes, that having babies was not the most dignified of processes. It was, he added, the ultimate triumph of the body over the mind.

'And of desire,' she said, 'over common sense.'

He thought she meant sexual desire, but she did not. She meant the overwhelming desire, of which she was now so conscious, to be part of the world about her: to be a woman like other women; to feel herself part of nature's process: to subdue individual spirit to some greater whole. (Weldon 154-155)

Both the doctor and Liffey allude to the binary oppositions between mind and body, rationality and desire, associated with the opposition between male and female. Her

pregnancy is associated with both the body and desire, and these, traditionally, both lie on the female side of the male/female opposition. When the doctor and Liffey discuss pregnancy as a triumph over mind and rationality, supposedly both on the male side of the male/female opposition, it is an undignified process rather than a glorified one. The female desire to have children is painted as an uncontrollable desire that women are not always even aware of. It is a desire “to be a woman like other women” that drives the desire to be pregnant; it is also an unconscious desire to relinquish their own subjectivity, their own “individual spirit to some greater whole”. By giving up their own individuality and accepting their role in a process, they are adding to their own objectification. They are part of a “greater whole” that constructs women as “part of nature’s process,” containers, foetal incubators that do not have subjectivity as it is given to the foetus they carry.

With the foetus having its own subjectivity and “super-subject” status, the pregnant woman is further objectified, as the emphasis is placed on her being healthy enough to provide a safe and healthy ‘container’ in which the foetus is able to grow. Bordo sees this “exclusive attention given to [the mother’s] physiological state...” as the reason behind the construction of women as “fleshy incubators” (84). The ten chapters in *Puffball* that deal with the physiological state of Liffey’s body are entitled “Inside Liffey”, and they deal with the internal happenings of Liffey’s body and the growth of the foetus. It is in “Inside Liffey (7)” that the reader learns that the child is male and this occurs after a chapter called “Inside Richard’s office” (Weldon 108). The titles have a similar ring, and the title dealing with Richard alludes to the titles that deal with Liffey’s confinement to her bodily space. This chapter about Richard does not confine him to his body, but illustrates how men are confined to other spaces - male spaces - such as offices. Liffey is, however, confined to her body as, it would seem, she is confined to her nature in her chosen space, the country, which has come to represent her reproductive role. As the foetus is identified as male it too gains freedom from the body, as it moves from being the “foetus” to the “baby” in “Inside Liffey (8)” (Weldon 158). In this chapter the baby’s circulation becomes separated from that of the mother and so, physiologically, it is gaining independence and even more subjectivity, just as its identity is beginning to be separate from Liffey’s. At eighteen weeks into the pregnancy the separation of Liffey and the baby, as well as

the baby's independence, are mentioned by Liffey's doctor. The doctor tells her that "[a]ll [she] ha[s] to do is just exist. The baby uses [her] to grow. [She doesn't] grow it" (Weldon 178)¹⁸. Through this the doctor diminishes Liffey's role in the pregnancy and prioritises the role of the foetus in its own development.

The foetus increases its super-subject status and autonomy when, in the thirtieth week of her pregnancy, Liffey has an ultrasound examination: "the increasingly routine use of ultrasound *has* made the fetus seem more of a person, both to the doctor and to the mother" (Bordo 86). Liffey, however, is somewhat disconcerted by the whole experience, as she "[feels] both reassured and shocked, at what seemed an untimely manifestation of spirit into flesh" (Weldon 192). Previously, the baby only gained its identity at birth, but with advances in reproductive technology the scan, or ultrasound, has made it possible much earlier in the child's life. The development of ultrasound is in the interest of the foetus and the mother, as it contributes to prenatal diagnosis. It also adds to the construction of an autonomous identity for the foetus that contributes to its super-subject status and helps the mother come to terms with carrying another being within her body. Once the foetus can be "seen" it becomes an entity on its own.

The super-subject status given to the foetus causes society to express great concern for the foetus. Bordo comments that, as a result of this, society generally perceives "pregnant women who engage in *any* activities that have even the *slightest* risk [as]... behaving 'selfishly'" (82). This is not so much a concern for the well-being of the pregnant women, but rather for that of the foetus. In *Puffball* the patriarchal perception that pregnant women behave selfishly is illustrated a number of times, particularly by members of the medical profession. When discussing the type of scar Liffey may have as a result of her Caesarean section, the specialist wastes no time in implying that women are selfish and vain, but the reader knows that "he [does not]

¹⁸ This notion of Liffey performing a function during her pregnancy is reinforced after the birth of the baby when

[t]he baby lay in Liffey's arms, snuffling and rooting for food. She sensed its triumph. None of that was important, the baby reproved her: they were peripheral events, leading towards the main end of [her] life, which was to produce [him]. [She] was always the bit-part player: that [she] played the lead was [her] delusion, [her] folly. (Weldon 262)

particularly like women” (Weldon 199). He describes the procedure to Liffey as follows, “[w]e’ll give you a bikini scar...[a]lmost unnoticeable...the old-fashioned navel to pubis cut is quicker and safer; but there you are: you girls think of your figure more than your baby” (Weldon 199). Later Liffey’s doctor, Dr Southey, reminds her that “[she has] to think of the baby” (Weldon 206) implying that she shows little concern for its well-being.

Just as during her pregnancy there was a preoccupation with the baby rather than with her, after the birth of Liffey’s baby it is even more apparent that within this patriarchal society the child has greater status than the mother does. Her pregnant body becomes a place that is “unsafe” (Weldon 253) for the baby, as the umbilical cord tightens around its neck, and her male child gains status immediately once its sex has been announced. The sex of the child is seen as something “[e]veryone wants to know[, as i]t defines the event” (Weldon 253). After the birth more emphasis is placed on the condition of the baby and descriptions are interspersed with the pronoun “he”, reminding the reader of his autonomy and of his status as a young male within a patriarchal society. It is at this point in the novel that it is made clear that without (male dominated) medical intervention Liffey and her baby might well have died.

It is apparent in *Puffball* that

[reproductive technologies] have offered women a greater technical possibility to decide if, when and under what conditions to have children;...[and] the domination of so much reproductive technology by the medical profession and by the state has enabled others to have an even greater capacity to exert control over women’s lives. (Stanworth 483)

Women are able to use contraceptives to prevent pregnancy (as Liffey did) and fertility drugs to improve their chance of conception. However, in a society that places such importance on the reproductive role of women it would be logical to assume that both the prevention and the promotion of pregnancy and fertility would have to benefit the ruling order, the patriarchy, in some way. Women’s desire or need to become pregnant seems to be one based on both what women want and what the

patriarchy wants. It could be an experience that women control or that the patriarchy controls, as the possibility exists that the desire women have is a desire fuelled by patriarchal ideology.

Such patriarchal ideology plays an influential role in the way that women experience their pregnancy. It will allow them to experience it either as a female resource and a liberating experience, or as a disruptive and oppressive one, but this allows only two ways of experiencing pregnancy. As is apparent in Liffey's experience, these cannot be totally separated and may occur alternately throughout the pregnancy, and so, the experience of pregnancy cannot be confined to either a liberating one or a disruptive and oppressive one. Just as patriarchal ideology influences women's experience of pregnancy, it will also impact on a woman's decision not to have children. This is particularly evident when the narrator comments on what influences Liffey's view of pregnancy. Her fear of pain is one of her reasons not to have children and the narrator explores how she feels this will be perceived by her society:

Liffey [is] afraid of pain....[She is] afraid of childbirth because she [knows] it [will] hurt. How could it not, if so large an object as a baby was to leave so confined a space? And the cries and groans of women in childbirth [were] part of her filmic youth: yes, that was pain, PAIN. And supposing the baby [is] born deformed? The fear would accompany her pregnancy, she knew it would. She could not say these things to Richard: women, though allowed to flinch at spiders and shudder at the thought of dirtying their hands, were expected to face pregnancy and childbirth with equanimity. Nor could she expect sympathy from Madge, who would see it as further proof of her daughter's errant femininity....Liffey kept her fears to herself, and let others believe her reluctance to have a baby was, in terms of an older generation, 'selfish', and in those of her contemporaries 'political' – namely, that she feared to lose her freedom and her figure, and sink into the maternal swamp. (Weldon 84-85)

This passage highlights how Liffey is aware that she must behave towards pregnancy and childbirth in a certain way, a way expected of her by society. She is aware that she cannot express her fear of the pain of childbirth to Richard as it is a pain women are not allowed to be afraid of. The narrator lists a variety of things that are socially acceptable for women to be afraid of and pregnancy is not one of these. Fear is not how women are socialised to behave towards pregnancy and childbirth, and it would

be considered evidence of deviant femininity. It is clear that Liffey's reluctance to become pregnant will be perceived negatively by her society. Her reluctance to become pregnant and give birth will be interpreted as 'selfish' behaviour or as 'politically' motivated. Both these perceptions will be based on the notion that women who choose not to have children do not want to lose their freedom or their figure, but freedom and a good figure are not high on society's list of characteristics of femininity, whereas childbearing is.

