



FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN MARGARET ATWOODS' BODILY HARM

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Since antiquity man has viewed woman as someone inferior to him. Women are not allowed any identity and individuality of their own. Right from her birth she is nurtured to be subservient, following the rules set by the patriarchal society. A female body has always been an object of pleasure and it turns to be “the locus of reproduction” becoming “a site of immense concern to the male patriarchy.”¹ A patriarchal social set up firmly asserts man’s superiority over woman and makes a dichotomy between genders: masculine means power, domination, authority, independence and self assertion and feminine means powerlessness, oppression, subjugation, internalization of inferiority and annihilation of individuality. With the coming of feminist movement, women have launched a systematic campaign against the social and economic discrimination, sexual violence and marginalization. In this rapidly progressing contemporary world they are redefining their proper place. They have revolted against their exploitation, victimization and subordinate position. Margaret Atwood, a prolific feminist Canadian writer and critic, in her works takes up the issues pertaining to women’s predicament, conflicts, quest for identity and survival. Her novel *Bodily Harm* (1981) is a story of Rennie Wilford, a Toronto journalist, who visits two Caribbean islands in order to write travel document for her magazines. This is a social novel dealing with the theme of violations which are social, physical, psychological, political and sexual. This post feminist text draws attention to the fact that the social, political economic conditions of the women are still bleak and they still have to struggle a lot to survive in this patriarchal world.

Bodily Harm poignantly presents the systematic abuse, mutilation, annihilation and destruction of female body and soul in hospitals, in homes and in prison cells by the male dominated society. Rennie, the protagonist, is bold, assertive and wise. She is a freelance journalist, who is careful in her relations. She is aware that to be in love is "like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles."² Instead of marrying Jake, an executive



packager, and making her life painful, she opts for a live - in relation with him. Her confidence that living in post feminist era makes women immune to exploitation is shattered, when she is hit first with mastectomy and then the Caribbean Island visit.

Rennie learns that "people get trapped in things that are beyond their control"(BH, p.47). The diagnosis of breast cancer shakes her. She feels that the partial mastectomy done to her is making her half dead. Jake also feels uncomfortable with her, so she decides to part with him. And with his exit she awakens to the fact that Jake was all along packaging her according to his taste and pleasure till he realized that what he was packing was rotting from inside. Rennie blames herself for allowing him to use her as a commodity.

Rennie's visit to the Caribbean island makes her aware of the real situation of women in the post-feminist era. The bodily harm done to them by men is a delusion of the so-called liberation and freedom of women. This bodily harm by others is far worse than the body's betrayal. In the Caribbean island men enjoy torturing women, a man is privileged enough to be disloyal to his woman. But a woman dare not. If a woman, who is not even the wife, is disloyal, then beating is not the only punishment for her. The more important form of chastisement is:

... he made her take off all her clothes, . . . and then he covered her with cow-itch. That's like a nettle, it's what you do to people you really don't like a whole lot. Then he tied her to a tree in the back yard, right near an anthill, the stinging kind. He stayed in the house, drinking rum and listening to her scream. He left her there for five hours; till she was swollen like a balloon lot of people heard her but nobody tried to untie her... .

(BH, pp.214-215)

Society's behaviour is again predictable - they would have laughed at Marsdon had he not beaten her. But if Marsdon's anger goes this far, they don't like to interfere, explaining it away as a man-woman thing and not anyone else's business. In another novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood refers to the physical violence used against women. In the 'Republic of Gilead' the hands, the feet and other limbs of women are chopped off because they are of no use. Their internal organs like womb, uterus and ovaries are of use so; they are tortured physically without any hesitant. The physical cruelty to woman is not limited to the



Caribbean Island or the Gilead Republic; it is almost universal. Shashi Deshpande, an Indian feminist writer too criticizes the violence perpetrated on women by the patriarchal set up. In her famous novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* there are references to the use of physical violence against women. A woman is so tortured by her in-laws that she commits suicide. Another woman is tied to a peg and fed in the cattle shed. She is literally made to live a life of an animal. The people around, especially Saru's mother dismissed the topic saying, "She perhaps deserved it."³ Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Atwood here by giving these descriptions are thrusting on the internalization of the patriarchal cruelty by women, who do not resist or raise cudgels against this inhuman treatment.

There is another shock awaiting Rennie in *Bodily Harm*. The worst crime in the Caribbean is robbery and not murder - "If you get angry and chop up your woman, that is understandable, a crime of passion you might say. But stealing you plan before hand"(BH, p.225). So, it is a greater crime and hence punishable. Whereas, if one 'chops up' one's woman it is linked with emotions and passions and so is pardonable. The man is both understood and forgiven by the society, precisely because it is the way of life. As for a woman, it certainly serves as a lesson. One consolation, however, is that women are mostly "beaten and sliced" (BH, p.226) as Paul says, -- as though talking about vegetables -- then chopped. "They are not shot down, not because men would hesitate to do it but because there are no guns in the Caribbean"(BH, p.226).

