

# Fatness, Gender, and Race: Obesity Narrative in Margaret Atwood's *The Man from Mars*

**Su Qin & Liu Jiuming**

School of Humanities, Huazhong University of Science and Technology  
Luoyu Rd.1037, Hongshan District, Wuhan, Hubei, 430074, China  
Email: 63944836@qq.com; jiuming2001@qq.com

**Abstract** This paper examines the intersection of impurity metaphor and identity politics in Margaret Atwood's short story *The Man from Mars* through the lens of obesity narrative. By analyzing the protagonist Christine's embodiment of obesity and her encounter with a Vietnamese students studying in Canada, the paper explores how Atwood critiques societal stigmatization of female bodies and social exclusion of the alien by interrogating the complexities of "impurity" discourse. The narrative reveals the public rhetoric on fat women and the "Third World" men, who are labeled as "dirty other", threatening clear-cut boundaries and categories with the parallels of fat and alien as pollutant so that they are treated as the "unwanted other", worthy of discrimination and exclusion. This phenomenon not only points to the heterogeneity of groups within spaces and places, but also reveals the hegemonic normative assessment that confines women's autonomy and reinforces the alien's otherness. The findings suggest that Atwood's obesity narrative challenges hegemonic aesthetics and purity norms while exploring the intersection of gender, ethnicity and health discourses. The study contributes to expand discussions on identity politics in Atwood's work and offers an interdisciplinary perspective on logics that determine individuals' positionings and their resistance with the monolithic "same system" and the symbolic hegemony.

**Keywords** Margaret Atwood; obesity narrative; fat stigma; polluting body; identity politics

**Authors** **Su Qin** is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature in Huazhong University of Science and Technology (Wuhan 430074, China). Her main research interests include modern English novels and illness narrative studies. **Liu Jiuming** is Professor and Doctoral Supervisor in School of Humanities, Huazhong University of Science and Technology. His main research interests include English and American literature, comparative literature and illness narrative studies.

## Introduction

In 2000, the World Health Organization released a report titled *Obesity: Preventing*

and *Managing Global Epidemics*, which declared that “Today ... as standards of living continue to rise, weight gain and obesity are posing a growing threat to health in countries all over the world. Obesity is a chronic disease, prevalent in both developed and developing countries, and affecting children as well as adults. Indeed, it is now so common that it is replacing the more traditional public health concerns, including under-nutrition and infectious disease, as one of the most significant contributors to ill health” (WHO Report 13-14). In this widely understood as a medical authority, it defines “obesity” as a true “disease” with a tone that includes risks, warnings, and impending disasters. The World Health Organization’s report does not make a personal judgment on “obesity”, nor does it explicitly mention any specific moral defects of the “obese” body. However, the authoritative medical narrative used by the World Health Organization provides the foundation for the moral panic currently experienced in Western societies. With the development of science and medicine to make moral evaluations of the body, many concepts related to beauty, health, and purity are also influencing different groups in different ways. Obesity and the shame it brings are also distributed in many aspects of society, placing marginalized groups in a more disadvantaged position in terms of region, race, and class. The negative cognition of “impure” bodies under the stigma of fat dominates the lives of groups such as women, immigrants or people of color as the victims. This “victim” image is a key element in Atwood’s creations. In the short story *The Man from Mars*, she highlights Christine’s embodiment of obesity and her encounter with a Vietnamese student, revealing the potential “terrorism” caused by the “purifying” power.

### **Offense: The Fat Female Body as Aesthetic and Spatial Disruption**

Given the pervasiveness of people’s fear of fat and the common panic caused by “obesity epidemic,” “obesity” are not primarily medical issues at all. Many people have come to see it as primarily a cultural and political issue, as Samantha Murray states, “In Western society, ‘fatness’ is not understood as a singular category, but rather is continually constituted and (re)constituted along a continuum of relativity that is governed by a series of gendered, classed, and raced imperatives for normative bodily being”(3). Socially, the obese body is perceived as aesthetically disordered and incongruous—its mass and dimensions disrupt environments designed for normative bodies. In *The Man from Mars*, Christine is acutely aware that upon being seen, she is expelled beyond the boundaries of acceptable corporeality. Christine’s overweight physique has always subjected her to an “abnormal” being: To her parents, she was a sturdy, chubby girl, diligent but lacking special talents. Christine’s two sisters, considering her plain-looking, showered her with affection never given to each other, because she posed no competitive threat. Male friends just saw her as an ideal tennis partner for the sporty ones. “She was an exception, she fitted none of the categories they commonly used when talking about