Liffey continues to be reluctant, even in her fifth week of pregnancy when she realises she is probably pregnant.

She was not ready to have a baby. She has not grown out of her own childhood: a baby was something which would grow at her expense: which would diminish her: which would bring her nearer death. It seemed bizarre, not natural at all. (Weldon 129)

It is clear that she feels she is too young to have a baby and that she fears that it will "diminish" her. The process of carrying the child will diminish her physiologically as is apparent when "Liffey... [suffers] from lack of calcium, vitamins, proteins, fats and carbohydrates – but the baby [does] not. Liffey's fat deposits [are] broken down, as necessary, to provide what [is] needed" (Weldon 185). Liffey's view of pregnancy does change as her pregnancy advances. Her perception of pregnancy as a 'maternal swamp' and as a diminishing force alters as she begins to embrace the experience. Her changing view illustrates the different perceptions of pregnancy and shows that to consider it in only one way is too limited and fixed. Part of the motivation behind the change is the bond that develops between Liffey and her unborn child. The baby comforts her and she feels she must "protect such charming naïvety" (Weldon 200). Her change of heart is most apparent when her attitude toward her swollen belly changes: "Liffey loved her tummy now. She lay on her back and sang to it. The earth was warm and so was she" (Weldon 210). It is clear that Liffey has accepted her pregnancy and her connection with the earth, a link that supports the notion that it is natural for women to become mothers. It is women's natural reproductive role and

they should embrace it. Liffey embraces her link with nature as a uniquely female experience and cherishes her pregnant body.

However, Liffey's apprehension towards the birth of her child appears in stark contrast to her new appreciation and enjoyment of her pregnancy. Her unease about the birth (and the paternity of her child) is apparent in her dreams that show the birth as disruptive of her expectations:

She dreamed that the baby was born: that it jumped out of her side and ran off laughing. Its hair was curly and it was aged about two. She dreamed she gave birth to a grown man and when he turned his face to look at her, it was Richard. She dreamed she gave birth to herself: that she *split* into cloned multitudes. (Weldon 223. Emphasis added).

This idea Liffey has of being split suggests that she fears that the birth of her child will be disruptive to her sense of her own identity. This is similar to Kristeva's notion of the "maternal body [as] a split body" (Oliver 49) that splits into two individuals, mother and child, after birth. This disruptive and potentially violent splitting of the maternal body after birth is evident again after the birth of Liffey's baby: "There was a great hollow under her ribs where the baby used to live, and a hole in that part of her mind which the baby used. She had endured some kind of fearful loss" (Weldon 259). This loss appears violent and potentially invasive of Liffey's body as it was not by natural childbirth but by Caesarean section and the surgeon had to separate Liffey's muscles to lift out the baby. It is an emotional loss because she no longer has the same relationship with the child as she did when it was part of her, inside her womb.

Pregnancy and birth bring not only physical disruption, but also a disruption of identity for women, as pregnancy is "an embodiment that literally houses 'otherness' within the self" (Bordo 96). Apart from the experience of birth as a "split" between the mother and the child, the experience of pregnancy is deconstructive, as "[b]eing pregnant, harbouring another inside the self, challenges our usual notions of identity and individuality: two people are in one body. Birth then further disrupts our

categories as one ‘individual’ literally ‘divides’ into two” (Cosslett 117-118). With the birth the woman’s identity is again altered as she has a new social role to fulfil as the mother of the child. This is true for Liffey as she experiences the split and disruption when the body she once shared with her child becomes hers again and she perceives the process of birth as “endur[ing] some kind of fearful loss” (Weldon 259).

Motherhood follows pregnancy and childbirth, and is yet another social construction of femininity. Cosslett argues that official discourses on childbirth (either medical or experiential) can be totalising as they assume that all women want to be, or should want to be, mothers(83). This generalisation is problematic as it will create divisions when some women are marginalised as Other because they do not conform to this stereotype, such as women who can no longer have children (post-menopausal women for example) and women who choose not to have children for various reasons. Cosslett comments that

[t]he totalising effect of the official discourse about childbirth is undercut in a whole number of ways: women writers show up differences of class and race where there is meant to be a uniform state of motherhood; they reveal highly ambivalent feelings about maternity, which is meant to be every woman’s natural destiny; they assert solidarity between mothers and childless women, where there is meant to be a sharp division....(109)

In *Puffball* there is a definite division between mothers/childbearing women and childless women. It is, however, a novel written by a woman and the author’s intention may be to expose the conflict between groups of women based on their childbearing status. The childless women and those who desire to have children but don’t become pregnant, like Mabs¹⁹, in *Puffball* are shown to feel resentment towards childbearing women in this patriarchal society, as the mothers are perceived to perform an important function for that society and gain value through their reproductive role. The conflict that occurs between women of varying reproductive

¹⁹ Mabs considers the birth of Liffey’s baby to be “Tucker’s baby emerging from the wrong body” (Weldon 257). Throughout Liffey’s pregnancy it is evident that Mabs wants to be pregnant, but never is until after the birth of Liffey’s child.

proficiency is as a result of the patriarchal construction of women based on their biological function and the social construction of women as mothers. In *Puffball* there is a great deal of conflict between Mabs and Liffey, as a result of Liffey's pregnancy. This conflict is not because Mabs is childless, but because she wants to be pregnant.

The issues that cause the conflict between Liffey and Mabs are also present in the conflict that occurs between Mabs and two of her daughters, Debbie and Audrey. Liffey's pregnancy acts as a reminder to Mabs that she is ageing and with age fertility wanes. As her fertility diminishes, her ability to become pregnant decreases and she is reminded of this by, not only Liffey's pregnancy, but by her daughters who are approaching adulthood and whose fertility is at its peak. Mabs herself is gradually approaching menopause and this creates a great deal of anxiety for her, as she must find new ways of constructing her identity because she can no longer rely on an identity constructed around her ability to reproduce. As Mabs ages she fears infertility (by the end of the novel it is apparent she had no grounds for fear as she finds she is pregnant):

She [does] not like being forty any more than the next woman [does]; she was beginning to fear, for one reason and another, that she was infertile. She was, in general, suffering from a feeling she could only describe as upset – a wavering of purpose from day to day. (Weldon 17-18)

Mabs longs for her youth, when she was Tucker's bride and was "pregnant and fruitful..." (Weldon 192). As she ages she begins to doubt her fertility, and with that her sense of purpose, because pregnancy has always given her that sense of purpose and contentment. Her fears of infertility have no grounds whatsoever, as Mabs is already the mother of five children, but it seems that Liffey's pregnancy only aggravates Mabs's anxiety and only fuels her desire to have more children. Despite having had five children, "Mabs liked to be pregnant" (Weldon 27) and felt that her other children "were left-over children; out-grown their usefulness as Mabs' babies" (Weldon 162). Mabs does not have children so that she can be a mother, she has

children because she enjoys being pregnant²⁰. Liffey's pregnancy reminds Mabs that she is not pregnant.

