

Didactic Strands in Geo-Physical Pattern of Atwood's *Bodily Harm*

Dr. Raj Kumar Sharma

Asst. Professor of English
Al-Kharj University, Saudi

Dr. Asra Sultana Mouda

Asst. Professor of English
Dammam University, Saudi

ABSTRACT

Feminism emerged as one of the predominant themes of postmodern literature. It got many ardent advocates who considered the sufferings of female folk as their own suffering and tried to vent their protest against this injustice through writings. Margaret Atwood, a renowned Canadian novelist, stands as an important pillar among feminist writers whose literary works reveal an inordinate degree of angst and ire against those who have exploited the weaker sex to satisfy their carnal passions. Along with this feministic aspect, she expresses her serious concern over the exploitation of Canada by America that she portrays through metaphoric juxtaposition in her work *Bodily Harm*. This novel amply testifies both of her concerns that she has tried to project through an artistic pattern. This research paper attempts to explore all such constituents of the novel that justify her stand over these two issues, and bring to light the didactic elements that this design enfold.

KEYWORDS

Didactic Elements; Feminism; Postmodern Literature.

Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* embodies a brilliant artistic pattern interwoven with unconventional and seemingly incoherent constituents like human body and geography that persuasively leads to the emergence of some popular postmodern themes like feminism, cross-cultural assaults and global power politics. The coinage 'Geo-Physical' implies Atwood's concerns for the deplorable condition of Canada reeling under the exploitative nefarious designs of global power, America, on one hand, and the suppression of the rights of women in a predominantly patriarchal society that invariably subjects them to physical

exploitation, on the other hand. The title of the novel manifests the afflictions and tortures perpetrated by the powerful on the powerless in all the possible domains reflecting the pseudo-sophisticated veneer of contemporary, ultra-modern society. The postmodernism as a concept endeavours to peep into all the psychological conduits that an individual or institution designs in order to fulfill inordinate consumerist desires and the esteem needs, making victimization, oppression and exploitation of the masses inevitable. This paper attempts to explore all such shades of postmodernist trends manifested through the geo-physical

pattern and strives to project the didactic overtones that maybe deduced from the trodden canvas of the novel.

The broad canvas of *Bodily Harm* enfolds many feministic issues relating to body, sex and pornography, with a view to interpreting themes which are relevant and vital in the contemporary scenario in the sense that it may pave the way for the amelioration of society. The themes centre around the issues like: the problem of power politics, power and body, patriarchy, identity of women, Canada's political predicament, the theme of philosophy, didacticism, escapism, CIA agents, the realms of fantasy elements, the corruption in the governmental organizations and spy in the network of system. *Bodily Harm* also explicitly states the perils and risks in manufacturing and trading lethal weapons along with the risks women are prone to, especially in the alien lands.

The title *Bodily Harm* evokes many layers of meanings, such as 'body' being the subject of undue torture and victimization both physical and psychological for which there is no solution unless the repressed victim asserts her autonomy or identity. Woman is absolutely powerless in the patriarchal society where she is a victim of diabolic crude desire of man. *Bodily Harm* also denotes the mutilation of the body of the protagonist in the form of mastectomy, while the removal of one of her breast results into the removal of her lover Jake, who abandons her. The moral implied here is that the body which is usually the locus of power and adoration loses its identity in the case of impending mutilation. This is truly a postmodern theme, dexterously handled by Atwood. It further connotes the harm done to Canada by America that subjects it to heavy exploitation as a nation. Atwood herself being a student of philosophy weaves the multiple themes so meticulously that the

text becomes replete with didactic and philosophical tenets.

The protagonist Renata Wilford, a typical ambitious white Canadian journalist is avidly determined to expose the lifestyles not seen. Atwood delineates through a male artist in *Bodily Harm*, "what art does, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can see it" (208).

