



## Treatment of Sexual and Political Exploitation of Women in Margaret Atwood's Novel *Bodily Harm*

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *The purpose of this research paper is to bring out the sexual exploitation of women in the male dominated society. As the champion of the women, Atwood has written on the issues of women as their liberty and their rights; she shows how the women's identity is redressed by the men and they are treated as the mere objects of sex. She represents the complex relationship between men and women and shows how the women are ruled by the men. Through the character of Rennie in the novel Bodily Harm, Atwood describes that what obstacles come in a woman's way when she wishes to lead independent and free life. The chief protagonist, Rennie has to face the mental and physical problems; and she is tortured at every step in her life by male's ill treatment. Working for her magazine Visor, she meets Jake, a designer in a packaging company and she finds Jake a good friend on*

*whom she trusts fully and loves him heartily but he leaves her when he comes to know that Rennie has breast cancer. He is interested only in her body. She is sexually exploited by Doctor Deniel in the name of surgery. While living on Carribean Island, she is involved in the politics and she meets Lora who tells Rennie about the victim of her stepfather's lust and she stabs her stepfather as he has a sexual assault on her. Many persons like her father want to sleep with her. When she goes to boat, there all the men want to have sexual relation with her. Both Rennie and Lora have to go to jail without their own faults. They have been exploited sexually as well as mentally by the prison guards in the prison.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *The study of the novel is based on the life of Rennie who has suffered a lot in the novel. The love and relationship between Rennie and Jack are seen in the starting and middle parts of the novel but Jack has left her when he came to know that Rennie has cancer in the left side breast. Rennie goes to Dr. Denial for operation of her breast and she started to make sexual relationship with Denial but this relation has broken up after some time. The third person, Paul comes in the life of Rennie who is involved in politics and illegal trafficking and she is trapped in an affair with Paul on reaching St. Antoine and in later life she is imprisoned. She has to face a lot of hardships without of her own faults.*

**Outcome:** *Bodily Harm is a story of Rennie and Lora who are tortured sexually as well as physically. Rennie is too helpless to save herself from the sexual exploitation in the male – dominated society and she regards herself as the object of exploitation. She cannot avoid her misfortunes. The hungry and powerful men also exploit her sexually to great extent but she does not oppose them. She thinks of the purpose of her life but she is a helpless dove, leaves that place to protect herself. Alas! She has to undergo an imprisonment. Another female character, Lora is tortured sexually by her stepfather and she stabs her step farther and runs away from home for her protection. She has to work on a boat for her bread and*

*butter but she is shocked to know that everyone like her stepfather wants to sleep with her. She is exploited by the prison guards for sex in the exchange for the news about her lover.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *The above lines show the women's condition in the patriarchal society where men treat the women like the flies on account of drive pleasure from them. They consider the women as the object of pleasure. Rennie realizes the pathetic condition of women in the male dominated society; and she decides to use her pen as a weapon to treat her bitter experiences of her life in her magazines. The novelist regards that the women are oppressed by the men; and they are considered as the weak and submissive in nature. Through her works, Atwood want to give the message to the women that they should be independent. They should revolt against the society for which they are an object to men's lust.*

**Keywords:** women's rights, physical and sexual violence, dehumanized and homogenized society, traditional customs, women's independence, live in relationship

**Volume: 3 Issue: 1 Monsoon Edition 2023**

**Paper Type:** Research Article

**Article History: Received: December 11, 2022. Revised: January 13, 2023.**

**Accepted: January 24, 2023**

The paper can be accessed online at: [www.literaryherm.org](http://www.literaryherm.org)

Margaret Atwood is among the most respected writers of fiction in the modern time. She is a versatile novelist who writes on women's issues and concerns over unsettled social issues. Her dealing with these issues is surrounded political, social and economic clouds. She is known as the literary celebrity, media star, the

public performer, a critic social historian and political satirist and cartoonist. Her novels explore the position of women in the contemporary society. She describes the inner conflicts and manifold agonies of women in the society. Her deep concerns are the threats to the environment to women's rights and human rights. Atwood has treated women as superior to men in several aspects and they can do work in any field more sufficiently than men. She has written more than thirty-five books and she is fondly read all around the world and her books have been translated in more than twenty-two languages.