Mabs and Liffey are constantly compared, and Liffey is generally described in terms associated with youth and fertility. Before Liffey becomes pregnant Mabs is described as "a tree grown roots, and...Liffey, [as] some slender plant swaying beneath her shelter, and they [are] all part of the same earth, same purpose" (Weldon 44). Here the contrast is concerned with age and experience. At the same time, however, it is made clear that they share the 'same purpose', as they are 'part of the same earth'. It can be assumed that by this it is meant that they have the same nature, a nature that binds them to fulfil their reproductive function as women and give birth. However, later Weldon uses the tree metaphor again to describe women past menopause, "withering like a leaf on a tree..." (Weldon 120). This description is coupled with a criticism of the assumption that "[n]ature intends us to survive only long enough to procreate" (Weldon 120) and after procreation there is no other purpose. Weldon is attempting to highlight the need for society to alter its perception of menopause previously based on the notion that women's sole purpose is to reproduce and that once they can no longer perform that function they are useless, but Weldon adds that "[w]e have other ideas" (120) and by "we" she means people in general. Post-menopausal women, like women who choose to remain childless, will have to find other ways to construct their identity, and society will have to allow women the opportunity to construct their identity around something other than reproductive ability. Weldon argues that "Nature" gave us "extras" (120) and mentions intelligence as one of these that women are able to use rather than accept that menopause is the end of the line. Through mentioning intelligence Weldon alludes to the mind: once women reach menopause and can no longer be defined solely by their bodies, they can begin to construct themselves around something like the mind or culture. At the same time Weldon mentions men "reading *Playboy*, whipping up desire" (120) which links men with the

²⁰ Early in the novel Mabs is agitated and Tucker tries to calm her.

'I know what's the matter with you,' said Tucker. 'You want another baby.'

'No I don't,' she said, but he knew she did. Her youngest child was four years old. Mabs liked to be pregnant. (Weldon 27)

body rather than the mind. It would appear that Weldon is playfully reversing stereotypical binary oppositions, those of male/female and mind/body, here to prove that they, as means of interpretation, are too fixed.

Liffey is not the only reminder that Mabs is ageing and that her ability to have children is decreasing. Her eldest daughter is becoming a woman in her own right.

Mabs [looks] at Audrey and [sees] that all of a sudden she [is] a young woman with rounded hips and a bosom, and Mabs' raised fist fell as she felt for the first time the power of the growing daughter, sapping the erotic strength of the mother...and [Mabs] hoped again that she herself was pregnant, and still young. (Weldon 96)

According to Grosz, “[p]uberty for girls marks the development of breasts and the beginning of menstruation as an entry into the reproductive reality that is presumed to be women’s prime domain” (*Volatile Bodies* 205) and Audrey is entering this domain that was previously only her mother’s. As Audrey enters her mother’s domain it impacts on Mabs’s role as child-bearer. At one point Mabs even wonders “if it [is] Audrey’s doing that she [does] not get pregnant” (Weldon 157), as Mabs’s mother has taught her such skills, but Mabs ignores the fact that her waning fertility is part of a natural process of ageing rather than some herbal spell. Mabs may find it easier to deal with her waning fertility if she thought it were caused by a herbal spell, as she would then be able to place the responsibility on someone other than herself. As Audrey approaches womanhood and her reproductive role becomes more important, the emphasis placed by society on Mabs’s capacity will decrease, as the procreative role is taken over by the next generation.

Just as Mabs fears infertility and feels threatened by younger women, male youth threatens older men. This is particularly relevant to Ray’s situation, where Ray pays a great deal of attention to Karen, who is still at school. Ray is unaware of his rival for her affection, though Karen is fully aware of Ray’s age, and when she notices that his chin is stubbly she immediately compares him with her younger boyfriend, Peter. “Peter was young. Ray was old. She had not told Ray about her boyfriend Peter, a gardener drop-out, with whom she was sleeping. She thought he might be hurt”

(Weldon 208). Ray would be hurt because he behaves as though there is no age difference between him and Karen, and once again the reader is confronted with the notion that the men believe in their own potency regardless of their age. However, the women are aware of the effects of ageing on themselves, as well as the effects of age on men. Karen is aware that Ray is much older and she “told her friends how she had seduced Ray, and about the sorry state of his legs, and the funny mottled colour of his member, and was believed...” (Weldon 227). It is clear from this that, despite their belief that they never lose their potency, men are also susceptible to ageing and will also need to reconstruct their identity as they age and their needs can no longer be met.

Despite the varying fertility of the characters in the novel it is clear that both the men and the women place great importance on their ability to procreate. This ability is highly valued by this society and it is the society that encourages individuals to conform to stereotypical views of men and women related to their reproductive functions. It is a patriarchal society that socialises both men and women into considering pregnancy and mothering to be essential aspects of femininity. Patriarchy tries to control and dominate the experience of pregnancy through constructing a need for pregnant women to rely on medical advice (from a predominantly male medical sphere), as well as placing greater importance on their own role in the reproductive process and diminishing that of the woman. In effect she becomes a container and the foetus gains subjectivity. At the same time the emphasis on women having children to conform to social constructions of femininity creates conflict between groups of women whose abilities to conform are different.

This thesis does not feel that *Puffball* endorses any of the above mentioned ideas, but considers the novel to subvert stereotypical views of pregnancy and mothering as the sole purpose of women. The novel draws attention to the fact that pregnancy is a subjective experience and that many women may share this experience, but each will perceive it differently. *Puffball* explores pregnancy and the female experience thereof from more than a biology-is-destiny perspective. The novel does not deny women's capacity to reproduce and offers the reader a view of the social pressures that may persuade women to have children and become mothers.

Chapter Three:

Reproductive Machinery in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a vision of a patriarchal future in which the roles of women (and men) are controlled in order to maintain the patriarchal order. It is, however, not merely a futuristic novel, but it also examines the role, particularly as it relates to reproduction, of women within societies of the past and present. Atwood comments in an interview that forms part of the reader's companion to the novel that "*The Handmaid's Tale* is a slight twist on the society we have now" (Atwood 317). The focus of her novel is not solely the role of women, but also the role of men within any society: "A more comprehensive reading of the novel... suggest[s] that it is closer to the new feminist scholarship which has moved beyond exclusively female concerns to a recognition of the complexities of social gender construction" (Howells 128).

Atwood is not only considering possible futuristic gender constructions, but also examines contemporary gender constructions and the ways in which these are negotiated. As in *Puffball*, an important part of social gender construction is based on reproductive function, and society's perception of the role reproductive function plays in power relations. The positions of men and women in the novel illustrate how power is never equally distributed, even amongst members of the same sex. Atwood's novel explores how characters try to come to terms with the identity imposed on them by their gender, as it is determined by both their biology and society. Unlike Weldon, Atwood does not explore the effect the experience of pregnancy has on identity, but rather she explores the effect that being defined by one's body has on identity. The defined purpose in life for Offred, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is to become pregnant, yet she never becomes so through the course of the novel.

The novel is concerned with the role of women in the patriarchal society of Gilead, a society where every movement is monitored and individuals are controlled for the benefit of the state, where women are "a national resource" (Atwood 65). That has a

crucial impact on the way in which these women construct their identities, and is further influenced by the

patriarchal system...[where] the essential concept is the 'seed' the part of the men that grows into the children of their likeness within the bodies of women...It is women's motherhood that men must control to maintain patriarchy. (Rothman 141)

Gilead is a patriarchal system, as described by Rothman, where seed is the "essential concept" and women become "two-legged wombs" (Atwood 136) controlled and monitored by men. In general, inner conflict often occurs as a result of the inconsistency between roles forced on individuals and roles they would choose if they were free to do so. In the futuristic Gilead women are torn between the role society forces on them and their individuality, but their choices are limited by their social position and their 'choice' is made for them by the patriarchy. They are torn between their identity as individuals and as reproductive entities. Offred is fully aware of her position and that of the Handmaids in society: they are "for breeding purposes: [they] aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans...[They] are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 136). As this thesis has argued earlier, there is a constant desire on the part of patriarchy to separate biology and individuality - but both are essential to female identity. A woman should be free to be an individual with choices and should not be defined solely by her reproductive ability, as the Handmaids are. She should be free to choose to identify herself in such a way if she so desires, but should also be free to define herself in terms of other 'non-biological' roles/characteristics. This is complicated by social stereotypes and access to other choices that influence (and in Gilead, control) how women are constructed.

