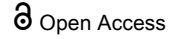


Research Article



Abject Mimesis: Grotesque Femininity and the Crisis of Representation in *Lady Oracle* and *The Gaze*

İğrenç Mimesis: *Lady Oracle* ve *The Gaze*'de Grotesk Kadınlık ve Temsil Krizi

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Abstract

This article examines how Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Elif Shafak's *The Gaze* mobilize grotesque femininity to destabilize the mimetic ideals of beauty, coherence, and narrative unity. Both novels center on protagonists whose excessive bodies and fractured identities render them unreadable within dominant aesthetic frameworks, thereby raising critical questions about who may be represented, desired, or made visible. Drawing on feminist theory—particularly Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, Luce Irigaray's critique of phallogocentric discourse, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque—the study develops the concept of *abject mimesis*: a feminist representational strategy in which distortion and excess expose the exclusions that sustain mimetic norms. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's grotesque embodiment and parodic use of popular genres disrupt the logic of coherence and closure. In *The Gaze*, the unnamed obese narrator and the novel's structure reveal the violence embedded in visual regimes. Taken together, these texts reconfigure mimesis not as faithful imitation but as rupture, where bodily and narrative excess become sites of feminist resistance. By pairing Atwood's postmodern irony with Shafak's mythopoetic layering, the article advances a theory of *abject mimesis* as a feminist poetics of grotesque excess, contributing to debates in feminist aesthetics, genre studies, and the politics of representation.

Öz

Bu makale, Margaret Atwood'un *Lady Oracle* ve Elif Şafak'ın *The Gaze* (Mahrem) romanlarının, güzellik, tutarlılık ve anlatı birliği gibi mimesis ideallerini istikrarsızlaştırmak için grotesk kadınlık kavramını nasıl işlevselleştirdiğini incelemektedir. Her iki roman da aşırı bedensellikleri ve parçalanmış kimlikleri nedeniyle egemen estetik çerçeveler içinde “okunamaz” hale gelen kadın kahramanlara odaklanır; böylece kimin temsil edilebileceği, arzu nesnesi olabileceği ya da görünür kılınabileceği gibi soruları gündeme taşır. Julia Kristeva'nın “iğrençlik” (*abjection*) kavramı, Luce Irigaray'ın fallosantrik söylem eleştirisi ve Mikhail Bakhtin'in grotesk kuramından yararlanarak, çalışma “iğrenç mimesis” (*abject mimesis*) adını verdiği bir feminist temsil stratejisi geliştirir. Bu stratejide, biçimsel bozulma ve aşırılık, taklit normlarını sürdüren dışlamaları görünür kılar. *Lady Oracle*'da Joan'un grotesk bedeni ve popüler türleri parodi yoluyla kullanışı, anlatıdaki tutarlılık ve kapanış mantığını bozar. *The Gaze*'de ise isimsiz şişman anlatıcı ve romanın yapısı, görsel rejimlere içkin şiddeti açığa çıkarır. Birlikte ele alındığında bu iki metin, mimesisi sadık bir taklit değil, bir yarılma olarak yeniden kurgular: bedensel ve anlatısal aşırılıklar, feminist direnişin alanlarına dönüşür. Atwood'un postmodern ironisini Şafak'ın mitopoetik katmanlaşmasıyla yan yana getiren makale, grotesk aşırılığın feminist bir poetikası olarak “iğrenç mimesis” kavramını geliştirir ve feminist estetik, tür kuramı ve temsil politikaları tartışmalarına katkıda bulunur.

Keywords

Abject mimesis,
feminist aesthetics,
grotesque femininity,
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Introduction

One of the most enduring concepts in the history of aesthetics and literary criticism, *mimesis* has long served as a foundational framework for understanding how art relates to reality. Emerging from classical Greek philosophy, the term has evolved from its early associations with imitation to encompass broader notions of representation and expression. In Plato's dialogues, *mimesis* is approached with ambivalence; it is cast as a deceptive copy of the ideal forms, twice removed from truth, and potentially corrosive to the moral and rational order of both soul and polis.¹ In contrast, Aristotle's *Poetics* rehabilitates *mimesis* as a vital human capacity. He conceives it as an innate instinct that grounds artistic creation, enables catharsis, and discloses universal truths.² For Aristotle, *mimesis* is not merely reproductive but also generative, conferring both epistemological and affective value.

Over the centuries, *mimesis* has remained central to aesthetic theory, though its meaning has shifted in accordance with changing cultural and philosophical paradigms. During the Middle Ages, it was tied to theological notions of divine truth;³ in the Renaissance, it aligned with ideals of naturalism and harmonious proportion;⁴ and in the Neoclassical period, it supported rationalist conceptions of order and decorum.⁵ With Romanticism, however, came a critique of *mimesis* in favour of originality, interiority, and self-expression.⁶ This destabilization intensified in the twentieth century, as structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers—from Roland Barthes⁷ to Jacques Derrida⁸—questioned the very possibility of faithful representation, revealing instead the constructedness, mediation, and the deferral of meaning inherent in all signifying practices.

While *mimesis* was traditionally conceived as a mode of reflection or recognition, modern and postmodern challenges to *mimesis*, particularly in feminist and poststructuralist theory, have interrogated its representational economy. Feminist thinkers have long argued that female embodiment has been persistently misrepresented, over determined, or rendered invisible within mimetic systems structured by patriarchal and within phallogentric norms. As Virginia Woolf famously stated in *A Room of One's Own*, “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size,” underscoring how women have historically functioned not as autonomous subjects but as

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 1993), 565a–598d.

² Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (Penguin Books, 1996), 1447a–1449b.

³ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Yale University Press, 1989).

⁴ Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960).

⁵ Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1953).

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977).

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

mirrors of male identity.⁹ She famously called on women to define *woman* for themselves, observing that male-authored definitions of femininity have served only to entrench inequality and silence.¹⁰ Woolf urges women to confront—and answer—the question “what is a woman?” on their own terms,¹¹ anticipating Hélène Cixous’s call in the feminist manifesto “The Laugh of the Medusa” for women to “write the body”: to reject the authority of the masculine logos, disrupt its closed circuits of meaning, and inscribe female experience in a language that resists the logocentric order.¹² Similarly, Luce Irigaray¹³ and Laura Mulvey¹⁴ contend that systems of representation have privileged masculine subjectivity while erasing, objectifying, otherizing, and sexualizing female difference. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, articulated in *Powers of Horror* (1980), introduces a conceptual register in which representation encounters its limits. By exploring the psychic and semiotic dimensions of the body, Kristeva posits the abject as that which disrupts identity, system, and order.¹⁵ Bodily fluids, excrement, and decay—forms of matter that resists incorporation into the symbolic—provoke both horror and fascination, marking the breakdown of boundaries between self and other, subject and object, form and formlessness. In relation to the female body, historically coded as unstable or Other, the abject generates a complex dynamics of attraction and repulsion. Within this framework, the abject female body emerges as a powerful challenge to mimetic norms and as a site where representation becomes both impossible and politically charged. Applied to literature, abjection signals not only a thematic preoccupation with bodily excess but also a disruption of mimetic coherence, producing what this article terms *abject mimesis*: a mode of representation that destabilizes the real and exposes the limits of representation itself. This intersection between *mimesis*, *abjection*, and the *grotesque* forms the conceptual core of this article. It asks: What happens to mimesis when the subject of representation is a body that exceeds aesthetic and narrative intelligibility? How do literary texts engage with the crisis of representation when they foreground grotesque or abject femininity? And can the very failure of mimesis become a form of resistance?

To address these questions, this article undertakes a comparative analysis of Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) and Elif Shafak’s *The Gaze* (2000), two postmodern novels that stage the crisis of representation through female protagonists who embody excess, distortion, and marginality. Both works resist conventional narrative coherence, centring on protagonists whose corporeal realities—fatness, deviance, spectacle—mark them as abject within dominant cultural

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Hogarth Press, 1929), 35.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 59.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 93.

¹² Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93.

¹³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.

¹⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 11.

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

imaginaries. In each case, the grotesque female body unsettles aesthetic norms and disrupts the mimetic codes imposed by patriarchal culture. These protagonists are not only subjected to the gaze of discomfort or fascination but also repeatedly attempt to reclaim self-representation through writing, performance, and storytelling. Yet such acts inevitably falter, unravel, or lapse into the grotesque, exposing a structural tension between female embodiment and mimetic form.

Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* is overweight, duplicitous, and narratively unstable—a parodic figure who ghostwrites Gothic romances while leading a life built on lies and escapism. Her grotesque body as a young girl, which she tries to shed and forget, persists as a haunting presence, resurfacing in flashbacks, dreams, and moments of crisis. Atwood satirizes romantic and Gothic conventions while simultaneously exposing their limitations to represent the unruly female subject. Joan’s shifting authorial personae—from feminist poet to escapist novelist—dramatize the fragmentation of identity under the weight of competing mimetic demands.

In *The Gaze*, Shafak constructs a layered narrative that probes the aesthetic violence of looking, particularly in relation to gendered and racialized spectacle. The unnamed female narrator, marked by her corpulence, becomes the object of eroticized scrutiny, social scorn, and psychological trauma. Her relationship with her partner B-C, a dwarf obsessively cataloguing gazes, embodies the asymmetries of visibility and objectification. Interwoven with mythical and historical sub-narratives—such as the tale of the Sable-Girl and the story of La Belle Annabelle—the novel interrogates the cultural production of beauty, deformity, and desire.

In both texts, the abject female body emerges as a disruption of representation; it cannot be fully seen, known, or mimetically rendered without distortion or violence. Atwood and Shafak thus engage the abject body and the gaze—who looks, who is looked at, and how bodies are rendered visible or invisible. The gaze functions as a regulatory mechanism within mimetic systems, constructing bodies as objects of desire, repulsion, or control.¹⁶ Yet in these novels, the gaze fails to master the grotesque female body, which instead destabilizes narrative, genre, and aesthetic categories, enacting what this article terms *abject mimesis*.

The grotesque, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, signifies a distortion or excess as a site of a process of becoming.¹⁷ Both *Lady Oracle* and *The Gaze* foreground such bodies—excessive, fluid, and transgressive—demonstrating how grotesque femininity functions as a counter-mimetic force. These texts do not merely depict the grotesque body; they actively stage and perform the breakdown of mimesis itself, exposing the crisis of representation that arises when the abject resists being made visible or narratable.

By placing these two works in dialogue, this article advances the concept of *abject mimesis* as a feminist strategy—a poetics of failure, distortion, and resistance. This is not a mere collapse

¹⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 1972), 47; Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 12.