girls” (Atwood 22). Because of her fatness, Christine is an outsider of “women”. According to Murray interpretation, the “fat” woman “(is presumed to be) lazy, she is out of control, she is a moral failure, she is unhealthy, she is an affront to normative feminine bodily aesthetics, she is a food addict, she cannot manage her desires, her level of intelligence is below average”(13-14).

As early as 1924, Dr. James S. McLester in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) summarized his generation's view of obesity, “Overweight is a mar to beauty [...] An excess of fat destroys grace and delicacy. A fat face has a monstrous uniformity. No theatrical producer would hire a plump actress to mirror the real depths of the human soul” (Kersh and Morone 166). This article on “obesity” was published in the top medical journal in the United States, but it was not related to treating diseases or finding the causes of so-called “obesity” diseases. The most intriguing aspect of McLester's article is his implicit assumption that “fatness” is essentially gendered. When an obese body belongs to a female, such a body is the most offensive and dangerous. McLester takes the example that “fat” actresses cannot convey the true depth of the human soul to the readers, believing that “the ‘fat’ woman as less-than-woman, less-than-human; unable to truly access her ‘inner self’, or perhaps she does not even have a core, but is merely an assemblage of the worst indiscretions and shortcomings of woman”(Murray 2). There is no mention in McLester's comment on “fatness” in men, or indeed of the disease of obesity in men. Similarly, Lee F. Monaghan also observes that fat today is “routinely discredited as female or feminizing filth” (68). The corporeality of fatty substances and their inherent gender differences link obesity to both physical and cognitive traits, playing a significant role in shaping negative perceptions and stereotypes about the personalities of obese individuals.

Obviously, obese women's bodies are not diseased, but they are pathological. McLester's medical view of “obese” women is not that it is a body that suffers from “pain”, but rather that it is a source of pain for others. This means that the threat to the body of “obese” women lies in their aesthetic offense to society, which indicates that the women are “harming beauty” and their “fat” flesh, destroys elegance and delicacy. In *The Man from Mars*, when Christine walks across the campus square after tennis, her imposing figure draws gazes from the crowd, their eyes followed her bodily movements, then indifferently shifted away. And when she is closely chased by the Vietnamese international student, she “was aware of the ridiculous spectacle they must make, galloping across campus, something out of a cartoon short, a lumbering elephant stampeded by a smiling, emaciated mouse, both of them locked in the classic pattern of comic pursuit and flight” (Atwood 17). Her body is interpreted as deviant, aberrant or perverse. The moment Christine's body enters others' visual field; it is instantly transformed and marked as problematic. Graham has coined the term “lipoliterates”, “In fat-obsessed cultures we are all ‘lipoliterates’ who ‘read’ fat for what we believe it tells us about a person. This includes not only

their moral character but also their health” (Graham 178-179). When it comes to reading bodies, many people have a readily deployed literacy to “read” bodies and to construct or (re)produce knowledge about certain bodies. Within the cultural narratives, the “appropriate” and “harmonious” female identity is confined to narrowly defined parameters. However, the criteria for what constitutes a normative body are never merely material. Like gender, fatness (obesity) can be both a state of existence and an assertion of identity—the fat female body becomes a lived identity arbitrarily narrated across cultural texts.