One could speculate that if it weren't for women's reproductive capacities and a variety of sex-specific roles the patriarchal government of Gilead would gladly have rid themselves of women. Instead of eliminating them they are limited to functions that men cannot or choose not to perform. "The circumstances have been reduced..." (Atwood 8) and women are reduced to particular roles/functions within this society. The Handmaids are reduced to the one function that men are unable to accomplish:

they bear children and are completely defined by their reproductive ability. The other women serve other functions: for example, the Marthas, such as Cora and Rita, are reduced to the domestic sphere as they are not viable Handmaid material. Their purpose is the maintenance of the household and various other domestic chores.

The society of Gilead has a hierarchical structure in which women are classified according to their function. In *The Handmaid's Tale* clothes are uniforms that provide physical evidence of an individual's position within society. The uniforms act as social indicators of both rank and function, and help to enforce gender-based restrictions and control over individuals. For example, the Handmaids wear red and everything associated with them and their activities is also red. Offred is a Handmaid and she, like all Handmaids, wears

red shoes,...red gloves...Everything except the wings around [her] face is red: the color of blood, which defines [the Handmaids]. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep [them] from seeing, but also from being seen. (Atwood 8)

The colour of Offred's uniform is red: she describes it as the "color of blood" and it carries connotations of fertility and the potential to bear children, serving as a reminder of Offred's function as a Handmaid. The Marthas have a uniform similar to Offred's, "long and concealing, but with a bib apron over it and without the white wings and the veil" (Atwood 9) and it is dull green in colour. The colour of their uniform carries no connotations of fertility, but they too are reduced to function and role and this is maintained through the uniform they wear.

The uniform's purpose of maintaining oppression in Gilead's society is indicated by Kaler, who argues that "[t]he most visible sign of depersonalisation in any community is in a uniform style of clothing" (50). The depersonalisation through the use of uniforms applies to both men and women in Gilead, as the uniform serves to further objectify the women and maintain a hierarchy within male ranks as well. The objectification of the Handmaids is evident in the way they are regarded by men other than the Commanders. These men, the Guardians, do not have enough power to have

Handmaids of their own (this will be discussed in more detail later), consider them to be fascinating objects because of their function and view them as somewhat mysterious because of their hidden identity. When Offred passes through the checkpoint with another Handmaid, Ofglen, one of the Guardians on duty “bends his head to try to get a look at [Offred’s] face” (Atwood 21) out of curiosity. It is not an attempt to relate to Offred, but rather a demonstration of the curiosity with which the men view the Handmaids. This suggests how these men regard these women as objects, similar to animals in a zoo, even though the society claims that women are protected in Gilead.

This incident is not all that different to the incident when Offred encounters the Japanese tourists on the street and considers that

[i]t’s been a long time since [she had] seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes...like delicate instruments of torture. The women teeter...their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red...(Atwood 28)

The way these women are dressed may seem entirely different to the modest apparel of women in Gilead, but what they wear doesn’t seem to have much of an effect on the way in which women are objectified and perceived. This contrast between the apparently more sexually evocative outfits of the Japanese tourists and the nun-like apparel of the Handmaids serves only to highlight the fact that women are perceived in an oppressive way, regardless of the clothing they wear. The Handmaids are objectified because of their reproductive role and are dominated and controlled in both private and public spheres, while Japanese women tend to control and dominate the private sphere, but are still discriminated against in the public sphere. Both groups of women are dominated to varying degrees by their patriarchal societies in different areas of their lives. “[Offred’s] misguided equation of western fashion with feminine liberation...is especially ironic given the fact that the person wearing it is not western but eastern, and is representative of a culture notorious for its oppression

of women” (Hammer 43-44)²¹. It is merely the external appearance of freedom and sexuality that Offred has noticed.

However, the uniforms, the reduction of women to specific roles and their confinement to domestic or bodily functions does not diminish the fact that women, and not men, are able to reproduce. Atwood’s novel shows that “[n]o matter how much [women’s] activities are confined, a society cannot function without women. Women always have a measure of power because they exclusively possess the means to propagate society” (Cutler). Offred recalls her mother commenting, before Gilead was in existence, that “[she doesn’t] want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (Atwood 121). Women’s procreative power is something patriarchy tries to control by confining women, placing restrictions on them and endowing itself with power to dominate. The control of women’s bodies becomes a very important aspect of the novel, as it is their bodies that determine their position in society and whether they will be a Handmaid, a Martha or an “Unwoman”. The women in Gilead are trapped in their various situations and roles by their bodies.

Offred expresses this on a number of occasions. While she washes her body she feels that “[her] nakedness is strange to [her]...[She] avoid[s] looking down at [her] body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because [she does not] want to see it. [She does not] want to look at something that determines [her] so completely” (Atwood 63). Schwartz comments that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a text that illustrates

²¹ Hammer’s view of Japanese culture, as one “notorious for its oppression of women” (44) is rigid and ignores the fact that Japanese women “[have]...achieved a dominant role in issues involving the household [and according to Friedman] it will only be a matter of time till women start acquiring public power” (6). At present women “[i]n corporate Japan...must compete with overt sex discrimination” (Friedman 5), but this discrimination is nothing like that against the Handmaids. The role of Japanese women in their society changed after World War II when women were required to take the place of men in industry and it seems that women’s positions in Japan are continuing to change. Before this Confucianism, Buddhism, and Samurai culture greatly influenced the position of women in Japanese society, as “[t]hese three institutions were all highly discriminatory towards women....stressing the preeminence of men over women” (Friedman 1).

“women’s increasing alienation from her body and the exploitation of her reproductive capacities, coupled with a nightmarish vision of an essentialist feminism gone awry” (246). Offred’s alienation from her body is as a result of the exploitation of her reproductive capacity and the objectification of her body that results from it. She has been indoctrinated by the patriarchy to be modest and not to display any skin. While Offred is being trained at the ‘red center’ Aunt Lydia explains to them how in the past women made spectacles of themselves, “[o]iling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them...” (Atwood 55). The Aunts are tools of the patriarchy: they too serve a function, to socialise women to conform to the demands of Gilead’s society.

Despite Offred’s refusal to look at her body as it determines her position in society, she is still quite in tune with the internal happenings of her body. She sees herself as

sink[ing] down into [her] body as into a swamp, fenland...[t]reachorous ground, [her] own territory [and she]...becomes the earth [she] set[s] her ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are the signs, these are the things [she] need[s] to know about. Each month [she] watch[es] for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. (Atwood 73)

This is very similar to Liffey’s early description of pregnancy as “sink[ing] into the maternal swamp...” (Weldon 85). The image of the female body as swamp is used by Atwood to illustrate what lies beneath the surface of the skin, something Weldon does in her chapters entitled “Inside Liffey”. Atwood, though, shows her protagonist as having a greater awareness of what happens within her body and this may be due to the fact that she, Offred, is more overtly aware that her body is responsible for her identity. She is aware of the subtle changes in her body and of the workings of her body because “[Handmaids] are containers, it’s only the insides of [their] bodies that are important” (Atwood 96).

In an attempt to redefine her ‘self’ and resist being confined to a reproductive function Offred tries to reappropriate her body when she chooses her sexual partner, Nick.

Initially it is initiated by the Commander's Wife as a means of getting Offred pregnant because she doubts her husband's fertility. However, when Offred chooses to visit Nick at night without the intervention of the Commander's Wife she begins to reclaim her identity. In fact, the ultimate resistance to her oppression comes from her body when she does not become pregnant. Her body remains hers and is not given over to the support of another life, which as discussed in the chapter on *Puffball*, can aid the objectification of the pregnant body and siphon subjectivity from the mother. Due to Gilead's laws against abortion and contraceptive devices Offred is unable to choose not to be pregnant. By not becoming pregnant, however, Offred's body offers an innate resistance to the patriarchy, while her visits to Nick are a form of resistance on a more conscious level.