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984), 317.

of representation but a productive failure: a deliberate refusal of coherence, containment, and aesthetic order that unsettles the gendered assumptions embedded in classical mimesis. *Abject mimesis* foregrounds the body not as a stable referent but as a site of excess, rupture, and resistance. Rather than recuperating the grotesque female body into normative forms, Atwood and Shafak stage its very unrepresentability, disrupting genre conventions and narrative coherence in the process. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's oscillation between high art and pulp fiction, autobiography and fantasy, mirrors her bodily liminality and narrative unreliability. Her grotesque body is never fully visible; it is repeatedly veiled, disguised, or disavowed—just as her story resists closure or stability. In *The Gaze*, the narrator's obesity becomes a focal point of objectification and humiliation, yet Shafak fractures the authority of the gaze by weaving multiple narratives and temporalities—such as the tales of the freak show curator Efendi, the Sable-Girl, and La Belle Annabelle—thereby complicating visibility and resisting mimetic resolution.

Theoretical Framework: Mimesis, Abjection, and Grotesque Femininity

At the heart of feminist critiques of representation lies a fundamental question: how has the female body been constructed—textually, visually, and discursively—within dominant mimetic systems? To address this, three interconnected concepts—mimesis, abjection, and grotesque femininity—must be outlined and synthesized into a feminist strategy that this article introduces as *abject mimesis*. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray, Kristeva, Creed, Grosz, and Bakhtin, *abject mimesis* emerges as a mode of representational disruption that undermines the phallogentric norms of coherence, clarity, and aesthetic containment.

The representation of the female body has long stood at the center of debates on mimesis and signification. Within patriarchal discursive systems, the female body is rarely permitted to speak on her own terms; instead, she is rendered a silent signifier, constructed externally through male-centered paradigms of perception and meaning. From classical antiquity to the twentieth century, mimetic representation has functioned as a regulatory mechanism that reflected and reinforced dominant ideologies of gender, identity, and power. Feminist theory responds to this by interrogating and subverting these regimes of representation—most powerfully through the conceptual frameworks of abjection and grotesque femininity, which destabilize the boundaries of representation and expose its ideological foregrounding.

Mimesis and the Crisis of Feminine Representation

Mimesis has long been central to aesthetic theory, traditionally framed as the imitation of reality. However, feminist readings reveal that this *neutral* mimicry is deeply gendered: it operates ideologically, regulating visibility, legibility, and normative forms of beauty, and thereby policing the female body. Classical conceptions of mimesis, which presume stable referents and coherent subjects, fail to account for the ways in which patriarchal representation produces women as objects of the gaze and sites of lack.

Twentieth-century theories of textuality and psychoanalysis allow us to re-conceptualise this crisis. Roland Barthes's notion that meaning emerges in the interplay of signs rather than from authorial intent exposes how mimetic systems are not faithful reproductions but structured performances, leaving room for disruption.¹⁸ In the context of female representation, this means that the female body is never simply *shown* or *known*; it is produced through a network of cultural codes that render it legible according to male-centred aesthetics. Jacques Derrida's concept of *difference* amplifies this insight by demonstrating that the signifier cannot fully capture its referent; meaning is endlessly deferred.¹⁹ When applied to the depiction of women, such frameworks reveal that attempts to contain or stabilize female corporeality through mimesis inevitably fail, producing anxiety, distortion, or erasure. Lacanian psychoanalysis further destabilizes this process: the female subject, mediated through the symbolic order governed by the Law of the Father, is structured by absence and lack, her body and desire excluded from the coherent system of signification.²⁰ These theoretical interventions reveal that patriarchal mimesis is a system that produces women as objects rather than subjects.

Feminist theorists extend this critique by showing how the female body is doubly displaced, both by language and by gendered codes of representation. Centuries of patriarchal signification have cast women as the Other and as lack, reducing femininity to an object of the male gaze and a site of aesthetic regulation. Luce Irigaray intervenes here by specifying the gendered dimension of mimetic authority. Her critique shows that conventional representational codes—what she terms the “logic of the same”—erases multiplicity, denies women access to self-definition,²¹ and reduces women to the *specular other*, a reflection of masculine unity.²² In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray challenges the Freudian framing of female sexuality as lack and insists on the dispersed, multiple, and fluid female sexual corporeality—“woman has sex organs more or less everywhere”—which disrupts the singular logic of masculine signification and functions as a deliberate counter-mimesis.²³ She reframes the female body as uncontainable, resisting the coherence and linearity demanded by phallogocentric representation.

Taken together, these interventions clarify the stakes of feminist engagement with mimesis: it is not merely a question of imitation or fidelity, but of power, ideology, and visibility. Feminist aesthetics must therefore operate within and against these systems, producing forms of representation that expose the instability of patriarchal codes. It is in this theoretical space that the concept of *abject mimesis* emerges: a deliberate strategy of distortion, excess, and failure that

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (Norton, 2006), 75–81.

²¹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 26.

²² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Cornell University Press, 1985), 133.

²³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 28.

challenges the assumptions underpinning classical representation while foregrounding the female body as a site of rupture, resistance, and performative possibility.

Abjection and the Female Body as Threat

Building on the crisis of representation in mimesis, Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* provides a way to interrogate how cultural discourses mark the female body as abject. The abject, for Kristeva, is not simply that which disgusts—it is the unstable remainder that the symbolic order must expel in order to maintain its coherence. In this framework, bodily processes such as menstruation, lactation, or childbirth are troubling precisely because they threaten to destabilize meaning by blurring the line between subject and object.²⁴ Thus, the female body becomes legible as a site of abjection because it continually exposes the fragility of the symbolic, especially its dependence on the repression of the maternal.

This insight helps explain why patriarchal culture repeatedly figures the maternal body as monstrous: it embodies at once the origin of life and the reminder of decay, excess, and uncontrollability. The maternal, in Kristeva's terms, is not assimilable into the paternal symbolic; it remains a liminal presence that provokes both desire and horror. Here, abjection is more than an affective reaction—it is a disciplinary mechanism that codes femininity itself as incoherent, unstable, and dangerous.