This kind of physical persecution stuns Rennie and her own obsession with the amputation becomes insignificant. This type of exploitation is not the fate of the Caribbean women only. The post- feminist society also considers women as objects or animals to be tortured. The saga of Lora's mutilation fully reveals the pathetic condition of women in the present society. Lora's own stepfather was her hunts master. She had led a life of complete terror under the gross exploitation of the so-called stepfather. It takes Lora nearly ten years to realize that "He didn't hit me because I was bad, like I used to think. He hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him" (BH, pp.113-114). And it took her a couple of more years to grasp the fact that most men do such things because they know they can get away with it. They all think it as their prerogative for being physically stronger.



Another type of horrible indignity heaped on women folk by the male species, merely on the strength of brute force, is rape. In words of Adrienne Rich, "it is not rape of the body alone but, rape of the mind as well."⁴ Economic deprivation and rape are the main instruments employed by men to curb the spontaneous growth of a woman. The anguish of such women is recorded in the feminist writings of the novelists of all the countries. Lora finally stabbed her stepfather when he tried to rape her. The death of the devil did not end her exploitation. There were many more who were waiting to exploit her. Lora is sexually assaulted and beaten, perhaps to death by the very custodians of society, namely the policemen. The police, Rennie realizes, did it not because they had orders, or even that they had the power but because they enjoyed mutilating Lora.

Lora's mother, of course, in keeping with her breeding and the tradition, lives her life as the will of destiny. Her life with her husband is much like an accident. One has to live with a broken leg. Probably, she hated her husband as much as Lora did - but she was trapped and obviously didn't know how to get out or what else to do. One can easily think of her in the context of the victim position two of Survival, where Atwood explains that it is easier to thrust the blame on destiny or biology rather than confront the situation. The situation of women in other countries is also equally bad. We have a number of women writers across the world highlighting how women have perpetrated a graver crime by responding to their lives in the ordained destructive manner. A similar reference can be found in Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine*. Urmil in the novel endeavours to help other women comes in contact with Shakuntai, her sister and her daughter. Her involvement with them brings to light the manner; in which the stamp of the traditional culture is operative in the sexual disparities between men and women of the lower class. Kalpana, Shakuntai's daughter, is raped and the mother assumes that her daughter has been injured in a car accident. On examination, the doctor confirms and informs Shakuntai that she has been brutally raped and in the process, she is physically and mentally injured. Shakuntai sees her daughter Kalpana, who appears to be lying like a vegetable dead or alive.

Shakuntai is shocked and hysterically she tells Vanaa, " It's not true, you people are trying to blacken my daughter's name."⁵



Urmila, to her surprise, realizes how the imperatives of physical protection, economic support and social approval undermine the instinctive sympathy of the mother for her daughter. While overhearing a conversation between Vanaa and Dr Bhasker, the doctor-in-charge, Shakutai recoils in fear against the word 'report' she cries, “. . . don't tell anyone, I will never be able to hold up my head again. Who'll marry the girl, we are decent people, Doctor." (TBV p58)

The mother like the rest of the society blames her daughter for the state she has arrived at. She is relieved when the doctor's report describes Kalpana's rape incident as a car accident. Regardless of the fact that her husband for another woman has abandoned Shakutai, she is extremely anxious to get Kalpana settled. The mother refuses to stand by her unfortunate daughter as she dares not to defy the norms of the society. Kalpana's mother hovers over the family name. If a girl is raped, for no fault of hers, she alone is censured, and victimized. Thus, Shakutai, in spite of all her motherly love and sympathy for her daughter, sees that Kalpana's bold independence as the real reason for this catastrophe. The only conclusion that Shakutai is able to arrive at is, “. . . We have to keep to our places, we can never step out. There are always people waiting to throw stones at us, our own people first of all" (TBV, p.148).

Hence, it is advisable that the victim chooses to remain silent. Ironically, in the patriarchal set up, a woman is the victim of rape, yet she is the one who has been defiled. The andocentric culture refuses to admit its crime. It is the woman, who is condemned as unchaste and immoral. This is the form of oppression that is practiced by the male-dominated society. The condition of Kalpana and Lora can be compared with that of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Celie does not consider herself chaste after being raped by her stepfather. The so-called loss of virtue vitiates her mind with inferiorization. One comes to realize that sexist abuse of the black women is not an upshoot of racist philosophy only; the disease is rooted in the patriarchal society. Like Shakutai and Lora's mother, Celie's mother also holds her responsible for the physical violence committed on her. The myth of woman being subordinate is so deeply ingrained in the minds of women that it makes them immune to the sufferings of their daughters. Instead of consoling them, they are more worried about their honour.



