

Estranged Self and Fractured psyche in Margaret Atwood's Bodily Harm

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood plays a key role in pioneering the causes of women among the Canadian women novelists. Atwood has vehemently been addressing the onerous questions, lambasting the indifferent and cruel attitude of masculinity towards women. Atwood's female characters often fight the marginalization and victimization and combat to position themselves in phallogentric society. She, through her works fights for the rights and identity of women and attacks the patriarchal discourse and dominant social construction of identity and gender. The aim of this paper is to look at various representations of female body, its objectification, abjection and deprecation as "sexual object" and "other".

Keywords: *Masculinity, marginalization, Phallogentric, Abjection, Female Body Identity, Objectification.*

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood has powerful feministic ideology which she expostulates through her fiction. Her writings are deep-rooted with natural rights of women. Her fiction depicts the complex review of women's problem that they face in accomplishing recognition of both human rights and fundamental rights. Thus, her novels bring forth that the rights of women are the rights of human and the rights of human are the rights of women as well. Atwood fights against the shallow construction of gender identity. Her fiction portrays the hidden and silent subjugation and oppression of women. The rallying cry in her novels is the healthy human relation between both the genders. She craves for the deconstruction and the demolition of the hierarchal gender-based system that is the first and foremost source of oppression of women and envisions for a utopia in which both the genders are equal in all walks of life. In this way, Atwood endorses the other picture of reality. In *Bodily Harm*, she rejuvenates feminist perspective as a theory as well as reality. Thus, her fiction is real mirror image of the offence of women's rights.

Bodily Harm is the best acknowledged postmodern text of Margaret Atwood that depicts the socio-political, legal and economic conditions of women as bleak and barren. It is a narrative of a woman who struggles hard physically as well as psychologically to triumph over the hurdles and hindrances and comes out as a survivor. It is *Bodily Harm* which seems to answer the question about 'Women' in totality... Atwood very categorically states in *Bodily Harm* that one should be glad if one is able to escape for a short while, for the final victim position is certain – there is no getting away from it. (Singh, 53)

Bodily Harm is a response and reaction to promote the phenomenon of feminism. It was published in post-feminist era where females were breathing in the illusion of women empowerment and gender equality. Sunaina Singh further pens down that, "Atwood thought it fit to evaluate the depth of liberation that women are supposed to have attained" (Singh, 53). It thus depicts that the real picture of the oppressed society where women are the 'other' in the eyes of men. The novel on numerous levels investigates male violence and power politics. It enquires and echoes domination over women's body and simultaneously assault towards it. Atwood in the novel has exposed the dark spots within the ideology of feminism:

It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed...the goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the same subject. (*Second Words*, 370)

The novel literally presents the injustice, mutilation, torture, abuse, suffering and finally annihilation of woman body in prison cells and hospital bed for the end of sexual domination at the hands of men. Metaphorically hospital rooms and prison cells represent the injury to the female body. It thus draws terrible status of women. Howells says: "In bodily harm, the female bodies are all passive, distorted, dismembered or coerced, witnesses to the sexual power politics of the Berger's epigraph" (120). In her essay, *The Female Body*, Atwood has depicted the abjection of women within patriarchal society:

Then it comes to him: he's lost of female body! Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room. Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain; settle it down, so it can never get away from you again. (Atwood, 37)

Bodily Harm covers the story of a female character namely Rennie Wilford who is abandoned by her family and is a child of reckless man, living in joyless and unhealthy niche in Toronto. She is brought up by her conventional grandparents in Griswold. As her childhood is suppressed and spoiled by her granny's orthodox approach, she eventually leaves that place to breathe freely and to pursue her career as a writer. She thus starts living as a Canadian journalist, writing various articles for *Visor*- a male oriented journal and *Pandora*- a female oriented journal. While writing an article for *Visor*, she comes in contact with Jake- a packing designer. Rennie despite her intelligence gets trapped in the evil and immoral designs of Jake. She soon realizes that Jake has bodily approach towards her and he uses the magical word 'love' to disguise his sexual desires. Jake possesses wild qualities which in Freudian terminology are referred to as Id to exploit and debase the female sex. He also furnishes her apartment with nude pictures and pretends love with Rennie which she notices as rape. Jake accuses women of possessing voracious female animalistic desires. He treats Rennie not only as a sexual object but also inflicts bodily assaults on her to the extent that she once feels that he is away to strangle her:

Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to her so she could not move. He liked that, he like thinking of sex as he could with at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing. (Atwood, 207).