Barbara Creed's concept of the *monstrous-feminine* extends Kristeva's analysis into cultural texts, especially horror cinema. Her claim that horror films situate terror in the maternal body clarifies how popular representation relies on abjection to render femininity fearful. For example, the bleeding woman, the witch, or the devouring mother is not monstrous because of external features but because she embodies precisely the bodily excess that unsettles the symbolic order.²⁵ Read alongside Kristeva, Creed makes visible the cultural work of representation: the monstrous-feminine dramatizes the anxieties of patriarchal discourse, simultaneously revealing its repressive mechanisms and staging their collapse.

Lastly, Elizabeth Grosz complicates this picture by reframing abject qualities—instability, fluidity, excess—as sources of feminist potential rather than deficiency.²⁶ Where dominant discourse treats the female body's openness as pathological, Grosz suggests that such permeability might become the very ground for feminist politics of embodiment. In this sense, reclaiming the abject body as volatile and transformative disrupts the sanitizing impulses of patriarchal representation. Abjection here is not only what must be expelled but also what can be re-

²⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1–5.

²⁵ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993), 1–15.

²⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), xi–xii.

appropriated as a counter-mimetic force, refiguring the female body as a site of resistance rather than contamination.

Together, Kristeva, Creed, and Grosz provide a set of interlocking tools for reading the representation of femininity as a contested field where exclusion and repression can also generate disruption and possibility. Hence, representing the female body as abject becomes a strategy of resistance, subverting the visual and conceptual regimes that seek to normalize, sanitize, and regulate femininity.

Grotesque Femininity and the Politics of the Carnavalesque Body

Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World* provides a useful, if initially limited, framework for thinking about feminine excess. His grotesque body is always in flux—"a body in the act of becoming...never finished, never completed"—unfinished, porous, oriented toward its orifices and exchanges with the world.²⁷ It resists the classical ideals of symmetry, containment, and purity by foregrounding the lower stratum of the body, where degradation and regeneration coexist. For Bakhtin, this carnivalesque grotesque is not simply obscene; it embodies material truth, collective laughter, and the renewal of life.

When feminist theorists mobilize Bakhtin, however, the grotesque body becomes more than a celebratory folk image. It becomes a critical strategy for disrupting the aesthetic and discursive regulation of femininity. The female grotesque insists on flesh, fluids, and affective unruliness precisely where patriarchal culture demands closure and decorum. In this way, the grotesque unsettles the mimetic codes that render femininity legible only as idealized, commodified, or sanitized form. It does not simply represent female bodies differently; it stages the impossibility of containing them within phallogentric aesthetics.

Importantly, the grotesque is not reducible to degradation. In its carnivalesque dimension, it overturns hierarchies by staging disorder, laughter, and excess as forms of critique.²⁸ Read through a feminist lens, this means that grotesque femininity destabilizes the cultural hierarchies of purity/filth, subject/object, and so on. When female bodies are rendered as grotesque—leaking, deformed, transformative—they expose the ideological labour behind categories of coherence and control. The grotesque here is not just a body but a politics: a refusal of the symbolic order's demand for neat boundaries.

Bringing Bakhtin into dialogue with Kristeva and Creed highlights the stakes of this move. Where Kristeva identifies the abject as what the symbolic must expel, and Creed shows how horror dramatizes that expulsion through the *monstrous-feminine*, Bakhtin's grotesque body provides the aesthetic and affective form for representing such expulsions. The grotesque body does not only reveal the instability of the symbolic but also revels in it, making degradation a site of renewal and

²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

²⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10–20.

possibility. In this sense, grotesque femininity is not simply an inversion of ideal beauty but a mode of *abject mimesis*: it represents by dismantling representation itself, forcing the symbolic to confront its own exclusions.

Toward a Feminist Theory of Abject Mimesis

These theoretical strands converge in the concept of *abject mimesis*, which this article defines as a feminist strategy of representation that stages the breakdown of mimetic norms through the embodied excess of the abject and grotesque female body. Unlike classical mimesis, which privileges coherence and legibility, *abject mimesis* foregrounds instability and excess. It resists purification: it refuses to tidy up the messiness of embodiment or the contradictions of subjectivity, whether in artistic content or in formal strategies of narration and depiction. In this sense, *abject mimesis* does not redeem the female body but insists on its fluidity, openness, and incoherence as the very ground of feminist aesthetics.

Crucially, *abject mimesis* works within rather than outside systems of representation. Like Irigaray's mimetic strategy of parodying phallogocentric discourse, it repeats dominant forms only to distort them from within.²⁹ By foregrounding rupture over resolution, opacity over clarity, and disorder over harmony, *abject mimesis* exposes the exclusions that sustain representational order. Here Kristeva's abjection, Creed's *monstrous-feminine*, Grosz's volatile corporeality, and Bakhtin's grotesque converge: together they demonstrate that what has been coded as feminine excess need not be pathologized but can instead become a disruptive aesthetic and political force.

This dynamic is particularly evident in feminist art and literature, where grotesque or monstrous female figures function not merely to terrify or disgust but to expose the cultural logic that marginalize non-normative bodies. *Abject mimesis* reclaims monstrosity and grotesqueness as modes of creative resistance, generating alternative subjectivities and aesthetic forms. Its force lies not in correcting patriarchal misrepresentations by substituting more positive images of women, but in compelling representation to confront its own limits. As such, *abject mimesis* constitutes a rupture in the very fabric of signification—a performative refusal to be contained within the symbolic order.