Thus, sexual exploitation of women is everywhere, be it in the modernized Canada or the still developing Caribbean Island or India or any other country. There may be a difference in degree but not in quality. Rennie's friend Jocasta is quite realistic when she says that sexual revolution is a hollow high sounding word, the bitter fact remains that men have always/ wanted to have full control over women. The concept of 'meaningful relationship' and 'mutual understanding' for men still means treating women as 'sex objects for pleasure'. Jake, the lover of Rennie, is a typical male, who is interested only in the body of Rennie. For him her mind, her individuality is of no importance. He just adores her physical self. He sees Rennie not as a complete human being but as a thing divided into two things — body and mind, out which he is interested in body only. He himself tells Rennie, "I'm not a mind man. I'm interested in your body only, if you want the truth"(BH, p.104). He is the typical example of a male with predatory sexual instincts. This is clear from the type of pictures and photographs he hung in his bedroom:

In the bedroom he hung a Heather Cooper poster, a brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to sides but left her breasts and thighs and buttocks exposed. She had no expression on her face; she was just standing there, if anything a little bored. The picture was called Enigma. The other picture in the bedroom was stylized print of a woman lying on a 1940's puffy sofa . . . she was feet — first, and her head . . . was tiny featureless and rounded like a doorknob. In the foreground there was a bull.

(BH, pp.105-106)

Jacosta's views, "I think it would be a great idea if all the men were turned into women and all the women were turned into men, even 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."(BH, p.156) highlights the sad predicament of the so-called liberated women. The heartless mutilation of Lora is symbolic of the limited gender specific role of women in society. Rennie finally realizes that she is not afraid of cancer or amputation "She is afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening"(BH, p.209). She draws satisfaction from the fact that "nothing has happened to her yet, nobody has done anything to her. She is unharmed"(BH, p.284).



According to Atwood, men are definitely responsible for the pathetic condition of women but women also can't escape the responsibility of making their lives miserable. Rennie was brought up in Griswold where there are lots of restrictions on women. The women had servile existence, sacrificed their lives for husband, home and family. They had the courage and confidence but used these qualities against themselves. Rennie's mother would never ever disclose her illness or pain to anyone. She even wanted Rennie also to be self-effacing like her. Thus, the older generations have digested their inferiority and want their future generations also to do so. So, the new woman has also to fight against her own sex (older women) to have the right place in the society

As a result, most of the women following their role models i.e. older women, try to confirm to what Betty Friedan says, "the feminine mystique."⁶ Similarly, in *Bodily Harm* as a child, while living in Griswold, Rennie was not allowed to have any freedom. She was not allowed to. She remembers:

As a child I learned three things well: how to be quite, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them. When I think of that house I think of objects and silences . . . my grandmother was best at silences. According to her it was bad manners to ask direct questions.

(BH, p.54)

Griswold, a typical puritanical and patriarchal town, does not provide women any identity or individuality of their own. Here standard of life is "not beauty but decency"(BH, p.55), but that standard aimed at is just for women and girls, not for men or boy-If you were a girl it was a lot safer to be decent than to be beautiful-"If you were a boy, the question didn't arise . . ."(BH, p.55). Rennie's life as a child is, thus, completely governed by the puritanical powers of Griswold, and decorum of her family. She has always been conscious not to disgrace her family and according to her, "the best way to keep from disgracing it was to do nothing unusual"(BH, p.55).

The intellectual revolutions have resulted in moulding the mentality of women. Women today are seeking economic independence to have an equal status in the society. In *Bodily Harm* Atwood also analyses if economic independence helps women to attain self esteem and respect? Unfortunately Rennie very well remembers all the instances of gender -



politics and discrimination against women in Griswold. She remembers how women were given only secondary jobs. They were not allowed to make any progress and live according to their own free will:

Men were doctors, women were nurses; men were

Heroes, and what were women? Women rolled the bandages and that was about all anyone ever said about that ...

(BH, p.56)

In working place women are not given proper respect and status. Men want total subordination to them in the work place also. Rennie, a promising journalist, is "expert on surfaces"(BH, p.26) because the strict patriarchal bringing up does not allow her to be seriously involved in anything. Her superficial involvement in creative writing points to the marring effects of patriarchy on a woman's creativity. After completing her college she becomes a freelance journalist, who writes on "life styles" for newspapers and magazines. Being an "expert on surfaces"(BH, p 26), who never writes about anything serious, she says, "Other people make statements . . . I just write them down"(BH, p.15) As a result of the strict patriarchal upbringing Rennie's life has nothing serious and meaningful. She has been forced to have a 'touch-the –surface –only' attitude as a woman and as a journalist.