The essence of obesity stigma is fat stigma. The dominant power/knowledge system generally holds a negative attitude towards fat: it is seen as excess and wasteful. Kent remarks that fat is often associated with specific manifestations of unpleasant, bad, or lifeless traits, “makes fat women’s bodies synonymous with the offensive, horrible, or deadly aspects of embodiment” (130) and is therefore despised and considered something that must be discarded. In *The Man from Mars*, people’s attitude towards Christine implies the preservation of fixed gender identities and normative female sexuality. Just like what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called a “fat abhorring world of images,” a world in which fat women are charged with “concentrating and representing ‘a general sense of the body’s offensiveness” (Sedgwick 1993). Besides, Christopher E. Forth states, “people’s prejudices against fat are often accompanied by a powerful emotion that is anything but detached or disinterested” (Forth 12). In *Fat: Culture and Materiality*, Forth and social humanist Alison Lich analyze the three characteristics of fat, namely, moist, pasty and soft. According to their analysis, after undergoing several centuries of semiotic construction and stabilization in western culture, fat or obesity is often linked with clumsiness and stupidity, as if their mental activities have become dull due to their physical insensitivity. The corporeality of fatty substances and the accompanying gender differences link obesity to physical and cognitive characteristics, exerting a significant influence on the formation of negative views and stereotypes towards obese individuals. These influences continue to be widely spread in society in subtle ways even today.

Fat people themselves are not the threat; rather, they are the metaphoric representation of problem of excess and corruption. This metaphor of fat continued to be used throughout the 20th century and now. When fat stigma permeates daily life, it infiltrates the individual’s psyche, shaping her beliefs, altering her interpersonal dynamics, and redefining her mode of existence. Internalized fat oppression may lead women to readily negate their self-worth, conflating identity with bodily appearance. Low self-esteem, body shame, and chronic stress are among the psychological and physical harms inflicted by such oppression. Especially for white women in the West, becoming fat means a person’s decline and degradation in the scale of civilization. In the western world, “civilization project” meant not just racialization and gender and sexual hierarchies, but also the construction of

certain types of body types as superior and others as inferior. In *The Man from Mars*, Christine's "chunky reddish face, exposed with no softening fringe, looked like a Russian peasant's (Atwood 14). When Christine engaged in a brief, heated altercation with the Indian maid at the home, her mother perceived this as evidence of her having descended to the level of a "servant" viewing both figures with equal dissatisfaction, albeit as unavoidable compromises. This perception stemmed from the white middle-class ideology embodied by the mother, wherein corpulent physicality functioned as a semiotic marker of civilizational decline—a signifier inextricably linked to racialized hierarchies of inferior bodies or associations with primal, uncivilized corporeality.

Thus, obese women face substantial challenges in constructing their social identities. If her fatness precedes her personality in the eyes of others, the obesity—along with all its associated prejudices and revulsion—becomes her public persona. That means people are highly inclined and eager to observe others' bodies and rapidly draw conclusions. When the observed subject is a fat woman, particularly a white one, observers swiftly extrapolate her character from her appearance, deeming her lazy, lacking self-control, or morally deficient. In contemporary western culture, the current rejection of "obesity" is still based on the moral anxiety of retaining a fixed gender identity and ideal avatar. This stigma distinguishes one woman from another or one type of woman from another in a hegemonic way. In the 20th century, the issue of obesity escalated to a moral and ethical level, with body shape becoming a significant criterion for social assessment. An advertisement even declared, "Don't let weight crush your body and social relationships," implying that without a good figure, one would lack credibility and connection.

Contemporary dominant discourses surrounding the aversion to obese bodies reveal that societal antipathy toward fatness stems primarily from its association with stigmatized groups—low-income populations, women, and people of color. In *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, Amy Erdman Farrell maintains "the cultural hatred of fat emerged simultaneously with the construction of hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and class. Fat denigration was linked to overall processes of mapping political and social hierarchies onto bodies" (19). He argues that the current stigmatization of fat has exploded in a world in which the stereotyping of traditional minority groups has become generally unacceptable. This aligns with Mary Douglas's analysis of concepts such as separation, purification and the punishment of deviance, whose primary function is to impose systemic order upon experiences of disorder. "Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited [...] It symbolizes both danger and power" (Douglas 95). Within this framework, fat becomes semiotically constructed as pollutant, the obese body a "defiled entity" violating social order.

Fat, as a substance imbued with unsettling cultural connotations—impurity,

disease, moral degeneracy—is perceived as possessing contaminating power. In this sense, the concept of contamination is linked to social life. Some contamination is used as a metaphor to express an overall view of social order. And the fat issue “sounds exactly like the sort of exaggeration that can produce a cultural epidemic of fear, bearing no relation to any rational assessment of risk” (Campos xv). Christine’s experiences of being ignored and belittled due to obesity indicate the stigma on fat is an outrage to values of equality, of tolerance, of fairness, and indeed of fundamental decency toward those who are “different.”