This discourse logic resonates with the theory of *écriture féminine*. Introducing the concept, Hélène Cixous calls for a mode of writing that transgresses the constraints of patriarchal discourse by embracing feminine corporeality, fluidity, and multiplicity: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard."³⁰ Cixous insists that the signifying system governed by phallogocentrism represses female difference by privileging *logos*—order, rationality, and fixed identity, associated with

²⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Cornell University Press, 1985). In particular, the essay "This Sex Which Is Not One" and the essay "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" articulate her strategy of mimesis—women's "playing with" and parodying of phallogocentric discourse to expose its limits.

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

masculinity—over flux, contradiction, and embodiment, which she aligns with the feminine.³¹ Luce Irigaray likewise envisions *écriture féminine* as a mode grounded in female embodiment and desire, privileging multiplicity and fluidity against the univocal structures of phallogocentrism.³²

Read alongside *écriture féminine*, *abject mimesis* can be understood as its grotesque, resistant articulation in the realm of representation. As a feminist strategy, it enacts a politics of formal disobedience: where *écriture féminine* writes from the body to exceed the logic of phallogocentrism, *abject mimesis* stages the body as grotesque and excessive, mimicking, overwhelming, and defiling the aesthetic sensibilities of dominant discourse. It insists on the political necessity of representing the female body not as coherent, purified, or closed, but as porous, unstable, and always in process. In embracing the abject and the grotesque, feminist cultural production transforms what patriarchal discourse marks as threat into a generative site of resistance. *Abject mimesis*, in this sense, performs the unruly dimension of *écriture féminine*, celebrating embodiment in all its excess so that the female body—and her texts—may leak, rupture, and continually become.

Lady Oracle: Gothic Excess and the Grotesque Body

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976) stages the grotesque and abject dimensions of female embodiment as both aesthetic disruption and feminist resistance. Its protagonist, Joan Foster, moves through a series of unstable roles—obese daughter, gothic romance novelist, feminist poet, dutiful wife, fugitive, and fraud. These shifting selves do not mark pathological fragmentation but what Luce Irigaray calls *strategic mimesis*: a performance that repeats dominant gender scripts in order to expose their artificiality. Joan's excess—corporeal and narrative—becomes a feminist refusal of representational fidelity, what this study terms *abject mimesis*, a mode of writing that inhabits patriarchal codes only to grotesquely unravel them from within.

From childhood, Joan's body is inscribed as grotesque and abject. Her overeating becomes a weapon against her mother's disciplinary gaze: "I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch... in this at least I was undefeated."³³ She describes her body as the "disputed territory" in a war with her mother, showing how female flesh becomes a battleground for conflict and control.³⁴ By fifteen, Joan weighed "two hundred and forty-five pounds" (74), a size that positioned her as culturally unreadable within ideals of slender femininity.³⁵ Kristeva's abject—the ambiguous matter that "disturbs identity, system, and order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules"³⁶—is here embodied in Joan's fat body, which overflows boundaries and resists containment. Joan's fat body, in its refusal to conform to

³¹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 876–893.

³² Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 28–29.

³³ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Andre Deutsch, 1977), 70.

³⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 69.

³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 74.

³⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 4.

normative boundaries, becomes a site of cultural anxiety: grotesque, excessive, and resistant to assimilation. Cast as socially abject—mocked by her mother, shamed by peers, and excluded from the domains of romantic and aesthetic desirability—it is marked and punished as a violation of the symbolic and aesthetic constraints of the feminine ideal. As the narrator reveals, her social isolation “was a punishment, deserved by me, for something I had done or hadn’t done that day: I had skipped too heavily in the fairy ring, I hadn’t stood straight enough, my tie was rumpled, I had dirty fingernails, I was fat.”³⁷ Yet the text refigures Joan’s grotesque embodiment as a locus of narrative and aesthetic resistance. What initially appears as shameful excess is re-valued as a disruptive force that unsettles normative coherence and purity, enabling a feminist reimagining of corporeality, narrative agency, and aesthetic excess itself—a radical refusal of symbolic purification.

Atwood underscores this disruptive potential through carnivalesque imagery. Joan fantasizes about using her flesh as defense: “I would be able to squash any potential molester against a wall merely by breathing out.”³⁸ Later, in her fantasy of the Fat Lady, she imagines an obese performer who strips: “She’d wobble her hips, removing her veils”³⁹ and when the cook from Bite-a-Bit proposes to her, she imagines herself as a bride “with this tiny foreign man slung over my arm like a purse.”⁴⁰ This grotesque image is further developed as she daydreams about having sex with him, envisioning him as “scurrying” like a friendly furry animal over her body, “enormous to him as a peninsula.”⁴¹ These fantasies reference the Bakhtinian grotesque body as a site of inversion, where abjected flesh becomes a parody of sexual spectacle. In this context, the female body refuses to serve the male gaze, displacing horror and desire onto patriarchal spectatorship itself.

Joan’s multiple personas—romance writer, feminist poet, gothic heroine—parody mimetic expectations by exaggerating them. As Irigaray observes, “to play with mimesis is to play with the semblance.” Joan’s *semblances* expose the instability of each *genre* she inhabits.⁴² Her romances reproduce idealized femininity for mass consumption even as her feminist poetry rejects them, yet both emerge from the same self. Her performances, like her body, refuse to resolve into coherence. In this sense, Joan embodies Butler’s notion of *performativity*: gender appears as repetition without origin, and Joan’s endless shifting of roles dramatizes the impossibility of stable representation.⁴³ In this case, *abject mimesis* emerges as a strategic performative mimicry of the aesthetic codes of idealized femininity grotesquely magnified—swelling, expanding, and leaking—until these representations collapse under the weight of constructedness.

³⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 59.

³⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 140.

³⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 251.

⁴⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 100.

⁴¹ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 102.

⁴² Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 76.

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

Joan's bodily resistance extends into narrative form: her self-representation is deliberately incoherent, enacting the grotesque not only as corporeal excess but also as semiotic disobedience. Atwood satirizes the medical and cultural pathologization of the female body—a logic Elaine Showalter identifies in diagnoses such as hysteria, which historically link femininity to instability, irrationality, and chaos.⁴⁴ Joan is not clinically mad but refuses to conform to psychic and bodily norms. Rather than seeking to overcome her grotesque past, she rewrites it through layered fictions, parody, and metafictional play, weaving many identities and thus, troubling the fantasy of feminine coherence. Here, her grotesque body becomes the ground of *abject mimesis*, a representational mode that exposes the limits of realist imitation and refigures female embodiment as unstable, excessive, and politically charged.

This critique is inscribed in the novel's very structure. *Lady Oracle* resists linearity, coherence, and genre purity. Its fragmented, non-chronological narrative—punctuated by flashbacks, hallucinations, and ghostly intrusions—mirrors Joan's refusal of singular identity. As Cixous insists, "Woman must write herself... break away from the suppression of the body."⁴⁵ Joan does so through a form of *écriture féminine*: a fluid, embodied writing that resists patriarchal logics of order and closure. This practice is not a simple inversion of masculine discourse but a displacement that unsettles binary oppositions and opens a space for feminine difference. *Lady Oracle* enacts this imperative through genre hybridity—romance, gothic, comedy, satire, confession—woven into a metafictional structure that destabilizes representation, challenges conventions, and undermines the realist novel's claim to coherence. Joan's refusal of a unified voice, genre, or identity parallels her refusal to be contained within patriarchal representations of femininity.

Atwood further formalizes this refusal through parody and metafiction. As Linda Hutcheon argues, self-reflexive fiction "both installs and subverts the conventions it appears to reinforce."⁴⁶ *Lady Oracle* adopts the clichés of romance and gothic only to destabilize them, showing how narrative itself enforces gender norms. In undermining generic coherence and convention from within, the text not only critiques the narrative forms that claim to represent female experience but also undermines the mimetic pact between author and reader, exposing the artifice of representation itself. Joan's evasions, lies, and narrative digressions—what can be described as excess—are better understood as *abject mimesis*: a refusal of mimetic transparency that forces the reader to confront the grotesque instability of female embodiment and self-representation.

Psychoanalytically, the recurrence of Joan's grotesque body—through flashbacks, memories, hallucinations, spectral visitations, and abrupt narrative disjunctions—enacts what Freud describes

⁴⁴ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (Pantheon, 1985), 3.

⁴⁵ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

⁴⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 1988), 7.

as the *return of the repressed*: the eruption of what consciousness seeks to exclude.⁴⁷ Joan's past cannot be neatly assimilated; it resurfaces in fragmented, nonlinear ways that destabilize narrative continuity. What returns, in her case, is not simply memory but the body itself—the grotesque body that resists conformity and threatens symbolic coherence. As Grosz observes, the female body is often “inscribed as a series of flows, energies, movements, and sensations,” rendering it resistant to symbolic fixity.⁴⁸ Joan's narrative reproduces this logic of excess and overflow, where both her body and her story emerge as unruly sites of resistance—irreducible to the order, coherence, or purification demanded by the dominant symbolic.

The symbolic system—what Irigaray terms “phallogocentric” logic—demands binaries, coherence, and representational fidelity.⁴⁹ Joan's grotesque body and fractured narrative explicitly violate these norms. She is not legible as a subject within this system; instead, her story, like her body, exceeds its boundaries by multiplying meaning, unsettling coherence, and foregrounding the instability of signification. This is the work of *abject mimesis*: a representational practice in which the abject female embodiment refuses purification, stabilization, or coherence. Rather than being recuperated by dominant discourse, *abject mimesis* mobilizes the grotesque, the excessive, and the unreadable to expose the ideological violence underpinning representation.

In this light, Joan's story—haunted by the unruly returns of her body and the multiplicity of her voices—becomes a subversion of mimetic norms and a feminist poetics of resistance. Her grotesque body is refigured as a site of political and aesthetic disruption. She writes herself—imperfectly, incoherently, defiantly—into being. Her resistance is not heroic in the conventional sense but unstable and disruptive. In that very unruliness, it speaks: offering a feminist vision of representation grounded not in clarity or coherence, but in excess, multiplicity, and the generative force of abjection.

The Gaze: Spectacle, Surveillance, and Eroticized Abjection

Elif Shafak's *The Gaze* (1999) interrogates the gendered politics of representation by exposing the visual regimes that commodify, regulate, and pathologize the female body. At the center of the novel is the unnamed female narrator, whose fatness functions as a symbolic and aesthetic site of grotesque embodiment, abjection, and—critically—*abject mimesis*. Her excessive body, rendered simultaneously hyper-visible and socially erased, unsettles normative ideals of femininity, becoming a locus of feminist resistance. Drawing on feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralist critiques of visibility, this section argues that *The Gaze* enacts a subversion of phallogocentric representation through *abject mimesis*: a disruptive strategy that inhabits and deforms representational codes from within. Through this lens, the novel may be read as a form of

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. and trans. James Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1955), 219–52.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, xii.