Though Atwood has unraveled the oppression of women and their complex response to the patriarchal set up in *Bodily Harm*, yet she firmly believes that the quest for identity is not doomed. Atwood through the character of Rennie examines the devastating effects of politics of power on human relations. Rennie fights back to undo these harmful effects and ultimately in her fight for potency she emerges successful. The turning point in Rennie's life came, when she flew to the Caribbean Island. She is strongly repelled by Lora's dirty hand and fingernails "bitten to the quick, stub—tipped, slightly grubby, the raw skin around the nail nibbled as if mice have been at them"(BH, p.86). Rennie does not want "to touch this gnawed hand, or have it touch her" (BH, p.86). But in the prison, when she witnesses the brutal treatment done to Lora, she feels compassion for her. Even though Rennie has always tried to evade "massive involvement" in the Caribbean Islands, however, she could not avoid it. Even though she does not like Lora, her cell - mate, she takes the hand of the bloodily—beaten Lora, lying unconscious on the prison floor, in her hand. She "hauls



Lora over to the driest corner of the room and sits with her, pulling Lora's head and shoulders onto her lap"(BH, p.298). Though Lora appears possibly dead, Rennie holds her hand "perfectly still, with all her strength"(BH, p.299) and believes, "if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, and something will get born"(BH, p.299). Now, she understands why her grandmother used to think in her senility that she has lost her hands, symbolizing her loss of contact with life. Rennie's will to hold Lora's hands ritualistically "affirms her will to participate in the deeper processes of human intercourse." Now she can no longer ignore the faceless strangers as she feels "there's no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is some one's it has a name"(BH, p.299). She has in a way regained her 'lost hands' i.e., her contact with life and realizes that "she is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything"(BH, p.290). She has come to know the importance of human connectedness. She is deeply changed now by her experiences. Rennie's compassion for Lora and her "ritualistic reaching out" re-affirms her allegiance to humanity and she symbolically regains her identity as a whole human being as against her earlier incomplete self."⁷ Now she has become a three- dimensional person. For the first time, "She's paying attention, that's all"(BH, p.301). For the first time she has felt compassion for the sufferings of people around her; "What she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it. It's all exactly the same. Nothing is the same"(BH, p.300). On her flight back to Canada, Rennie feels as if "she's returning after a space trip, a trip into the future; it's her that's been changed but it will seem as if everyone else has"(BH, p.300).

Rennie's experiences have made her what "she was not one a once but now she is, a reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report"(BH, p.300). The Canadian official's request to Rennie not to write about what has happened to her has no effect on her. She takes a vow to report everything to the larger world. Now "in any case she is a subversive"(BH, p.301), what they have always accused her of. But in the final paragraph, Rennie again makes an ambiguous statement that "he will never be rescued"(BH, p.301) and immediately in the following sentence she says, "she has already been rescued"(BH, p.301). Whether "she is actually released from the physical prison is not the point; rather, we are told that she can never be rescued now from this knowledge of human barbarity and yet that knowledge, paradoxically, frees her from her aloof detachment toward others and releases in her for the



first time genuine compassion for the hurts and sufferings of her fellow human beings." Instead of returning to her shallow existence again, now she will always be concerned about the fate of the human beings around her.

Thus, by the end of the novel Rennie has moved away from passive acceptance to active participation. She shows a greater awareness of the self - destroying nature of patriarchal structures of power and dominions in inter - personal relationships and this recognition although does not entail a violent retaliation nonetheless equips and enables Rennie to cope with the contingent reality better than before.

Notes

1 Sorcha Gunne and Z B Thompson , *Feminism,Literature and Rape Narratives*(New York: Roulledge,2010), p.8

2 Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm*(Toronto:McClelland and Stewart,1981),p.102. All subsequent references to the text of this novel are from the same edition and page numbers in all cases have been given within the parentheses immediately after the quotation.

3 Shashi Deshpande,*The Dark Holds No Terrors*(New Delhi: Penguin Books,1980),p80.

4 Quoted in R K Dhawan, *Indian Women Novelists*,Set III,Vol 4(New Delhi: PrestigeBooks,!995),p.61

5 Shashi Deshpande,*The Binding Vine*(New Delhi:Penguin Books,1992),p.58. . All subsequent references to the text of this novel are from the same edition and page numbers in all cases have been given within the parentheses immediately after the quotation.

6 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*(London,Penguin Classics,2010),p.38.

7 MF Salat,*The Canadian Novel:A Search for Identity*(Delhi:BR Publishing Corporation,1993),p74.