### **Anxiety: The Alien’s Body as Contamination and Transgression**

The cultural aversion to fat stems from its materiality evoking dual negative perceptions, fat body means filthy, shame or abjection. In Kristeva’s words, abjection “is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Objectively, fat operates as a transferable substance traversing bodily interiors and exteriors. Yet its internal accumulation manifests as a transgression of somatic boundaries, producing the swollen morphology of obesity. The body, as a paradigmatic bounded system, becomes destabilized, which further reinforces perceptions of obese bodies as ungovernable—both individually and socially, which corresponds with Kristeva’s viewpoint: abjection is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things. Such perceived inability or loss of control over bodily boundaries constitutes a social threat. Because all social systems are vulnerable and fragile at their margins, margins are deemed perilous. This is oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility-both threatening and fusion. Similarly, Judith Butler interrogates: If gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings (Butler xi). Given the understanding of construction as constitutive constraint, it is possible to raise the critical question of how such constraints not only produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of abject bodies. This latter domain evokes the further thinking, such as what is excluded in constituting bodily boundaries? How does this exclusion haunt those boundaries as their constitutive outside? Therefore, the alien body bodies could be also interpreted within the productive constraints of certain highly regulatory schemas.

In *The Man from Mars*, Christine initially intends to evade and reject the Vietnamese student, but gradually transforms into understanding and sympathy to the foreigner. Christine sees the shadow of her own discrimination in this Eastern man. The Vietnamese student’s subjectivity is overlooked due to his marginalized ethnic identity, while Christine is rendered “invisible” because of her obese body. Like the obese individual is seen as both internally polluted and capable of

transmitting this defilement to others, the Vietnamese student is also labeled as “the polluting other.” His experiences of isolation and exclusion in Canada exemplify how the local residents to “purify” the neighborhood to keep clean, modern and bourgeois inner-city spaces and hegemonic aesthetics. “Purity” cultural communities construct boundaries and taxonomies to control disorder and expel the “impure.” Categories are shared; they cannot emerge independently. Elements that defy shared classificatory schemas—aberrant individuals or objects—are invariably labeled “dangerous,” thereby erecting walls between “us/inside” and “them/outside.” In this sense, Christine and the student are the “spectacle” in the hegemonic normative assessment, considering the dominant values and orders.

In Canada, “Asians” or those from “oriental countries” are locally classified, are still seen as “others” with poverty, disorder, and backwardness, who disrupt the local pure, stable and safe pattern, like “rendering ‘Asia’ (and on occasion ‘Africa’) transparent (unless the subject is ostensibly the ‘Third World’); reestablishing the legal subject of socialized capital—these are problems as common to much poststructuralist as to ‘regular’ theory” (Spivak 24). Accordingly, the “Vietnamese body” could serve as a master trope for delineating insider/outsider, self/other boundaries. Eveline Diirr and Gordon Winder use “dirty other” to indicate the dominant trope that draws boundaries between outsider and insider. “These boundaries are spatial, social and racial at once and involve an inherent social ranking of who is more ‘foreign’ and therefore more polluting than others” (Diirr and Winder 64). In other words, immigrants, refugees and strangers are polluting because they are not seen as the “natural” and “original” inhabitants. This reflects the argument of Duschinsky and Brown (2014), who points out that it is an imputed difference from the “natural” or “essence” attached to a place that underlies classifications of impure or polluting. Pollution, then, is tied into the perception of otherness and difference; it is a means by which individuals negotiate and relate to difference of an assumed “natural” (Duschinsky, *The Politics of Purity* 65).

In the perspective, the negative discourse regarding outsiders reflects resentment at the presence of outsiders. As Douglas (2001) would have it, identities are related to place in this discourse. The student’s following with Christine is construed as the result of unwelcome alien behavior so that it is in fact not the “following” person but “he” is not seen as belonging “naturally” to Canada. Negative discourses about immigrants and pollution both reflect and legitimize xenophobic exclusion. When first confronted with the diminutive, disheveled Vietnamese international student in *The Man from Mars*, “Christine looked at him more closely... he was not young, just short. ...He was also what was referred to in their family as ‘a person from another culture’: Oriental without a doubt” (14). Her initial reaction is one of visceral disgust—she found him somewhat repulsive. Motivated by a perfunctory sense of “gave him her official welcoming smile”, she directs him to his destination, only to be met with the man’s effusive gratitude: he