Harbouring this notion, Atwood takes up the issues festering contemporary society with reformatory zeal and considers writing as the most effective medium through which desirable changes can be realized. Cixous, the French feminist strongly advocates this idea in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa":

Woman must write herself: must write about woman and bring woman to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text –as into the world and into history by her movement. (875).

Simultaneously there is a section of active feminists, who believe that there is a wide chasm between the plights of women exposed and actual reality. Economy, social stability and family harmony play a crucial role in the structuring of women's role in society, and female body becomes a locus of empowerment due to which she either survives gloriously or succumbs to male domination. In the delineation of Rennie-Jake relationship, feminine naivety and male lecherous euphoria can be discerned because everything takes a smooth sail till the mastectomy of Rennie which is instrumental in bringing out the true colour of Jake to surface. "When she loved Jake, she loved everything. She felt She was walking inside a charmed circle: nothing could touch her, nothing could touch them (72). She wants "quite companionship" (101) and "life-long

goals" (126). Jake represents a sort of quite casual and easy going attitude. "If you don't like the road, don't go, said Jake, smiling at her. I am not too good at life-time goals. Right now I like the road" (125). Rennie patiently undergoes all reviling attacks and torments without any resentment which Jake is consciously perpetrating on her. At one point when Rennie expresses her desire of having babies, Jake rebuffs curtly, " I am not a mind man, I am more interested in your body, if you want the truth" (104). Jake is one example of how, many men like Jake in society abuse and torture the body of the female and this is a monumental example of their masculinity bereft of all human affections and affinity for the women, the weaker sex.

The novel deals with the nature of violence, human cruelty and victimization of women. The leitmotif underlying the novel is suggested by an epigram from John Burger's *Ways of Seeing* which says, 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 be and cannot be done to her. Howells observes, "*Bodily Harm* shows that female bodies are all passive, distorted, dismembered and coerced, witnesses to the sexual power politics of the Burger epigraph" (120). Thus, Rennie is a typical example of "oppression in all manifestations, both physical and psychological," comments Rigney (104). Pilar Somacarrera in her essay "Power Politics: Power and Identity" articulates, "Personal is political." This well-known feminist slogan from 1970s provides an adequate synopsis of Margaret Atwood's poetry collection of *Power Politics* (1971). Atwood has always been concerned with the interface between the public and personal worlds, and she has often referred to the blurry boundaries between them. According to Atwood:

Power circulates like a kind of energy that permeates in all relations

within a society. Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and we do, invisible and soundless like air . . . We would all like to have a private life that is sealed off from the public and different from it, where there are no rules and ruled, no hierarchies, no politicians, only equals, free people, but because any culture is a closed system and our culture is one based and fed on one that is impossible, or at least very difficult . . . so many of the things we do in that sadly we think of as our personal lives are simply duplications of the external world of power games, power struggles" (Conversations 7)

It is the same game of power that enters in the life of Rennie-Jake relationship. Rennie cannot distinguish any more between her lover's sadomasochistic game and real oppression. These lines indicate it.

Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat, and she really did stop breathing. Danger turns you on, he says. Admit it. It was a game, they both knew that. (207)

Emma Parker comments about Jake's behavior thus:

It is a method of male domination, since by stopping the life-giving flow between brain and body, it physically enforces the ideological dichotomy between mind and body which forms the basis of the hierarchical system of gender polarity which informs the whole of western metaphysics and culture. (363)

Bodily Harm, comments Bouson, "focuses on the contrast between affluent thinking and the brutal reality of power and sexual politics" (111). In the process

of his pseudo love life with Rennie, Jake's callous remarks on woman bespeaks of his approach to life, and his mindset about woman in particular. "What is a woman...A head with a cunt attached or a cunt with head attached? Depends on which end you start at. It was understood between them that this was a joke" (235). Jake is very clever and a subtle exploiter. He exploits her, using her for the satisfaction of his carnal desires. Dorothy Jones says, "Jack, Rennie's foxy, saturnine lover is a trickster" (91). There is another blow to her when her apartment is ransacked by an unknown stranger and she sees a coil of rope in her bedroom; consequently what she encounters is the callousness of the policemen, which is a typical example of the members of patriarchy:

You close the curtains in the bathroom when you take a shower? You close the curtains when you get dressed at night? . . . He wanted it to be my fault, just a little, some indiscretion, some provocation (14-15).