However, Offred's resistance is never particularly active. Stephanie Barbé Hammer argues that because Offred becomes the Commander's mistress and remains passive, as opposed to taking action to alter her situation, she is in fact repeating the life she had with Luke, her former husband. This can be linked to Atwood's comment that the novel "is a slight twist on the society we have now" (317), since in Offred's case her present situation seems to be a slight twist on that of her past:

She was formerly the mistress of a married man, and the novel obliquely suggests that her husband Luke may have chosen her over his first wife for the same reasons that the commander favours her over his spouse – Offred is younger, more sexually attractive, and fertile (significantly, Luke seems to have had no children by his first marriage). More disturbingly, despite her intelligence and education Offred seems to have exercised as little control over her former life as she does over her present existence. (Hammer 43)

Even though life in Gilead seems, in a limited way, to be an extension of Offred's previous life, Atwood is exaggerating the circumstances to highlight where the problem lies. The problem lies in the assumption that because women's bodies are able to have children, women will automatically want to experience pregnancy and childbirth. It is clear, however, that Atwood is critical not only of the patriarchal control exercised over women and their bodies, but also of women's reactions to their circumstances, both in the past, the present and potentially in the future too. She examines the various ways in which women are able to react and the ways in which

they may choose not to. As the difference between Offred's idealized past and the dystopia of Gilead seems to decrease as the novel progresses, it could be argued that Atwood is leading us to see these two fictional worlds as similar, as well as inviting comparisons with current conditions.

The fact that Luke and the Commander choose Offred over their spouses because of her youth and fertility (she was Luke's mistress before they were married) touches on one of the main issues of this thesis: the construction of female identity according to fertility. Since this is a situation that occurs in many societies, and is not limited to Gilead, Atwood seems to be commenting on a general condition, rather than an isolated case. Offred's relationships with men are determined by the construction of her identity according to gender assumptions and the objectification of her based on her bodily function as a reproductive vessel. Her fertility causes conflict between her and the Commander's Wife: their fertility becomes a source of power (resulting from the value and status of children in this society) for the Handmaids and at the same time it evokes the Wife's resentment at being placed in a position where she requires a Handmaid. It is not only Offred's situation that is defined by her gender and fertility, but the Wife's is as well: the Commander's Wife is unable to bear children and this creates bitterness in her because Offred is "a necessity..." (Atwood 3) to her and the only way in which she will be able to achieve the status that accompanies the birth of a child in this society. When there is a birth "[e]nvy radiates from [the Wives]... [and] [t]he Commander's Wife looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet of flowers: something she's won, a tribute" (Atwood 126). A birth gives the Handmaid status too, as "she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward" (Atwood 127).

Despite the resentment they feel toward their Handmaids, the Wives are reliant on them for procreation. In Offred's case, the Commander's Wife's only "form of procreation" (Atwood 154) without her Handmaid takes the form of knitting scarves with little figures on them. Significantly, she takes this wool and wraps it around Offred's hands so that she "is leashed,... manacled; cob webbed..." (Atwood 203) and trapped by that which seems to be symbolic of procreation. It is also important to note that it is a woman who has trapped another woman as a result of her own inability to have children, and so she has imprisoned Offred simply because she depends on her

to fall pregnant. It is not only their fertility or infertility that traps them both, but also the male government that considers it an act of treason to accuse a man of being sterile. According to the patriarchal government “[i]t’s only women who can’t, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective” (Atwood 204), just as in *Puffball* the men are reluctant to accept the possibility of their own infertility. Offred *must* fall pregnant if she is to avoid the threat of being labelled an ‘Unwoman’ and being sent to a Colony with “old women...and Handmaids who’ve screwed up their three chances...” (Atwood 248). This is Offred’s third ‘family’ and both she and the Commander’s Wife are desperate for a baby. It is this desperation that results in the Commander’s Wife prostituting Offred in an attempt to have the power and recognition that she will gain from having a child in the family. The desire to have a baby creates “collusion of a sort...” (Atwood 205) between the women, but not solidarity. The Gileadean government is attempting to create a community of women who “will live in harmony together, all in one family....Women united for a common end!” (Atwood 162). In fact, they may well share a common goal, but they are motivated by very different needs and the patriarchy will benefit most from a community of women who serve its needs.

In the society depicted in the novel the birth rate has dropped drastically and babies are highly valued. Because of this the restrictions imposed on women who are fertile are greater: the government dictates what they eat, drink and do. To Offred and the other Handmaids, cigarettes “like liquor and coffee...are forbidden” (Atwood 14), and the food the Handmaids eat is “good enough food, though bland. Healthy food...[they must] get [their] vitamins and minerals...[to] be a worthy vessel” (Atwood 65). These restrictions placed on the female body are related to the objectification of it. The female body is, in general, constructed as a “fleshy incubator” (Bordo 84) and in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as “two-legged wombs” (Atwood 136), and the restrictions are put in place so that the women provide ‘healthy’ containers in which the foetuses may grow. This is similar to the preoccupation with Liffey’s health and psychological state in *Puffball*, though there is in that novel a greater preoccupation with the health of the baby, which is given super-subject status compared to the mother. In Offred’s case, even though she is not yet pregnant, she is objectified and greater concern is shown for her physiological capacity to bear a child than her own state, because Handmaids

are considered to be “containers, [and] only the insides of [their] bodies...are important” (Atwood 96).

The Handmaids are merely containers seemingly serving a similar function to that of surrogate mothers. According to Rothman, surrogate mothers “may simply be seen to own the space in which the fetuses are housed” (151). In contrast to surrogate mothers, the Handmaids do not “own” their wombs, as it is the government of Gilead that exercises control and ownership over them. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, unlike *Puffball*, the identity of the maternal self is created far more overtly by the role of the body as a reproductive machine than through a need to conform to social stereotypes, despite the fact that Gilead is a society which constructs and controls identity through stereotypes. Offred does not choose to be a mother because of certain patriarchal notions of a woman’s role, but is forced into using her body to meet social needs. She is a reproductive machine and a surrogate mother to an extent. The surrogate mother gains a certain amount of power when she is pregnant, but when that child is removed she becomes disempowered. Offred and the other Handmaids become disempowered after giving birth, as they are not allowed any power as mothers who can nurture and care for their children. Their disempowerment after birth does not make Handmaids surrogate mothers: as mentioned previously, surrogate mothers own their bodily space and Handmaids don’t.

However, those women who are not suitable containers are assigned to other roles within society. As mentioned previously, the Marthas fall into this category as do the Aunts, the Jezebels and the Unwomen. The Unwomen are sent to a colony where they work as labourers, often in hazardous conditions, handling nuclear waste that would render any fertile woman sterile. The Jezebels are women who work in the brothel of Gilead. “The name of Jezebel, the wicked wife of King Ahab, is sometimes used as a label for any shamelessly wicked woman” (Brians) and in Gilead any woman who poses a threat to the ruling patriarchy or has chosen to render herself infertile despite being of a young enough age to reproduce is banished to the colonies or becomes a Jezebel. In fact, Moira, a friend of Offred’s from her past life, is a Jezebel and it is perhaps particularly fitting that she be labeled a Jezebel or “wicked woman,” as she has had her tubes tied and is a lesbian. She is both a feminist and a lesbian, both positions which subvert the Gileadean government’s construction of the female role.

However, Offred describes Moira's lesbianism in a way that also comments on the ideology behind Gileadean society. Offred is critical of Moira's past views and the Gilead government when she comments on Moira's notion that she "thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave [but] she [would be] sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away.... You [can't] just ignore them" (Atwood 172). It seems that the Gilead government attempts to create a men-only society, relying on women to carry out various functions, but also trying to ignore their existence and this is what Offred is opposed to in both cases. As a Jezebel, Moira finds another 'community of women-only', but has lost the idealism that she once had concerning it, as she comments that "[being a Jezebel is] not so bad, there... [are] lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (Atwood 249). She has become more cynical than ever.