⁴⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 74–75.

écriture féminine—a nonlinear, embodied mode of storytelling that foregrounds multiplicity while aestheticizing the abject and turning grotesque excess into narrative and visual dissent.

The narrator's fat body cannot be assimilated into aesthetic ideals premised on slimness, symmetry, and containment. Instead, it is repeatedly described through a language of seepage, stickiness, and uncontainability: sweat, tears, drool, vomit. These bodily elements—hallmarks of both Bakhtinian grotesque realism and Kristevan abjection—become expressive tools of *abject mimesis*, dramatizing a body that resists symbolic reduction. In one passage, she recalls her clothes clinging to her sweaty flesh “like a second skin,” immersing the reader in the material proximity of her leaking, formless body.⁵⁰ This grotesque imagery unsettles the boundary between visibility and erasure, spectacle and void, generating simultaneous fascination and repulsion. As Kristeva notes, the abject destabilizes systems of order and identity, and the narrator's body enacts this disruption both as a social condition and stylistic device. Her body's refusal to conform mimetically to ideals of beauty, femininity, and bodily propriety signifies the narrator within the liminal abject.

Her vomiting after being objectified makes this disruption explicit: “I rushed to the bathroom and threw up everything inside me, as though I could expel not only the food but their gaze as well.”⁵¹ Here, vomit is not simply grotesque but mimetic excess—a symbolic rejection of the invasive gaze that attempts to master her body. The act of expulsion becomes a counter-gesture, a rejection of the visual order that seeks to define her. Similarly, her grotesque obsession with food becomes more than corporeal excess; it is an aesthetic mode. “I stuffed my mouth not with food but with silence,” she declares, linking consumption with repression, aligning the devouring female body with the abject subject silenced by patriarchal discourse.⁵² Eating, in this case, also becomes a metaphor for her desire to consume the gaze before it consumes her, to assert a kind of presence through embodied excess, even when paradoxically rendered invisible by societal standards of femininity. The grotesque body thus emerges as both spectacle and counter-spectacle, mimicking and sabotaging the social demand for feminine disappearance.

Shafak aligns this grotesque corporeality with Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque body: “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world: the mouth, the genitals, the anus.”⁵³ The narrator's body, porous and overflowing, emphasizes the mouth—an orifice of consumption, vomit, spit, but also of speech and silence. The episodes depicting her sweating, vomiting, and excessive eating are not just deviation from aesthetic norms; her leaking flesh resists normalization and places her outside frameworks of feminine decorum. Like Kristeva's abject, her body haunts the threshold of signification, threatening to collapse binary distinctions—self/other, purity/filth, visibility/invisibility. Positioned in this liminal space, her body becomes both the target of

⁵⁰ Elif Shafak, *The Gaze*, trans. Brendan Freely (Penguin Books, 2006), 8.

⁵¹ Elif Shafak, *The Gaze*, 33.

⁵² Elif Shafak, *The Gaze*, 41.

⁵³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.

regulation and a site of resistance; abject not because it lacks meaning but because it exposes the violence inherent in demand for coherence, containment, and legibility.

This ambivalence extends into her erotic life. She is rendered alternately hypersexualized and desexualized, fetishized in fragments—breasts, stomach, mouth—yet denied subjectivity. Her body is not eroticized in the traditional sense; it unsettles the gaze, which typically demands aesthetic coherence. Her fatness makes her both hyper-visible and invisible—*looked at* too much and never truly seen—visible as a grotesque body in excess, yet invisible as an autonomous subject. Rather than resisting representation entirely, she mimics the roles imposed on her—lover, fetish—but exaggerates them to excess, performing what Kristeva identifies as abjection’s haunting visibility. Erotic encounters become *fat erotics*: disruptive, affective, non-normative intimacies that refuse aesthetic coherence.⁵⁴ Queer theory’s emphasis on non-normative intimacies offers a framework for understanding how erotic experience might emerge from rupture, failure, or awkwardness rather than from mastery and coherence.⁵⁵ The narrator’s body, leaking and desiring, refuses to stabilize, reframing desire through abjection as rupture. Erotic pleasure, when it arises, is not redemptive but sticky, awkward, and unruly—resistant to phallogocentric categories of beauty and desire.

The novel also interrogates the gaze more directly through metafictional sub-narratives that allegorize the politics of looking. In “La Belle Annabelle,” the perfectly beautiful protagonist becomes a voiceless object of collective desire and eventual destruction. Her dismemberment literalizes Irigaray’s claim that woman functions as a mirror for masculine desire: Annabelle is consumed by the very gaze that idealizes her—a consequence of being representable within a patriarchal symbolic economy. In contrast, “The Sable-Girl,” a half-human, half-animal figure displayed in freak shows, dramatizes the eroticization and commodification of monstrous femininity. Her spectacle echoes Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, where non-normative bodies are managed through visual and institutional scrutiny.⁵⁶ Both figures allegorize how aesthetic ideals elevate and annihilate, categorizing women, defined by their bodies, as either representable or monstrously un-representable. Yet they also suggest counter-narratives: by refusing mimetic closure, these abject bodies expose the violence of representation and reclaim difference as agency.

The novel’s critique extends into institutional regimes of visibility, particularly the medical gaze. The narrator’s encounters with doctors exemplify Foucault’s disciplinary biopolitics: her weight is measured, charted, pathologized.⁵⁷ She is positioned as a deviation to be corrected. Yet

⁵⁴ Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Punctum Books, 2012).