The coil of rope in her bedroom in Toronto and the intruder, pose a volley of questions in her mind, she is bemused, bewildered and her peace is gone. She ruminates:

In itself it was neutral, and useful too, you could use it for all kinds of things . . . And when you pulled on the rope, which after all reached into darkness, what would come up? What was at the end, the end? A hand, then an arm, a shoulder and finally a face. At the end of the rope there was someone. Everyone had a face, there was no such thing as a faceless stranger (41)

The dream of this man continues, even in Caribbean island even after she meets Paul who understands Rennie. Paul does not treat her as a pawn of emotional

urge. Rennie feels reassured with his soothing touch and love of comfort. Yet the dream of coil and the man, intruder continues:

Rennie is dreaming about the man with the rope, again, again. He is the only man who is with her now, he has followed her, he was here all along, he was waiting for her. Sometimes she thinks it is Jake...; sometimes she thinks it is Daniel... But it is not either of them, it is not Paul,....The face keeps changing, eluding her, he might as well be invisible, she can't see him, this is what is so terrifying, he isn't really there, he is only a shadow, anonymous, familiar with silver eyes, that twin and reflect her own. (287)

Rennie is jolted between the thought of the past and the nagging experience of the present making her future elusive. She feels torn between the two worlds, bereft of hope or redemption. The anguish and pain of torture induced by the mastectomy, performed by a male gynecologist Dr. Daniel Louma, leaves her incomplete. Ann Howells observes in her book on Margaret Atwood thus:

Bodily Harm is another version of writing the female body.... from the point of view of a woman whose own body is damaged by cancer and mastectomy. From the 'post-operative' angle, she scrutinizes social myths of femininity, medical discourse on breast cancer and, the rhetoric of pornography; this novel is emphatically not about bodily pleasure but about Bodily Harm. (106)

Atwood dexterously depicts the ambience in the situation: on the one hand "sexual mutilation", and on the other, Jake delighting in external fopperies, when Rennie's room is furnished with naked

pictures "like thighs". This is in tune with Jake's sexual fantasy. The juxtaposition of a very serious issue like the breast cancer and the surgery on the one hand, and the sexual fantasy on the other, exacerbate the gravity of the situation. Howell says:

Jake's rapist fantasies are similar to the early 1980s feminist anti-pornography position which asserted strong links between pornography as misogynist power fantasy and male violence against women (121)

This element of fantasy continues throughout the novel and Atwood perhaps employs this fantasy element as a trick, to alleviate the psychological aberrations of the victim. Daniel figures in her fantasies. She dreams that Daniel "..... Knows something about her she doesn't know, he knows what she's like inside" (80-81). Despite pain and anguish, fantasy continues. The scar on her breast is as "the kiss of death on her ..." (201). Daniel responds reluctantly and answers evasively to her shooting question.

You're not dead yet. You're a lot more alive than many people.... But she wants a definite answer....definite, the real truth, one way or the other. Then she will know what she should do next. It's this suspension, hanging in a void, this half-life she can't bear. She can't bear not knowing. (60)

Rubenstein views Rennie as being double victim:

Some of Rennie's anxieties about invasion and violation can be understood through the cultural attitudes towards both the female flesh and cancer; Rennie is a double victim, of both disease and exploitation. Men worship the breast, and women internalize the male over-valuation of this aspect of their anatomy. Because it is also associated with the actual and symbolic qualities of nurturance, the loss of part or all of a breast

effects a woman's sense of procreative capabilities, after her operation, Rennie wonders and worries whether she'll be able to bear a child. (264)