eagerly writes down his name for her. Yet Christine resists further engagement, her internalized revulsion persisting as she “turning away from his puzzled face and setting off at what she hoped was a discouraging jog-trot. It was like walking away from a growling dog” (15). Finally, her guardedness softens when he meekly expresses a desire for friendship. After all, he isn’t harassing her—“he was a stranger, he just wanted to meet some of the local people; in his place she would have wanted the same thing” (16). After obtaining intimate photos with Christine, the Vietnamese student happily said that he could send the photos home so that his family wouldn’t have to worry about his life in Canada, as he could acquaint himself with the local people because he finally made his first “friend” there.

In *The Man from Mars*, when the Vietnamese student phoned Christine in French, her mother mistakenly thought it was a French man pursuing her chubby daughter, and she was extremely excited. She warmly invites him over, urging Christine to be friendly or “more cooperative.” “He” is a foreign monarch in her mother’s mind, while a Vietnamese person is dangerous guy. Here, the colonial logic of racial valuation is laid bare: the hypothetical French student is romanticized as royalty, while the Vietnamese counterpart is degraded to a “threat.” Within Western societies, the Enlightenment narrative posits rationality as humanity’s liberator from misfortune, with scientific knowledge enshrined as the engine of progress. In the sense, the history of Europe as Subject is narrativized by the law, politics, economy, and the West’s ideology. Consequently, regions outside Europe’s sphere of instrumental rationality development are systematically interpreted as realms of inherent deficiency. When viewed through the West rational subject’s gaze, the cultural achievements of societies deemed “underdeveloped” in this paradigm inevitably receive pejorative valuations. Financial capitalism’s globalization has further institutionalized the center/periphery dichotomy, reified through discursive oppositions between a dynamic, progressive West and a static, inert East. Such binary imaginaries bifurcate the world into enlightened civilization versus benighted backwardness, or stabilization versus drift. Ultimately, any divergence from western modernity’s developmental trajectory becomes marked as otherness.

Obviously, the “outsider” is deemed problematic or even dangerous, unable to achieve moral subjectivity. In this view, the Vietnamese student is conceived of as not conforming to the models of rational or logic behavior. When faced with the chase of the Vietnamese student towards Christine, Christine’s family reported the matter to the police. During the police’s arrest of the student, Christine insists that “he was not dangerous, he had never hurt her.” However, her mother claims that the thing about people from another culture is that you could never tell “whether they were insane or not because their ways were so different”. The policeman definitely agrees with her mother, warning Christine “That kind don’t hurt you...They just kill you. You’re lucky you aren’t dead” (Atwood 34). These individuals, without having engaged in in-depth exchanges with the man, labeled him as a danger. In addition, Elvira, the maid

from the West Indies working for Christine's family is regarded as less educated urban dwellers in general or community members in particular. The "girls" like her seem to be destined because most people like Christine's mother viewed "they'd either have to go into a Home or stay in their own countries" (Atwood 17).

These reactions represent typical responses to the rejection and aversion towards "uncivilized foreign bodies". Those who do not belong to the "native" or "original" residents—this identity legitimizes the "fact" that "outsiders bring contamination"—demonstrates that identity is tied to place, and anything beyond the boundaries is perceived as impure, dangerous, and taboo. Negative emotions cluster around it. Thus, the obese body and the stranger's body establish a reciprocal correspondence: a deviation from an ideal. The social manifestation of the obese body represents an aesthetically disordered and discordant physical form, while the weight and dimensions of an overweight individual disrupt environments designed for normative bodily standards. In *The Man from Mars*, Christine's obese body becomes relegated beyond the homogeneous "pure" space due to its marginality and deviation from "normative" or "normal" physical parameters. Similarly, the Vietnamese international student provokes local anxieties and disgust through the "alien body" perceived as transgressions against the same notions.