As a novelist, Atwood is clearly concerned with alignment of power that exerts physical, political, economic and social control over women to fragment her. If a job is assigned to a woman; she can do it in a better way than her counterpart man can do. They are deficient neither physically nor intellectually. If they are given power, they use it in an effective and efficient way. In her novels the chief protagonists are women, their progress is not smooth. In her novels she concentrates mainly on woman's realization of power central and self-awareness. She has got the success in creating the mirror or map to display the people regarding women who they are and what they are. She helps them to change their position in the society. In *Second Words* she says:

I have always seen Canadian nationalism and concern for women's rights as part of larger, non-exclusive picture. We sometimes forget, in our obsession with colonialism and imperialism, that Canada itself has been guilty of these stances towards others, both inside the country and outside it; and our concern about sexism, men's mistreatment of women, can blind us to the fact that men can be just as disgusting, and statistically more so towards other men, and that women as members of certain groups, although relatively powerless members, are not exempt from the temptation to profit at the expense of others. Looking back over the period

I see that I was writing and talking a little less about the Canadian scene and a little more about the global one. (282)

In most of her novels, Atwood has dealt with theme of the victimization and survival of women. Her female protagonists are displayed as a part of cultural life of Canada and they are actively engaged in the problems that are not just national concern, but also the social, political and traditional issues that determine the survival of the country. The pervasive symbol of American literature, as Atwood mentions, is frontier, the dominant image of Canadian fiction is survival, the unheroic survival of victimized. Mary Morris Remarks:

The question of the status of woman has been an issue in Atwood's work and feminists have seized upon her writing as a product of the movement. Atwood has also made other political and philosophical issues themes in her work, such as Canada's Struggle to create an identity and in recent years, her concern for human rights. (55)

As a novelist, Margaret Atwood discovers the anomalies of Canadian civilization in which the women are not given any liberty to make any strategy of occupying the place hold by men. Her novels represent an important development in the post sickles Canadian writing. The women's quests were viewed in terms of marriage and happy ever after wards' ends, nor self-actualization or individualization but self-effacement and socialization. In her novels she makes an attempt to fictionalize the progress of the female's protagonist's quest for distinctive feminine identity. She has been successful because of her ability to capture and mobiles popular feelings. Her works provide us with a measure of self-protection a shared way of looking at the self and relation to society and the wider world. Similarity the heroines of her novels are shown at war with circumstances and society arouse our sympathy not so much because they are outsidess as because they register reality identifiable forms of middle-class alienation.

As a feminist, Atwood focuses on the theme of gender relation and men's mistreatment of women. As a realist, she has made the beautiful use of colour, caste and gender; she takes her themes from the real society as her works show sufferings, mental agonies and victimization of women, who are wives, aunts, hand maids, jezebels' etc. Women are treated as super human beings and their individual desires and ambitions are suppressed. Rennie says:

My mother worshipped my grandfather, or so everyone said. When I was little, I thought of him as a hero.... I wanted to be like him, but after a few years at school I forgot about that. Men were doctors, women were nurses: men were heroes, and what were women? Women rolled bandage....  
(*Bodily Harm-48*)

Her works replete with the theme of victimization and survivable of women in male-dominated society in which women are treated as only sexual object and are regarded as sexual slaves:

At the thematic level, Atwood's novel examines themes related to the politics of gender such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of woman as a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual carving out of female space by woman through various strategies and women's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy.... Atwood's novels are based on the politics of gender. (Gomez-74)

Alienation and exploitation of the women are as the main themes of her novels. In *The Edible Women*, the principal character Marian who works in Seymour survey..... a market organization, faces woman enters like Peter and Duncan and refuse to fall a prey to their lust. She feels identity crisis on account of gender discrimination. She marries Peter and willingly yields to Peter's imperialistic designs. *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on the theme of patriarchal structure of domination and power and the woman's quest for meaningful identity. Through

Offered, the heroine of the novel, Atwood portrays the physical and psychological oppression. It is Offred who suffers much on account of her minute narration. The novel *surfacing* depicts another aspect of womanhood. In this way in Atwood's highlighting gender politics woman is as implicated as is man.