⁵⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 139–145.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1995).

she refuses to diet or undergo surgery, resisting the normalization demanded by the medical institution. Her refusal becomes an act of embodied defiance, a rejection of what Bordo identifies as the internalization of disciplinary discourse.⁵⁸ By refusing to participate in her own *correction*, she reclaims opacity, unsettling the panoptic logic that governs both medicine and gender.

Formally, *The Gaze* mirrors its narrator's grotesque body. Its nonlinear structure, embedded tales, and shifting perspectives fracture mimetic realism, enacting *abject mimesis* at the level of narrative. The text refuses coherence or closure; it digresses, interrupts, and circles back, embodying what Cixous and Irigaray theorize as *écriture féminine*: writing through the body, privileging multiplicity and fluidity over rationalist order or coherence. The insert tales—such as “La Belle Annabelle” and “The Sable-Girl”—function as fables of *abject mimesis*, imitating conventions of beauty and monstrosity only to expose their ideological construction.

Just as the narrator's body cannot be contained—it leaks, sweats, trembles, vomits, and bleeds—the text itself resists linearity and logical progression, unfolding through detours, digressions, interruptions, and reversals. These formal disruptions, hallmarks of what feminist discourse identifies as feminine textuality, destabilize representational norms and foreground embodies difference. In this way, the very texture of *The Gaze* becomes a feminist intervention into the symbolic order. Shafak transforms literary form into critique, parodying the conventions of beauty and monstrosity to reveal their ideological construction and to open space for alternative imaginaries of embodiment.

Ultimately, *The Gaze* performs a feminist aesthetics of *abject mimesis*. The narrator does not escape the gaze nor overcome abjection. Instead, she inhabits abjection as a mode of visibility, insisting on being seen in her grotesque, leaking, excessive complexity. Her fatness, her erotic ambivalence, and her fragmented narration are strategies of disruption. By mimicking and distorting representational codes, Shafak exposes their violence and reclaims abjection as creative resistance. The gaze thus becomes not only a site of discipline but also of subversive mimicry. In refusing resolution, *The Gaze* produces a feminist poetics grounded in distortion, rupture, and excess.

Conclusion: *Abject Mimesis* as Feminist Aesthetic Resistance

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Elif Shafak's *The Gaze* mobilize grotesque femininity not simply as transgression but as a deliberate disruption of representational and epistemological norms. Both novels undermine mimetic traditions that have historically privileged coherence, beauty, and narrative unity, revealing how these ideals sustain patriarchal aesthetics. In their place, Atwood and Shafak stage what this study defines as *abject mimesis*: a feminist aesthetic practice

⁵⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (University of California Press, 1993)

that mimics representation only to deform it from within, turning failure, excess, and incoherence into critical strategies.

At the heart of both texts lies the grotesque female body—a body that spills across borders, resists containment, and destabilizes legibility. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's fatness and unstable identities parody the conventions of romance and realism, exposing how feminine legibility is bound to slenderness, coherence, and desirability. Her grotesque embodiment of multiple, shifting identities and her fractured narrative perform resistance by refusing closure, parodying cultural scripts while simultaneously inhabiting them. In *The Gaze*, Shafak's unnamed narrator is scrutinized, fetishized, and erased, yet her very abjection becomes a site of narrative power. Through allegory and mythopoetic layering, Shafak interrogates the gaze as a disciplinary apparatus and reclaims grotesque bodies as sites of resistance, transforming fatness, monstrosity, and excess into aesthetic resources.

Despite their different strategies—Atwood's parody and metafiction, Shafak's allegory and fragmentation—both writers deploy grotesque femininity to reconfigure mimesis itself. Their novels resist the cultural compact that aligns beauty with truth, coherence with legibility, and compliance with value. Instead, they embrace rupture, multiplicity, and opacity, thereby making visible what dominant discourse seeks to erase: unruly female bodies and fragmented subjectivities.⁵⁹ Feminist theory provides the conceptual grounding for this reconfiguration. Kristeva's abjection, Irigaray's critique of phallogentric binaries, and Cixous's *écriture féminine* all illuminate how Atwood and Shafak transform exclusion into aesthetic potential. Their grotesque bodies are abject not because they fail to signify, but because they signify too much—excessively, messily, beyond containment. This unruliness is precisely what makes them politically and aesthetically generative. As Linda Hutcheon reminds us, parody is not simply mockery but a “repetition with critical distance”, a strategy that destabilizes authority by exposing the ideological underpinnings of representation.⁶⁰

Importantly, neither novel rejects representation outright. Rather, both re-imagine it, showing that literature can resist patriarchal visibility not by erasing abjection but by amplifying it. In doing so, they enact what I call a politics of formal disobedience: refusing unity, decorum, and closure in favour of excess, contradiction, and embodied difference. *Abject mimesis*, then, is not a retreat from representation but a feminist poetics of interruption, exposing the violence hidden in aesthetic norms while reclaiming disruption as a mode of agency. The broader implication is that feminist fiction can turn grotesque embodiment into a resource for rethinking visibility, desire, and narrative itself. Atwood and Shafak demonstrate that literature need not mirror cultural ideals of beauty or coherence; it can act instead as a *speculum*—a distorting surface that exposes, refracts, and re-

⁵⁹ As Elaine Scarry demonstrates, beauty has historically been linked to truth and justice. See Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 25–26.

⁶⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Methuen, 1985), 6.

imagines. Through *abject mimesis*, *Lady Oracle* and *The Gaze* open space for alternative imaginaries of the body, insisting that what is messy, incoherent, or abject is not a failure of representation but its feminist possibility.

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