Zygmunt Bauman noted in his book *Strangers at Our Door* that since the dawn of modernity, migrants or refugees fleeing primitive hunger, barbaric wars, and destitute living conditions have been knocking at the doors of other nations. Those behind these doors have consistently perceived these refugees as strangers. As Bauman notes: "Strangers tend to cause anxiety precisely because of being 'strange'—and so, fearsomely unpredictable, unlike the people with whom we interact daily and from whom we believe we know what to expect; for all we know, the massive influx of strangers might have destroyed the things we cherished – and intend to maim or wipe out our consolingly familiar way of life" (8). While "the presence of strangers among us" is a universal phenomenon, a closer examination of specific, nuanced, and "present-day" existential realities under postmodern and postcolonial frameworks reveals that displaced people have become the most emblematic group among these "strangers at our door." Living in foreign lands under impoverished conditions, stripped of dignity and respect, they endure condemnation and discrimination from their host societies, leaving them feeling perpetually affronted and oppressed. In his analysis of "strangeness as anxiety," which integrates the concept of liquid modernity in postmodern society and postcolonial power structures, Bauman argues that refugees and migrants, as "strangers at our door" challenge the stability of nation-state boundaries and collective identity.

In fact, a striking problem with globalization is that the number of homeless people such as immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers has been rising. The influx of these outsiders will inevitably lead to cultural blending, as the fusion

of cultural inspirations serves as both a wellspring of cultural enrichment and an engine of creativity—a truth equally valid for European civilization and all others. Nevertheless, a subtle distinction must be drawn between cultural enrichment and the erosion of cultural identity. To prevent coexistence between natives and newcomers from harming cultural heritage, such coexistence must be grounded in respect for the fundamental principles of the host nation’s “social contract.” Crucially, both parties must strictly adhere to this principle. The Vietnamese student in *The Man from Mars* expresses his eagerness to develop a good rapport with the local residents. Unfortunately, they did not give him an amicable feedback. Yet genuine respect cannot be achieved if the recognition of these outsiders’ social and civil rights remains so grudging and hesitant, and if progress continues at such a sluggish pace.

### **In the Flow: The Paradox of Prison and Liberation**

Christine and the Vietnamese shared experiences reflect how the “pure” and “natural” mainstreams persistently construct boundaries and classifications through standardized value systems to impose control over disorder or evade contamination. The category of “purity” operates as a shared, holistic construct that cannot emerge independently. Components irreducible to these collective classificatory schemas—heterogeneous individuals or elements—are systematically labeled as “dangerous”, thereby establishing the dichotomy of “inside”/“us” versus “outside”/“them.” This mechanism mirrors the realities of Christine and the man, whose narratives exemplify victimization through being categorized as “exceptional” or “abnormal”. Such labeling inherently embodies acts of epistemic violence and hegemonic enforcement, reinforcing exclusionary socio-cultural hierarchies through institutionalized otherness.

It is precisely because the two characters encounter similar experiences of discrimination and exclusion, which leads the westerner and the oriental to seek mutual comfort. Christine found herself perplexed in the wake of being persistently pursued by the Vietnamese international student. Standing before her mirror, she contemplates what makes her so charming that elicited his attention. The young man’s relentless pursuit paradoxically allowed her to experience what she perceived as a “normal girl’s” life. Her perceived “weight loss” appeared to rupture a false exterior, unveiling a seemingly coherent body imbued with individuality and agency—a form now deemed socially legible, unthreatening, and non-transgressive due to its liberation from the “burden” of fat. Yet this corporeal transformation constrained the body’s capacity for outward expansion, redirecting its energies inward toward a ceaseless struggle against an “internal enemy.” So long as fat remains discursively constructed as an urgent risk, its designation as a “danger” can never be fully eradicated. Like “embodied knowledge” or “psychological archives,” it becomes inscribed into bodily memory. The experiences, sensations,

visual perceptions, and actions of individuals invariably imprint themselves upon bodily imagery, while shame and disgust deposit residual traces upon the corporeal form. Fat, demarcated as shameful or repugnant bodily zones, operates as an intrinsic specter that shapes the boundaries of all somatic representations. In the novel's denouement, Christine's aura of mystery soon fades because no one like the Vietnamese student follows her, "she herself no longer believed in it. Life became again what she had always expected" (Atwood 26).