It substantiates the fact that Jake treats Rennie as a wild animal who needs to be tamed, caged and dealt with aggression. On the scene of strangulation, Emma Parker has made a vital observation co-relating it to hierarchal system of gender polarity:

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Strangulation is the method of mere domination, since by stopping the life-giving flow between the brain and the body, it physically enforces the ideological dichotomy between mind and body which forms the basis of hierarchal system of gender polarity, which informs the whole of Western Metaphysics and culture. (Parker,363)

Throughout the novel, Rennie faces excessive amount of 'harms' physically as well as psychologically. She realizes that the obvious cause of her victimization is her being a subaltern i.e. a woman. Atwood's focal point in the novel is on the psychological effects of living within an oppressive society and one's complicity in ahierarchal and hegemonic social structure. The ground beneath Rennie gets shaken when a male gynecologist diagnosis her breast cancer. In hospital bed her female self gets shattered when the doctor starts to show interest in her body than to treat her and she has to face Victorian dilemma to choose between 'sexual mutilation by a surgeon or death by cancer'. It suggests that in a phallogentric society, woman is a site of subjugation not only because of her bodily charm but also because of a life taking disease as she falsifies an affair with doctor to save her life. She tells doctor, "I don't feel human anymore...I dream I am full of white maggots eating away at me from the inside" (Atwood,87). She soon discovers that the oncologist uses technological assault on her in the guise of surgery and medicine. Rennie regrets that she is a kind of 'raw material' to be used either by Jake or the oncologist for their own sexual interests. Howells writes in her book *Modern Novelists: Margaret Atwood*

Bodily Harm is another version of writing the female body, this time from the point of view of woman whose own body is already damaged by cancer and a mastectomy. From this "postoperative" angle she scrutinizes social myths of femininity, medical discourse on breast cancer and most significantly, the rhetoric of pornography; this novel is emphatically not about bodily pleasures but about bodily harm. (106)

The breast cancer thus exposes the increased level of violence, oppression and abuse of power against women on the part of phallogentric society.

Sexual violence and abjection of women is found throughout the novel. At the very onset of the novel, Rennie comes home and discovers, "length of rope coiled neatly on the quilt. It was not any special kind of rope: there was nothing lurid about it. It was of white and medium thick. It could not have been a clothesline" (Atwood, 6). The clothesline connotes both physical as well as sexual restraint as its comparison initially associates Rennie with domesticity while its location on the bed

is very much suggestive of sexual violence. Even the police- the guardian of peace who manages law and order represent the patriarchal hegemony as they look upon spinsters with suspicion. The police interrogate her:

You close the curtains when you dressed at night? . . . You have men over here a lot? Different men? He wanted it to be my fault, just a little, some indiscretion, some provocation. Next he would start lecturing me about locks, about living alone, about safety. I close the curtains, I said. I don't have men over. I turn out the lights. I get undressed by myself, in the dark. The big one smirked at me, he knew about single women, and suddenly I was angry. I unbuttoned my blouse and pulled my left arm out of the sleeve and dropped the slip strap over my shoulder. (7)

In order to make them believe, Rennie gets compelled to show them her amputated breast. In a male driven society, not only amputated self but also the dead body is never spared by lustful male gaze as Rennie while reading *Dell Mysteries* is reminded of the pathetic and deteriorating conditions of female body.

Conclusion

Thus, the novel as the title itself shouts out suggests the harm done to the female body by the hierarchal society. In the novel, Atwood has highlighted the colonial mind set up towards women in a very subtle way.

Through Rennie Wilford the author has shown the diseased phallogocentric and capitalistic society in which a woman is abjected to the extent of living a life of wilderness internally as well as externally and physically as well as psychologically. Physically because of breast cancer, fear of being spinster and pornography; psychologically because of inexplorable exploitation of women, terrorism and capitalism. The novel commences with, "I am still alive" and highlights the fact that till end she has to strife a lot because of failed relationships, breast cancer, sexual abuse, pornography, power politics and exploitation of women. As Rennie experiences several forms of harm, from cancer and a thwarted stalker in Toronto to an assault in the prison, she comes to conclusion that women are abjected, debased and objectified as 'other' across the world irrespective of class, creed and colour.

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