Rennie depicts the predicament of a woman in a male dominated society. The way she has been used first by Jake who believes that life cannot be enjoyed with a sick woman, and later by Daniel who victimizes her by his technological assault on her, stands witness to the real attitude of a male towards a female. In the light of this context, here is a remark made by Rubenstein that the inimical atrocities perpetrated by technology attest "the paradoxes of patriarchy: the opposing stances of healing and destruction as practiced in the characteristically male institutions of medicine and politics." (264)

After the intruder episode, Rennie flies to the fictional Caribbean island -St. Antoine and St. Agathe. She dreams of higher prospects in a foreign land, but ironically falls in the wicked company of manufacturers of lethal weapons. She chances upon Paul an American whose active involvement with guns detracts her from him in future. Yet, she feels him to be a good substitute after being exploited and violated in her sexual relationship by Jake and Dr. Daniel. Unlike Jake or Daniel, who have used her for their sexual and emotional needs, Paul takes her for what she is, she feels enlivened by his touch on her damaged body. She regains confidence in herself and her body.

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before . . . This much is enough. She's open now, she's been opened.... She enters her body again and there's a moment of pain, incarnation.... She's still here on the earth, she's grateful he's touching her, she can still be touched. (204)

The thought that men are not reliable persists in Rennie's mind. This revelation of the fact about exploitation, and ingenuous submission of women to ingenious design of men can be envisioned as a feministic awakening. She considers that involvement in love affairs is "like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles" (102). She feels an urgency to run away from the meaningless involvement with men. Their sexual liking or lust for personal motives takes on larger perceptions on the political scale.

The metaphoric relationship between the female body and Canada connects the politics of sexual power with the politics of colonial domination. Like women, Canada is also emerging from a "deadly brain-washing". The awakening of Rennie stands in semblance with the emergence of Canada as a nation striving to establish its identity in isolation from the clutches of America. Canada as a geographical entity and political force appears to have failed miserably in projecting itself as a recognizable power. The dominance of America has subjected it to a colonial status leading to its mass exploitation at several levels. The protagonist of the novel, Rennie, and Canada undergo the same kind of predicament marked by oppression, assault and exploitation at the hands of powerful entities like males and America respectively. Canada is as much unmindful as is Rennie in being exploited by the powerful. In this sense, *Bodily Harm* is a political novel that endeavours to highlight the interplay of international politics. Rennie is unable to understand the nefarious design of her lovers that compounded her problems of life, and likewise, Canada fails to manage the national problems like poverty, illiteracy and preservation of cultural identity. Atwood has aptly drawn parallels between her protagonist and nation suggesting the wakening call, and herein, lies the justification of her artistic effort.

A brilliant didactic design emanates from the sensitive reading of predicaments encountered by the protagonist, Rennie and Canada as a nation. What Atwood apparently seems to emphasize is that sometimes things go beyond our control, taking ruinous shapes shattering all our dreams and higher prospects, and what remains is only infamy, suffering and torture. This is obvious in the case of Rennie who faces imprisonment and ignominy on an alien soil. This didactic element is something specific in *Bodily Harm*. Atwood insists that we all need to have a perception of the society, perception of the things around us, lacking which we encounter failure and misery. Dr. Minnow, a native of St. Agathe, upon returning to his native place reprimands Rennie, "We will call you an observer . . . Look with your eyes open and you will see the truth of the matter" (133-34). This is what Atwood emphatically drives home, and this proper perception alone will remove the ills of society and ameliorate them. Ancestral roots exercise a profound influence in shaping a person's personality and have a direct bearing on one's life and prospects. Her early ancestral upbringing in Griswold does not seem to evoke all that is congenial aura in her mind. Her gritty recollection of Griswold is somewhat gloomy as if a devilish plant has been nurtured in a garden or villa haunted by a ghost.