Upon graduating, Christine goes into the Department of Health and Welfare; she does a good job, and is seldom discriminated against for being a woman because nobody thinks of her as feminine. Obesity in men can symbolize wealth and power, but for Christine, it serves as the best evidence of her "degendering" as she possesses a "less feminine" body. Thus, Christine embodies various "differences" and her difference is even "pathologized": represented as a pathological form of "otherness." Christine plays less and less tennis; what had been muscle with a light coating of fat turned gradually into fat with a thin substratum of muscle. She begins to get headaches. Ironically, Christine's position—a governmental apparatus imbued with medical authority—heightened her awareness of her precarious existence as an "abnormal subject". The obese body, precisely because it constitutes an object of bio-political technologies and epistemic regimes, becomes fragmented, medicalized, and pathologized under the ideology of weight. This process transmutes the flesh into a locus of fearful imaginaries, rendering it incapable of resisting the hegemony of the "fat-free" ideal. Her "headaches" symptomatize the ontological confusion and powerlessness of a victim subjected to fat-phobic oppression. The spectral presence of fat—so potently stripping individuals of their right to "normative existence"—haunts all corporeality, amplifying somatic anxieties, demonizing fat subjects, and mobilizing affective economies of revulsion.

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese international student's pursuit can be understood as an attempt to forge "connection" with others or to seek mutual, reciprocal "recognition"—or, more precisely, to navigate toward "equilibrium of recognition" amid its systemic "imbalance." As Liu Yu observes in her essay *One and All "Us,"* struggles for "recognition" in the 21st century have centered on identity politics, where the adversary is "no longer monarchy or capital, but the 'other' or the 'imagined other'" (Liu Yu iv). Actually, the ongoing deepening of identity-driven political struggles catalyzed the proliferation of civil rights movements—feminism, anti-racism, and migrant/refugee rights activism—demonstrating that identity politics remains compatible with main values like equality and fraternity. Though identity derives its potency through the marking of difference, its analytical focus on multiplicity and diversity (rather than singularity or homogeneity) reveals it as a dynamic framework for social organization.

In the eyes of the Vietnamese student, Christine is the first person to respond to his request for help after coming to Canada. Later, he visits her home and takes

photos with her, including using an urgent action to “grab” this friend. He feels he is no longer treated as a “stranger” but a subject. This identity does not demand assimilation into mainstream societal treatment of its members but rather insists on respect for their existence as a differentiated one. The quest for recognition here shifts from universalist individual liberties toward collective liberties grounded in ethno-cultural particularities. Johann Gottfried Herder, foundational thinker of modern European ethno-nationalism, posited that every human community manifests uniqueness, with each “Volk” expressing its distinctive cultural character through adaptation to local environments. Echoing this, Francis Fukuyama (2021) contends that the demand for recognition tends to take a particular form, focused on the dignity of a specific marginalized group that feels disrespected. For many people, the inner self that needs to be seen is not a generic human inner self but that of a particular kind of person from a particular place with particular customs.

But the student enthusiastic following still caused unease among Christine and her family, and finally he was sent back to Vietnam. Deported--- “had him out of here” and “he’ll be better off in his own place” means denying the right to nationality for other social classes or ethnic groups. From restrictions to expulsion, the process encompasses the unknown terror, time-limited ultimatums, the feeling of being unwanted, and the psychological pressure solely due to ethnic identity, just like Atwood writes in the novel, “Was it that something had happened to him, some intolerable strain just from being in this country” (Atwood 26). Gayatri C.Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* interrogates the epistemic violence inherent in hegemonic political representation systems, arguing that while subaltern or marginalized subjects may physically articulate speech, their voices remain systematically suppressed and rendered inaudible within dominant discursive frameworks. She prefers to consider the “margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, Aborigines, and the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (37). This totalizing application of identity neutralizes the radical multiplicity and “heterogeneity” of the Other through assimilation into the Self’s universality. The pursuit of “self-identical being” thus enacts a violent epistemic process whereby heterogeneous Others become subjected to homogenizing reduction—even ontological erasure—ultimately reduced to mere “energetic substrata” that sustain the Self’s illusion of existential continuity. In Atwood’s word, “something nondescript, something in the background” (Atwood 26).