*Bodily Harm*' leads to so many questions. What happened? Who was harmed? Was it an attack? Was it a fatal injury? Having read the novel, we do not get any real answer. In the novel, both Rennie & Lora suffer bodily harm. The novel '*Bodily Harm*' is the life story of a woman Rennie who suffers a lot on account of her ailment of cancer but this ailment shrinks to naught when compared to cancer to widespread in the world dominated by man at large. Other woman in the novel also suffers because of their sex and they are tortured in many ways which could not happen to them if they had not been women. Atwood brings her novel with these lines, "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence..... defines what can and cannot be done to her." (Margaret-09) The above quotation is expression of male aggression and female's inactivity. It focuses on sexual power politics. Howells remarks, "In *Bodily Harm*, female bodies are all passive, distorted, dismembered, witness to the sexual power politics of the Berger epigraph' (120). Janifer Walters also comments in his review:

The men use their hands to choke, beat, otherwise torture the women in the novels; the women's hands are cut off. They can do nothing on their own behalf except very occasionally alleviate each other's pain within the context of their powerlessness. (Yadav and Rajput-46)

Rennie, the heroine of the novel is much harmed then expected when she encounters cancer in her life, her lovers leave her one by one. They consider her only sexual object. Jake the lover of Rennie, uses her for his sexual purpose and his relationship with her is physical. He fails to consider woman that she has a life of her own, and for him, she is an object of sex. He says, "What a woman... A

head with cunt attached or a cunt with a head attached? Depends which end you start at. It was understood between them and this was a joke. (Bodily Harm-205). She sees herself as rotten and the maggot and split fruit images. Rennie does not give importance herself except in bed and her armour with Paul becomes a ray of hope, but there too, she is deprived of all goodness. She realizes well how people entertain themselves torturing females. Rennie says that the women are abused everywhere like helpless poor. She is arrested on her accusation for revolution and from jail she sees violence against women.

The novelist asserts that in society bodily harm is everywhere, both inside and outside the prison, both civilized and uncivilized world, both political and personal life. We can say that because of their sex, only women are the sufferers in novel. Lora also suffers a lot in the novel. She is badly beaten to death hitting hard on belly and breast. Her life is also a tale of woes. Lora's father died when she was in her infancy. Her mother remarried Bob. She and her mother with lived in the cellar of apartments. Bob was a dirty and lazy man. He had the cats but he never cleaned their filth. Lora's mother worked hard to earn money so that they might shift another better place. Lora has passed her most time at school. She was in love with Gray who promised for marriage to her. Lora was exploited by her step-father and resultantly she had to stab her step-father to save her chastity. She passes her a life of terror under the exploitation of her stepfather. She narrates the cruel nature of her stepfather and says, "He hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him. That is mostly why people stuff like that, because they can get away with it" (Bodily Harm-99). Lora tries to work for her bread & butter; but all men around her want to sleep with her. She does not like to live in the company of men. She is exploited physically and sexually by many men. She has to yield before them due to the conditions or to lose her job. She says, "I am for sale. I'd tell them, but I am sure as hell is not for rent. How much? One of them said ... Hot shot lawyer or something. You cannot afford it, I said,



Funny, you look pretty cheap to me, he said. I may be pretty but I am not cheap, I said. I am like a lawyer, what you are paying for is the experience” (Bodily Harm-185.)

Lora tells Rennie that she came in the contact with Paul. Paul had only one boat. She found him both rich and nice. She started living with him. He proposed her to work on his boat as a cook. She accepted his offer. Paul gave her full freedom. These boats were used to ferry the illegal things. Every male member working on the boat wanted her to sleep with him. At that time Prince of Peace fell in love with her. He did not like her relationship with Paul. So, she broke her relation with Paul and started living with Prince of Peace. There is the social and sexual oppression that her experiences are different from Rennie’s. Her voice is unheard in the society. She exploited in the jail. Rennie becomes hopeless when she sees her tortured by a number of prisoners and the policemen; and she is beaten by police guards. Lora become impatient when she comes to know that prince was never imprisoned. Her body bears their cruel beating and Rennie feels helpless; and she can only pity for her and says:

Her face is not a face any more, it is bruise, blood is till oozing from the cuts...the mouth looks like a piece of fruit that has been run over by a car, pulp. it is the face of a stranger, someone without a name...it is the face of Lora after all, there is no such things as a fearless stranger, every face is someone’s it has a name (*Bodily Harm* 260)

As Rennie arrives at Antoine, she gets trapped in Lora’s clutches who is involved in illegal activities. She succeeded in sending Rennie to the airport to receive Elva’s box which contained machine gun. She created such a situation as Rennie was forced to take the box to St. Agathe to give it to Elva. Rennie stayed at Paul’s residence. Marsdon and Prince of Peace raised their voice against the government. Rennie is arrested and is put in jail in such a society where she is not allowed to live as a human being. She wishes to free herself from this critical situation but in

vain. Lora was a cheap and dirty woman. While in the prison, she sold herself in return of petty articles like cigarettes, chewing gum and hair brush. The policemen seduced her at the pretext of arranging her meeting with Prince of Peace. She comes to know by a policeman that Prince had been shot in the beginning of the revolution; she wept and flew in rage. She threatened to the policemen to open all they did to her.