The Jezebels, however, are not the only women in the service of the patriarchy. The Aunts train other women to conform to the patriarchal construction of women's roles and constantly enforce patriarchal control over women. They instruct and train Handmaids to conform to Gileadean notions, as they themselves are too old and can no longer bear children. In Hammer's opinion "[t]he sadistic aunts are frustrated older women who brutalize their younger, fertile charges out of jealousy and fear" (40). Thus, the patriarchy uses the Aunts to control other women.

The patriarchy further controls women through the names assigned to them. Offred's name is in fact a declaration of ownership because it is "a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question" (Atwood 305), the Commander she serves. To return to Atwood's comment that this society is a version of present day society one could argue that Offred's patronymic is not all that different to when a woman takes her husband's surname after marriage (in a conventional marriage), as an indication to society that she is now a married woman. In both cases the woman must take the man's name as evidence of the preference and value that society (both futuristic and present) places on the masculine name, and so naming becomes gender specific in that it provides evidence of gender oppression in society. When Offred goes with her Commander to the Jezebels he places a purple tag around her wrist to indicate that she is "an evening rental". This, like her name,

indicates ownership: both signify temporary ownership of Offred's body – the one for a night and the other for a period of a few years.

As a result of the possessive patronymic imposed on Offred she comes to value her previous name as a reminder of her past identity, a more individual and 'free' identity. She alerts her listener/reader to this:

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past....(Atwood 84)

Offred realises the value her name has and the impact it has on one's identity. She preserves it and hopes to recover it one day. Even though she does not tell her listener her real name, she shares it with Nick. "[She] tell[s] him [her] real name, and feel[s] that therefore [she is] known," despite the fact that "[h]e seems indifferent to most of what [she has] to say, [and that he is] alive only to the possibilities of [her] body..." (Atwood 270). Even though Offred has chosen to tell him her name and feels that she is truly known by him, and thus not objectified by him, she senses that he is 'alive only to the possibilities of her body'. Is Nick like the rest of the men in this society, objectifying women as foetal incubators, bodies that reproduce? In the historical notes it is argued that Nick is like other men in Gilead and saves Offred because of the chance that she might have been pregnant with his child: "What male of the Gilead period could resist the possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status, so highly prized?" (Atwood 311).

However, in Nick's support one could argue that he is merely conforming to society's expectations and constructions of masculine ideals. It is clear, after all, that not only women are oppressed in this society. The government of Gilead exercises control over men as well, particularly if the men are not in prestigious positions. Men are forced into working for the state and their lives are also restricted, but their roles are not determined solely by reproductive ability. Their roles reflect their position in society according to their prestige and status, though this could possibly also reflect their

worthiness as producers of 'seed' although many of the Commanders are infertile. For example, only Commanders and other high-ranking officials will be assigned Handmaids. "[T]he women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can" (Atwood 24). These men cannot afford to have individual women for individual functions.

However, despite the fact that these men seem to have little status in relation to other men, their work is valued in this society when they act as Guardians to women. These men not only enforce the patriarchal rule of the government, but also monitor women's movements under the guise of offering them protection, and so further control women within society. The patriarchy claims to protect women, providing a safer environment compared to the past when "women were not protected" (Atwood 24). Their control over women is under the guise of protection, while in fact it seems to be merely a form of exploitation. The Aunts form part of this, as they force the Handmaids to watch

old porno film[s], from the seventies or eighties. [With] [w]omen kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. (Atwood 118)

The Aunts show these films to illustrate to the Handmaids that they are fortunate because they are no longer objectified in this manner, and protected against such violence though the Aunts fail to indicate that in Gilead women are, instead, subject to the violence of objectification because of their reproductive abilities. According to Aunt Lydia "[t]here is more than one kind of freedom...[f]reedom to and freedom from" (Atwood 24). In the past women had 'freedom to' do as they please; in Gilead the women are 'free from' violence and abuse against women. However, these are different types of freedom, as one is linked very closely to choice while the latter is imposed on the women of Gilead, with little or no choice.

The Guardians are much like the Handmaids, in that their sexual activities and lives are restricted by the state. It could be further argued that the men who act as Guardians, Eyes and Commanders are also restricted, as men are today, by

preconceived stereotypical notions of what it means to be masculine. The Commander is stereotyped as “the older, paternal, established authority figure who connotes at once lord of the manor and a seasonal military campaigner; and on the other hand, Nick, the ambiguous, delinquent, dangerous and therefore sexually attractive younger man of inferior social position” (Hammer 41). The men in Gilead are also influenced by stereotypes related to their reproductive abilities. When Offred makes her obligatory visit to the doctor he offers to help her become pregnant. In his view “[m]ost of those old guys can’t make it anymore... [o]r they’re sterile” (Atwood 61). His comment is directed at the Commanders, but Offred is taken aback by the fact that he has so blatantly disregarded the rules of Gilead. “[H]e’s said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (Atwood 61). As in *Puffball*, male infertility is an issue not readily dealt with by men and society. When the Commander takes Offred to Jezebels she acknowledges that he may also want to feel human and that he “is more than just a seedpod” (Atwood 262). Offred is aware and critical of the potential in this society that both women and men will be objectified because of their reproductive ability or lack of it.

These notions and stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity are also bound to the narrative that we encounter and Atwood, not Offred, provides the criticism here. The story Offred offers the reader is presented as a feminine one, dealing with female experiences, and provides a feminine perspective of events and characters. She assumes the role of storyteller, a role that is a traditionally feminine one in oral traditions, and in her case the story is oral because she records it on tapes. She must negotiate situations for the reader and it is through her that we are presented with various characters, and so also the feminine perception of the gender relations of the day. It is through Offred that the reader becomes aware of the objectification of her body and the impact it has on the way in which she perceives herself. As Offred offers her audience a criticism of her society, so Atwood offers a criticism of her own society through her satire of it.

Atwood’s novel criticises patriarchal society, not only in a general way, but also specifically for the appropriation of a woman’s tale by men. What are the implications of the fact that Offred’s tale is found and transcribed by men? It is possible that

Atwood is highlighting the fact that in patriarchal societies it is men's voices that are heard, or that the literary tradition is in fact a masculine one. The notion that the literary (both historical and academic) tradition is a male one and orality a female one is not apparent from Offred's tapes: "[t]here were some thirty tapes in the collection altogether, with varying proportions of music to spoken word...[t]he voice is a woman's..." (Atwood 301-2). It is more apparent in the form of her tale, which does not conform to (male) linear literary structures, as it is interspersed with music and there is no clear order in which the tapes should be listened to. The men who find her tapes take them and transcribe them into a masculine literary form. This masculine narrative is then presented to the reader by a female author (Atwood) who seems to be trying to subvert and find her own way into a traditionally male canon of literature. In fact, just as Offred acknowledges that her tales are "reconstruction[s]" (Atwood 140) so too does Atwood, because the novel she has written is presented as a masculine reconstruction of a woman's story. This raises a number of issues about whether men can speak for women and vice versa. Just as Weldon appropriates a male discourse through her use of medical and physiological terminology in *Puffball*, so too does Atwood appropriate a male discourse when she as the author takes on the identity of the male academics who have transcribed Offred's tale.