A subground ... full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones . . . Those who had been lately clamouring for roots had never seen a root up close. Mostly she tries to avoid thinking about Griswold at all. Griswold, she hopes, is merely something she defines herself against. (18)

Here, Atwood tries to depict Rennie's impressions to justify her behaviour in later phases of life. She constantly looked for the fulfillment of some void space in

her personality and went on inviting problems one after another, especially in love affairs. This void might have resulted from her dissatisfaction over the ways of upbringing. It is true that our mind remains like a clean slate in childhood and whatever comes to it through family gets deep-rooted finally leading to the fossilization of belief systems that filter all the inputs of later stages of life.

Rennie recapitulates her childhood, her grandmother's application to life. She is taught the lessons of decency each now and then, even to the degree of her vexation. She says:

As a child I learned three things well: how to be quiet, 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. The silences are almost visible; the objects in the house were another form of silence. Clocks, vases, end-tables, cabinets, figurines, cruet sets, cranberry glasses, china plates. They were considered important because they had once belonged to someone else. They were both overpowering and frail: overpowering because threatening. What they threatened you with was their frailty; they were always on the verge of breaking. These objects had to be cleaned and polished once a week, by my grandmother when she was still well enough and afterwards by my mother. It was understood that you could never sell these objects or give them away. The only way you could ever get rid of them was to will them to someone else and then die. The objects weren't beautiful, most of them. They weren't supposed to be. They were only supposed to be of the right kind: the standard aimed at was not beauty but decency. (54-5)

These lines clearly indicate Rennie's disgust towards the preachings of her grandmother. Atwood has tried to suggest that excess of emphasis on an issue like morality leads to the loss of effect and at the same time, it forces an

individual to seek escape as it so happens in the case of Rennie. Atwood covertly advises to strike a judicious balance between the freedom and confinement, especially for the weaker sexes who stand vulnerable to victimization. The brittle nature of objects kept in the house manifests the fragile nature of life itself and it really makes life intimidating. Therefore, a sound nurture engenders discipline in life that largely helps in stabilizing it.

Optimism is another vital factor and essence of life. Atwood reinforces this aspect through the utterances of Rennie. Renata Wilford whose name suggests being "born again" is in a way being born again after the holocaust of her experiences in the Caribbean island. She flies to Caribbean island, the fictional place where she encounters horrendous experiences including prison life and brutal treatment by the police guards. According to Lorna Irvine, *Bodily Harm* illustrates ironically, "inscription of the female body and, by connecting hospital room and jail cell, dramatically presents the injury to the female body that results from its confinement" (96). At one point Rennie bursts with predictive optimism and solace, affirming herself. "She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky, suddenly, finally, she is overflowing with luck, it is this luck holding her up." (301). She cannot see face to face the physical assault and brutal treatment given to Lora, Paul's mistress, in the prison. Again Rennie in a mood of optimism, takes Lora's hand, "Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move, and live again, something will get reborn" (299). Positive attitude to life, optimism, faith and conviction even in the face of atrocities, are the hallmarks of the novel which Atwood drives home successfully.

Paul Farmer, a physician and anthropologist commenting on injustice

and inequality in his *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights* opines regarding rights and social equality to the afflicted providing pragmatic service to the afflicted is one form of intervention. In other words, we cannot exclude social and economic rights from the campaign for social and human rights (402).

He further argues that the problem lies not with the victims, but with the fact that our world—and the landscape of life chances with it—is calibrated to the workings of a competition-driven market economy that has “lost its soul”. Instead of allowing individual destinies to run their course free from interference, these political and economic forces predetermine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm. In the current era, human rights violations are both local and global. We must avoid becoming wittingly or unwittingly, abettors of neo-liberal policies that declare every service and everything to be for sale. The elemental priority of all human activities should pay heed to the gross suffering and physical cruelty like torture, beatings, killing, rape and assault in the third world countries particularly and seek the panacea for such maladies. Paul Farmer argues for the intellectual recognition of structural violence as a necessary step to show solidarity with those who suffer increasingly harsh in “new world order.” Rennie’s gesture of empathy in taking Lora’s hand takes on the saga of intellectual recognition of structural violence, the didactic element which Atwood successfully interweaves.