The tragic tale of Rennie and Lora's prison life explores another segment of Bodily Harm on women. The life of both women represents the victimization, oppression, and tyranny of men and their authority. The brutal harms imposed on Lora are much greater than the harms done to Rennie. Rennie finds herself ease. The scars of cancer on Rennie's body symbolize the scare of the tortured human beings all over the world. Rennie is a simple woman. She is not cleaver. She becomes a prey to Lora's tricks and goes to the airport to receive her. Box- She should not have taken their decision Paul & Lora Implicate her in their illegal dope trade. She has to pay for her simplicity and ends up in the prison. None of her three lovers loves her. She also knows that Jack is not sincere in his love for her. He is hungry to get her body. He wants to exploit her body as much as he can. He regards her as only object of sexual gratification. Rennie says, "Jake liked to pin her hand down, he liked to hold her so she couldn't move. He liked that; he liked something of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really stop breathing" (Bodily Harm-207). She does not think of a home, a settled life and a devoted husband. She wants to enjoy herself. She wants some men to be with her when Jock leaves her because of the cancer in her breast. She is attracted towards Dr. Daniel who is married. He is devoted to his profession. He is busy every time. He has no time for romance with her. She establishes sexual relation with him. Paul is the third man who comes in her life. Rennie starts her affair with him. She frequently sleeps with him. Like Shakespeare's heroes, Rennie also suffers punishment in

the end of her life and she is responsible for exploitation. Rennie is a tragic heroin. Rennie is an embodiment of helpless in the male dominated society as to save herself from exploitation. Atwood has painted the character of Rennie from the women point of view; and says, “I am a writer who is a woman and therefore I write a lot from the point of view of a woman. In other words, I do not myself as women who is writing to promote certain things.” (261)

Rennie meets Jocasta, a social activist, and she raises her consciousness. She helps her in understanding better the cruel nature of the males. She is convinced that female’s liberation keeps on being a distant dream. Jocasta wants to converse the all of men and women and said, “I think it would be great is all the men were turned into women and all the women were turned into the men, ever just for a day. Then they’d all know exactly how the other ones would like to be treated. When they got changed back, I mean.” (Bodily Harm-137) Jocasta’s idea of women –men relationship illuminates her. She represents a complex socio-gender system’

Rennie wants to quote on pornography as an art form from the women angle for Visor; and her research work leads to the studio of Frank, a male porn artist. Rennie with Jocasta visits policemen’s pornography museum in Toronto. She gets horrified by the sight of the film clips of the nude women indifferent postures of brutality showed at the museum. Some of the films project woman copulating with animals leading to the mutilation of their bodies. The purpose of the ugly films seems to exhibit the women bodies as the maps of violence. Rennie thinks that the women are reduced to raw-materials; and all the men destroy women’s individuality in an invisible manner with the help of codes. The victimization and survived of women especially in Canadian literature & civilization shadows over all her novels as the main theme. Her novels progress step by step under these head’s civilization, psychology and Revolution. Howells, Carol Ann says,

As in many of the heroines of Atwood's novels Renie is addicted to negative relationship. She feels "hooked like a junkle" to her relationship with Jake, and becomes unable to distinguish between sadomasochism and genuine aggression. (163)

Thus, Atwood is concerned, with the miserable conditions of women. She challenges the traditional image of women; and she presents the hidden operation of gender and confronts its politics. She, in *Bodily Harm*, reflects the violence on women's body as the violence of their rights; and she advises them to oppose a victim of such patriarchal power structure. Through her female characters, she wishes to empower the women and thinks of a society free from gender discrimination. She hopes a new world in which both men and women are equal at every level of existence. She is a lover of positive values and her works answer the question-how to live?

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