Atwood's appropriation of the male literary tradition and Offred's inability to enter into this written tradition appear to be contradictory. One woman willingly enters it while the other cannot enter it and in so doing parallels her own resistance to enter into and conform to or be objectified by her society²². Atwood is not simply entering into a male literary tradition, she is, like Weldon, using her appropriation as a tool to aid her subversion. At the same time she does not conform to male literary constructions, but subverts them through the structure of her novel. The structure of the narrative – the way in which many of the sections have the same name and the repetitive quality – illustrates Klarer's argument that "in terms of their structure and

²² Offred mentions early in the novel that she chooses to "[t]ell, rather than write, because [she] ha[s] nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden" (Weldon 39). Offred implies that she does not have tools for or access to writing, as it is forbidden. The tools and access she lacks could be an allusion to writing and literature as a male tradition, one she cannot enter into as a woman – more specifically, as a woman in Gilead.

content, oral traditions tend toward redundancy, easily recognised by recurring phrases..." (132). It is clear then that even as Offred obviously makes use of this type of 'oral tradition', so too does Atwood through her repetitive section titles (seven sections entitled "Night") and multiple reconstructions of the same event (for example, Offred's reconstructions of her meeting with Nick). So, one could argue that Atwood is not trying to conform to a male literary tradition, but is trying to find her own feminine voice, a voice that is not male and is unique to women, in her own literary patriarchal dystopia. This reconstructed narrative, and narrative within a narrative, force the reader to interrogate traditional narratives, particularly because these seem to be determined by gender. Offred's fragmented narrative becomes a process of renegotiation of her past and present self. She is constantly aware that she is telling a story and this is clear in her self-referential comments: "[she] would like to believe [it] is a story [she] is telling...If it's a story [she is] telling, then [she has] control over the ending..." (Atwood 39). Offred may not have control over what the patriarchy does to her, but she does have control over the way in which her listener/reader perceives the end of her tale, which she leaves open-ended, allowing the reader to decide whether she enters "the darkness within; or else the light" (Atwood 295). She does not choose to let the reader know whether the black van holds her freedom or her end.

Offred makes a number of references to the process of writing, despite the fact that she does not physically write any of her narratives. She apologises that "there is so much pain in [the] story. [She's] sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force" (Atwood 267) and yet, at the same time, she is fully aware of the fragmented and non-linear narrative she presents, which further confirms the fact that it is not a male narrative. She must "compose [herself]" (Atwood 66). And "[b]y writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. Write your self. Your body must be heard" (Cixous 350). Through the process of telling her story and 'composing' her identity through it, Offred is able to reclaim her body and tell the story of her body as it was controlled and objectified in Gilead.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that the construction of personal identity is a complex process, influenced by socialisation, ideology, discourse, gender and individual choice. The focus of the thesis has been the role reproduction and fertility play in influencing the construction of identity, which is a fundamental aspect of the two novels dealt with. Reproduction and fertility are regarded as vital aspects of female and male identity in both novels, though both make it clear that female infertility is confronted more willingly than male infertility, since “[i]n a patriarchal system... the essential concept is the ‘seed,’ the part of men that grows into the children of their likeness within the bodies of women.... It is women’s motherhood that men must control to maintain patriarchy” (Rothman 141). If the men in the novels were to confront their own infertility they would have to deal with the possibility that the patriarchal system cannot be maintained indefinitely. It is the emphasis that they place on their seed and its role in reproduction that enables patriarchy to construct women as foetal incubators and reproductive machinery. By contrast, the women in these novels are more aware of the possibility of their infertility and this is, at times, something they struggle to come to terms with, because their society places such a value on the ability of their bodies to act as reproductive machines. Women are constructed as mere containers for that seed and this further enforces their objectification, the women becoming mere bodies to the patriarchy, with little other value.

Despite their objectification, women still desire to have children, and as this thesis has shown, part of this desire stems from a need to conform to stereotypes of femininity (either by choice or under threat). These stereotypes are used as a means of socialising women into desiring motherhood, and such stereotypes are highly influential in constructing female identity. “Women who are not mothers are seen as failed and unfeminine women, and achievements and pleasures gained outside motherhood are condemned within patriarchy as substitutes for ‘normal’ femininity” (Nicolson 202), this is evident in both novels. If “‘normal’ femininity” is constituted by motherhood one would consider it to be a biological imperative, yet this thesis has found that it is

also greatly influenced by the socialisation of women. Motherhood is “an identity which, in our society, is necessary for full adult status as a ‘normal’, ‘feminine’ woman. To have children...is rewarded by social approval and social acceptance, providing that you are not a lesbian or unmarried” (Richardson 1)²³. The need to be “normal”, like other women, and to be “feminine”, or a “real” woman, tends to occur “when women are strongly socialized to believe in marriage and motherhood as central to their lives and their identity, and when the alternatives for women are limited” (Richardson 1). Such strong socialisation is apparent in both novels, as Liffey chooses pregnancy over a career (not that she ever pursued one) – she hardly considers herself a career woman – and Offred, who has little choice, is forced into a fixed identity by the extreme policies of “socialization” (indoctrination) of the government. Both Liffey and Offred have limited alternatives: Liffey has not explored possible alternatives and Offred’s alternative to being a Handmaid is being labeled an ‘Unwoman’.

In response to the socialisation of women into viewing motherhood as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ aspects of femininity, Irigaray calls for women to find “value in being women, and not simply mothers. That [would mean] rethinking, transforming centuries of socio-cultural values” (*The Irigaray* 31) that impose gender stereotypes on women. She does not reject motherhood, but calls for a re-examination of the “socio-cultural” identity ascribed to women. She hopes this will allow women to find value beyond the traditional value placed on roles of motherhood and childbearing. These “socio-cultural” values, according to Irigaray, are patriarchal. She argues further that “[men’s] discourses, their values...have the force of law...[T]hey define women’s function and social role, and the sexual identity they are, or are not, to have” (*The Irigaray* 35). From this it is assumed that Irigaray means that male, or patriarchal if you will, discourses and values (ideology) construct and regulate female identity. So, one could also argue that the notion of pregnancy or motherhood, as an essential part of that identity, is also part of the patriarchal construction. Patriarchal discourses that make use of binary oppositions aid constructions of difference and more

²³ Richardson speaks of a predominantly Western, middle-class society, similar to those depicted in both the texts.

specifically, the construction of femininity linked closely with nature and biology which is used to limit women's roles to those associated with their 'nature', reproduction and childcare. The patriarchal ideology supports and perpetuates these gender roles as it continues to socialise both men and women to conform to them.

However, this thesis, though it does not deny that "[men's] discourses [and] values...have the force of law" (*The Irigaray* 35), makes allowance for the fact that women have a certain amount of choice in the matter. "Through 'free will' – the process of choice in interpretation, selection – we can, to some extent, limit or adapt the external determinations" (Sarup 48). In both novels, Liffey and Offred have the choice not to have their identity determined purely by external factors. Understandably, Offred is not able to escape the fact that she serves a specific function in her society, but she can still choose not to construct her identity solely around that function – hard as it may be for her. Liffey, on the other hand, has a greater amount of freedom to decide to what extent she will allow external factors to influence the construction of her identity. The ability to choose how one constructs one's identity becomes very important, and Irigaray feels that if women cannot escape their reproductive function they should choose it: women should "assume the feminine role deliberately... [and] convert a form of subordination into an affirmation" (*The Irigaray* 124) of their female specificity. They should make the decision to have children actively and not as a means of conforming. Their decision should be an informed one and should not allow them to be objectified by the patriarchy. Choice, however, is an area that is influenced by discourse and socialisation. The dominant discourse and ideology have an influence over how an individual perceives themselves and their society, so their choices will be based on their perceptions, which are not entirely their own or free of stereotypes.

Yet, when looking at these novels one wonders whether the texts will simply contribute to the objectification of the pregnant body, or whether they will indeed create an awareness of other possible ways in which we can examine the roles of mothers and women. This thesis maintains that through the work of these women authors on motherhood, we are given access to female experiences that would

otherwise be left unappreciated and unspoken. Through Weldon and Atwood, and many other female authors, we can “[refocus] our vision on maternal experience reveal[ing] the sophistication of the process of mothering as a complex experience grounded in social, psychological and political realities...[As a result] contemporary culture is beginning to articulate the mother as a subject in her own right” (Bassin et. al. 9). Greater acknowledgement is now being given to the experience of motherhood and pregnancy, or birth, through an inclusion of the maternal voice in contrast to the past, when this voice was excluded or spoken on behalf of – either by other women or by men. Despite the fact that Atwood’s novel does not deal directly with the experience of pregnancy, it allows the reader to confront the way women feel when reduced to their reproductive function. Through Offred’s experience of being reduced to a reproductive machine, the reader is forced to examine a society that reduces female identity in this way and does not allow for individual choice with regard to becoming a mother.