Linda Hutcheon remarks in *The Canadian Postmodern* that the novel is “about human rights and politics” (153). Howells remarks about Atwood’s mystification of power politics through her protagonists, who are the metaphoric representation of victimization at the gender and national scenario in *Private and Fictional Worlds* thus:

Her protagonists are not innocent; instead they are shown to be the collaborators in cultural myths shared both by women and men. For Atwood these myths are not confined to power relations between the sexes but form the basic assumptions for all patriarchal structures. It is a logical consequence of her vision that national and gender politics should mesh together in a colonial fiction like *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (56)

In Caribbean island, what Rennie expected was totally different and what she totally undergoes is different; all due to politics, power politics. She is no longer the agile woman caught in the world of journalism; she is caught unawares in the public world of politics, traffic, contraband prison, so on and so forth. Atwood said, “I was writing a spy story from the point of view of one of the ignorant peripherally involved women” (*Conversations* 59). Rennie’s doleful experience in the prison cell is an explicitly apparent example of politics, politics of power, and atrocious, inhuman treatment. Through the prison window, she observes the brutal beatings of the deaf and dumb man in the island. This scene represents the ugly face of colonialism that promotes all sorts of inhuman acts in order to continue in power.

Atwood, thus, has hinted towards a lot of maladies festering modern society which may rightly be attributed to the rampant growth of consumerism that results into mass oppression and exploitation. She has amply highlighted the chinks deep-rooted in the difference between professed ideological frame and its practice by the powerful in all manifestations. Through this, she has tried to expose the ostentatious designs of the ruling classes under which they go on wielding their authorities for mass

perpetration. At the same time, her concern for providing a very sound upbringing to all individuals sends a universal message cutting across cultural differences when she considers it as a precondition for the healthy growth of our personality. Amidst all the oddities that the protagonist encounters, her optimism

sustains reaffirming our faith in spring following winter. This optimism reveals the self-confidence of Atwood who is largely aware of the inherent potential of the exploited mass that will rise up to the occasion and liberate itself from the shackles of domineering forces.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Bodily Harm*. London: Virago Press, 1981.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Conversations*. Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. London: Virago, 1992. 142.
- Bouson, J Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993. III.
- Carrington, Ildiko De Papp. "Another Symbolic Descent." Rev. of *Bodily Harm* by Margaret Atwood. *Essays on Canadian Writing*. 26. (1983): 61-62.
- Cixous, Helene. "*The Laugh of the Medusa*." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4 Summer 1976. 875.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Margaret Atwood*. London: Macmillan Private Limited, 1996. 106-128.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English, Canadian Fiction*. Toronto, New York, Oxford: OUP, 1988. 8-153.
- Irvine, Lorna. "The Here and Now of *Bodily Harm*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Ed. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Gordon Castro. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. 96.
- Jones, Dorothy. "Waiting for the Rescue: A discussion of Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*" *Kunapipi*. 6.3. (1984): 91.
- Parker, Emma. "You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood." *Twentieth Century Literature*. 41.3 Fall (1995): 350-363.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Women Writers - Margaret Atwood*. Macmillan: UK, 1987. 104.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. "Pandora' Box and Female Survival: Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*" *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Judith McComs. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988. 264.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Private and Fictional Worlds: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970 and 1980*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. EC4P4EE. Google books
- Paul Farmer. *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*. Berkeley, California: U of California Press, 2003. 402.
- Somacarrera, Pilar. "Power Politics: Power and Identity." *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells. Cambridge University Press. 2006. Cambridge Collections Online. 23 September 2009. OI:10.1017/CCOL0521839661.004.