In Atwood’s depiction, Christine and the Vietnamese student are perceived as the Other because of the traits of “liquid”. The obese body always appears unstable and trembling, which implies that the boundaries on obese women’s bodies (those that have been transgressed) are filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. Consequently, there is a perception that the obese body is difficult for both individuals and society to control. The alien body, being “outside the place,” is also easily seen as an

“impure” body, a symbolic representation of a body that has violated social order and been contaminated. Therefore, fluid bodies are framed as a threat to safety and stability. In fact, it is not fluid or impurity that is the real issue here, but rather danger. Impurity discourses are the trappings of danger to an imputed state of purity, identity and stability. However danger only exists where there is power—the power to destroy, transform and create from a cellular to a social level. In this regard, “pollution has the potential to challenge normalized behavior. This feature of pollution can be strategically employed and is used to deliberately differ from mainstream society, thus raising critical questions and pointing to inequality, uneven urban power dynamics and negligence” (Diirr and Winder 62-63).

### Conclusion

In *The Man from Mars*, Atwood depicts two characters' encounters with their bodies, becoming an “outsider” and by the end, realizing that certain aloneness with her and his body is all that is possible in the patriarchal structure of the gender and race that she and he “inhabits.” Fat, as an unsettling substance imbued with multivalent cultural connotations, exists as a dense semiotic matrix rather than a neutral biological entity. The construct of “fatness” operates not as a singular category but as a fluid relational framework perpetually constituted and reconstituted through socio-cultural praxis, which is governed by the imperatives of gendered, classed, and racialized normative corporeality that dictate the hierarchical valuation of bodily existences. Fat possesses the ability to cause pollution, and obesity not only pollutes from within but also risks spreading this contamination to everyone around them. Undoubtedly, gaining entry into the sanitized world of “pure bodies”, alongside advocating “positive” representations of fat, constitutes a central struggle for women like Christine. Yet the majority of such “positive” bodily archetypes remain problematically conflated with hetero-normative beauty standards that equate female worth with sexual desirability. Whether these ostensibly “positive” images—codified as normal, beautiful—genuinely expand the representational possibilities for women's bodies remains, in Atwood's critical lens, a question answered with profound skepticism.

Meanwhile, Atwood associates the alien body with the fat body to examine the issue of ethnicity. During her academic tenure at Harvard University, Atwood grappled with the complexities of cultural identity formation—a struggle emblematic of mid-20th century American cultural hegemony. As the United States positioned itself at the epistemic center of globalization processes, it actively constructed its cultural identity as inherently dominant while relegating all others to peripheral, subordinate statuses. This ideological framework finds vivid articulation in Atwood's “*Survival woman*” cartoon series (circa 1960s), where she satirically reimagines national archetypes: the Canadian “heroine” as “Survival woman” juxtaposed against an American “Superham” (a deliberate lexical subversion of

“Superman”). The stark physical disproportion between these characters visually encodes the asymmetrical power dynamics between the two nations, serving as Atwood’s trenchant critique of the neocolonial ambitions. The dominant cultural identity operates as a centralized, exclusionary construct—one that recognizes itself as the norm against which all “others” (whether colonized subjects or marginalized groups) must be measured and invariably found wanting. In *The Man from Mars*, the Vietnamese boy’s experience of discrimination and exclusion as an “outsider” manifests as a profound social exclusion, the “otherness” of the man completely replicate this logic.

The fat body and the alien body are two of the main sources for images of pollution and stigma in the public rhetoric; they are viewed as impure and dangerous. Whenever a strictly pure pattern is imposed upon people’s lives, it either becomes extremely uncomfortable or leads to conflicts, even harm, physically and psychologically. Definitely, Atwood does not merely discuss the “body issue,” but expands her perspective to a broader range of marginalized or stigmatized groups. Rosemary Sullivan(1998), author of the biography *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* once wrote that during her interview with Atwood, the latter admitted she was interested in the periphery, the marginal, and the permutations of displacement. The body in Atwood’s story conveys not only individual voices but also societal ones. Those striving to articulate these voices are not merely postmodern but, more specifically, postcolonial in their self-construction. Listening to marginalized groups that are silenced in particular ways is part of a broader narrative. Within it, recognition based on universal and equal principles transforms into a special recognition of specific groups. From this perspective, Atwood’s obesity narrative in *The Man from Mars* embodies the justice of fighting to be seen, heard, and respected.

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