The point is that there is a danger in over-emphasising the impact that socialisation and ideology (culture) have on identity as this “will obscure powerful...aspects of women’s experience” (Bordo 36) – particularly those experiences unique to women. At the same time, placing too great an emphasis on the role of biology and sexual difference is to simplify and essentialise a complex process. Despite this, one cannot escape the “nature” of one’s body, and this applies to both the men and the women in the novels. The men in the novels claim that infidelity is in their “nature”, while they reiterate that women’s “nature” is to reproduce. This notion perpetuates the opinion that the ‘seed’ is important and women are foetal containers. It is a view that manipulates the argument that your nature or biology is your destiny, a view that confines women to reproductive function and one that will need to be altered if women are to move beyond an association with the body. Furthermore, generalisations about women’s experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood are inaccurate, as

[w]omen’s reproductive experiences, of course, differ widely, but surely not as widely as they do from those of men, *none* of whom...has had even the possibility of carrying a child under any circumstances. (Bordo 230)

The ability to carry a child is something this thesis recognises as having a certain amount of power. The power that women's reproductive ability holds is seen in the status pregnant women achieve in both novels, and also in the way the patriarchy controls or tries to control pregnancy as it threatens patriarchal power.

The status associated with pregnancy in both novels allows the pregnant woman to gain power over those women who are not pregnant. Why is pregnancy rewarded with such status? Does pregnancy offer status to the father as well? In *The Handmaid's Tale* the reason for status is quite obvious, as it is a tale that takes place at a time when the birth rate is very low and the number of healthy babies born has diminished. When a woman gives birth to a healthy baby in Gilead, she is rewarded for performing a service to the government. However, in *Puffball*, the reason a pregnant woman is envied is less overt. It has little to do with low birth rates, but a great deal more to do with the ability to conform to the stereotype of femininity created by patriarchal society. Liffey becomes pregnant, initially to please her husband and to give herself a chance to live in the country, and Mabs is very envious, as she is unable to conceive and fulfil her perceived function as a reproductive entity. As demonstrated, the ability of some women to become pregnant and the inability of others to do so, is the cause of much of the conflict between women in the novels. This refutes any notion of female solidarity based on a shared experience of pregnancy or a common goal to be pregnant.

By contrast, within the patriarchal societies depicted in both novels,

[f]athering a child can be seen as proving a man's virility, a concept that is central to definitions of masculinity, but a man maintains his status even if he is childless. For women... what is supposedly indicated in their case is the existence of a maternal instinct and a nurturing, caring personality – essential aspects of society's construction of what is both female and feminine. (Richardson, *Women* 75)

The thesis finds that in both novels the differences and identities are based on “society’s construction of what it is to be female and feminine”. The women in the novels construct their identity around these stereotypes and their desire to have children is as a result of their need to conform to them.

However, those women who are unable to conform in this way find that they experience conflict between their desire to conform and their inability to do so. An option for a woman who is infertile and unable to conform to stereotypes of femininity, as set out by patriarchy, is to consult reproductive technologies, though this is not an option available to the women in the novels. New reproductive technologies, such as artificial insemination and fertility drugs, make alternatives available for infertile women and women who have difficulty conceiving. Just as the men in the novels seem unable to confront the possibility of their own infertility, so too do the reproductive technologies reflect a similar phenomenon in men of today: most reproductive techniques aimed at enhancing fertility and aiding conception are intended for women rather than men. This suggests, as in the novels, that men are not responsible for their infertility. “In most cases of infertility it is assumed that it is the woman who has the problem” (Richardson, *Women* 83) and this is not always a correct assumption. Another presumption is that, through reproductive technology, a woman has greater control over her body because reproductive technology

[has] offered women a greater technical possibility to decide if, when and under what conditions to have children;...[but] the domination of so much reproductive technology by the medical profession and by the state has enabled others to have an even greater capacity to exert control over women’s lives. (Stanworth 483)²⁴

Despite the threat of reproductive technology offering patriarchy greater control over women’s lives and the potential for further oppression and reduction, the possibility

²⁴ Stanworth’s discussion of reproductive technology fails to take into account the access different women have to these technologies. Her comments are used in this thesis because they are issues of concern to white, middle-class women in Western societies and the women in the texts are both white women from middle-class backgrounds who live in Western societies.

exists that advances in technology will offer women the chance to construct their identities around something other than their reproductive capacities.

The associative link between women, fertility, and motherhood is being eroded, if not broken, in the laboratory. The traditional shame of barrenness, the inevitable sterility of menopause, the onerous ticking of the biological clock, the very legitimization of womanhood by reproductive function, are all called into question by alternative modes of reproduction. (Schwartz 242)

Richardson discusses the “artificial womb” (103) and the notion that “[o]nly by freeing women from the reproductive processes of pregnancy and childbirth... would women ever achieve social and economic equality with men. The key to women’s liberation [is] artificial reproduction” (118). This is not to say that Richardson, or this thesis, believes that this will prevent objectification of the female body, but rather, it represents one view of how women can achieve liberation from their bodies. Liberation from their bodies seems impossible as women can never be separated from their bodies, and both Liffey and Offred are unable to escape the fact that women’s bodies are responsible for their position of oppression. Perhaps women would feel less oppressed by their bodies if they followed “a strand of radical feminism, sometimes referred to as cultural feminism, which seeks to celebrate what are regarded as undervalued female attributes and female biology” (Richardson, *Women* 119). This does not offer a solution as it is not the body that creates the oppression, but the society. Celebrating female attributes may be a strategy for coping with oppression or subverting it, but society needs to address the ways identity is/has been constructed if it is to do away with oppressive and controlling social structures.

Despite efforts to celebrate unique “female attributes and female biology”, it remains to be seen whether technology will liberate women from their bodies or be used to further control, dominate and marginalise them. According to Stanworth:

[i]n the feminist critique of reproductive technologies, it is not technology as an ‘artificial invasion of the human body’ that is at issue – but whether we can create the political and cultural conditions in which such technologies can be employed by women to shape their experience of reproduction according to their own definitions. (487)

This thesis affirms that it is only through the appropriation of reproductive technology to meet their own needs that women will be able to make it work for them. Without this appropriation, it will continue to be a tool used to further oppress and control women's bodies and experiences.

As this thesis has shown, some of the female characters do attempt to resist patriarchal norms, but are not always successful. How, then, can women achieve successful liberation? Is the answer for women to shape their own experience of reproduction according to their own definitions and identities? If so, how can they do this without relying on patriarchal constructions of what it is to be feminine? The authors are more successful than the characters at subverting patriarchal constructions. They do not conform to patriarchal literary constructions and each subverts it in their own way. Weldon subverts it through her appropriation of medical discourse, and Atwood does so through her non-linear subversion of the typically linear male literary tradition.

According to Sarup, "it is in the construction of a narrative, the making and telling of a story, that we produce the self" (46). Through telling her story Offred is able to produce her 'self', her own identity and "[b]y writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. Write your self. Your body must be heard." (Cixous 350). Atwood seems to suggest a solution to the confiscation of the female body through this process of writing. By constructing your own narrative you write yourself and find an identity linked to the body. Cixous, it seems, supports the notion that a return to the female body will allow women to construct their own identity. The female body is not an oppressive force, but has become a tool of oppression through patriarchal and social constructions of gender roles based on sexual difference.

Finally, is the solution to female oppression resulting from their reproductive function to be found in a return to the body or should social constructions be drastically altered? Does one blame the patriarchy or do we acknowledge that "[m]en are not the enemy, but they often may have a higher stake in maintaining institutions within which they have historically occupied positions of dominance over women" (Bordo

29)? Reconstructing notions surrounding pregnancy and motherhood is not a simple task, as “ideologies of mothering exist not in isolation, but as part of complex ideologies that buttress male dominance...” (Glenn 12). The construction of female identity around reproductive ability is the result of both cultural (social) and biological constraints experienced by women. Identity, then, is both “related to what one is not” (Sarup 47) and what one is. Women’s identities are constructed by what they are (women) and what they are not (men), by their biology and by the cultural constructions that accompany the divide between what they are and are not. This again highlights why women do not share a universal identity or experience, as they do not have the same influences that make them what they are and do not deal with the same constructs that prescribe what they are not.

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