

THE CONCEPT OF THE OBJECTIFICATION OF THE OTHER IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S BODILY HARM AND LADY ORACLE

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Abstract

The twentieth century Canadian feminist Margaret Atwood's voice for the marginalized gender is heard in her early novels like *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976) *Life before Man* (1979) and *Bodily Harm* (1981). With her novels, the Canadian novel began to take a new turn in the 1960s. *Bodily Harm* and *Lady Oracle* focus on the contrast between imaginary and the brutal reality of power and sexual politics with special emphasis on feminine vulnerability. The concept of 'the other' that "man is the One and woman is the Other" (Beauvoir) has been foregrounded by feminists. The power structures - colonial power structure and patriarchy exploit the female gender and the female sex feels victimized in their collective unconsciousness and they imbibe within them the subaltern psyche. The women realize the importance of identity formation through which they can subvert patriarchal and colonial powers. This paper deals with various aspects of bodily harm - cancer - suffered by Rennie in *Bodily Harm* and excessive fatness of Joan in *Lady Oracle*, the paradigms of identity crisis, loss of identity and displacement which are traditionally associated with femininity. Atwood's texts reveal the Canadian social structure and culture which make the body of woman as an object. Both the novels expose the pathetic condition of woman as the 'other'. 'Othering', in this context, refers to the marginal condition of women as they are treated as objects. Subjectivity

Keywords: objectification, feminist, marginalized gender, power structures, colonial, patriarchy, subaltern psyche, identity formation, identity crisis, displacement, femininity, Canadian social structure, and 'the other'.

Feminist writers like Doris Lessing, Anita Nair, Mahasweta Devi, Toni Morrison AND Margaret Atwood have explored the theme of subjectivity of women in the postcolonial male-oriented society. Though the term 'subjectivity' seems a positive word as subject is a noun that "indicates self-determining agency, but as a verb it describes the process of being defined and controlled by external forces", (Radha Chakravarty 97) thereby the paradox of women's subjectivity due to "various cultural and economic forces...shape and limit women's experience". (Chakravarty 97)

The themes of colonial exploitation and gender inequality are handled realistically by Atwood as she exposes the pathetic plight of women whose physicality and mentality are

unconsciously shaped by patriarchal culture. Such controlling authorities of the colonial power structures become a metaphor for exploitation of the women. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines objectification thus: “Objectification is a notion central to feminist theory. It can be roughly defined as the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, *as an object*” (2) This gender marginality is seen in the protagonist Rennie’s (B H) internal torment and physical as well as psychological trauma in Joan’s (LO) troubled childhood, the protagonist’s relationship with men and the violent postcolonial society at large. Her passive acceptance and submissiveness take a different shape as her female body is representative of sexuality and power. “Being men those who have made and compiled the laws have favoured their own sex, and jurists have elevated these laws into principles” (Beauvoir 681) and “,, it is not the biological fact that women have children that is the cause of women’s subordination, but, rather, the cultural construction of mothering and sexuality that defines women’s status.” (Susan Herman 93).

Woman is imprisoned in her body and she is a prisoner in her house. Thus, her marginal position in the society due to the objectification, fragmentation, denial of autonomy, subjectivity and, physical and epistemic violence infuse in her guilty conscience. Atwood's novel explores this dilemma of a woman's objectivity due to "objective, immanent body" (BH49), and her readiness to open herself to anyone who offers her love. Being the other, powerlessness of a new kind creeps in Rennie Wilford, a young Canadian journalist, travel reporter, and a survivor of the breast cancer. Due to her bodily harm, she is emotionally and physically falling apart as she is disturbed by “violating gazes” and as days go by, she learns to adopt herself. One day, Rennie listens to “a woman’s voice, wordless, and mindless. Before she places it, she bears it as agony” (49). Her sexual vulnerability and psychological repression make her experience “the blood running through her body, which is still alive, she thinks of her cells” (106). Thus, body gives woman the status of otherness which is often humiliated in the postcolonial, male-oriented society.

Cancer is used as a metaphor for human condition and breast cancer has left the protagonist with a partial mastectomy and her boyfriend Jake has left her because he is disgusted with her illness. Due to the reduction to body and silencing develop in her guilty-consciousness which is a postcolonial syndrome. When Jake tells her to put her arms over her head so that it “lifts the breasts” (105), she tells herself “A secure woman is not threatened by her partner’s fantasies” (105). Jake tries to reshape Rennie into the image of an eroticized female. This indicates clearly how women are largely treated as objects and the other by the male chauvinists in the Canadian society.

Rennie’s objectification makes her think that the female is nothing but the body. She is often emotionally disturbed by the mark of scar on her body. When the radiologist tells her that she is in remission which makes her think of “bus stations: the end of the line. Love relationship is nothing but the power relations between male and female. 'It took her more time than she should have to realise that she was one of the things Jake was packaging.' (BH 106). He is 'an animal in the dark’ who is a predator ready to pounce on the prey and for him his “beloved woman is only one value among others” (Beauvoir 713)

After her love affair with Jake, her encounter with Paul and the love experience with him gave Rennie a new meaning in life and she realizes the healing power of love. “She is open now, she’s been opened, she’s being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there’s a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body’s desperation...” (BH 204). Her relationship with her lover Jake makes her feel "hooked like a junkie". She realizes that her love

relationship with other men is meaningless as they prove to be selfish. When Rennie gets arrested and imprisoned in Central America prison, she comes into contact with Lora who endures sex torture by the prison guard. Lora's stepfather raped her when she was a child. Male domination, victimization, bodily harm and female subordination themes are portrayed through the victimized Lora who is beaten and killed by the policemen. Rennie takes Lora's injured hand and gives her full strength hoping, "something will move and live again, something will get born" (BH 299). The inhuman male chauvinists like the hotel manager and the prison guard enjoy the bodily harm of women in predominantly patriarchal society.

.Dr. Daniel Luoma, a sixty year old male gynecologist who develops a passion for Rennie is another male brutality. His sexual mutilation is worse experience borne by her than her death by cancer. She is forced to have an affair with the doctor who ignores professional ethics. Dr. Minnow, the mentor and spiritual guide of Rennie makes her conscious of her duty as a writer. Her friend Jocasta makes her realize her feminine potentialities. Her new feminine consciousness makes her understand female exploitation and victimization bodily and psychologically. She begins to write a travel article and goes to the Caribbean but the island of St Antoine is not what she expects. There she finds corruption, political riots and violence. In this world, Rennie has to struggle to survive. "A significant element of the argument of radical feminists is their assertion that it is not the biological fact that women have children that is the cause of women's subordination, but, rather, the cultural construction of mothering and sexuality that defines women's status" (Harman 93).

The motif of *Bodily Harm* is a tool for depicting the sexual difference - the experience of power and powerlessness in relationships- which can be viewed from feminist object-relations theory. Feminists attribute women's lack of social power to repressed memories and social castration. The "notion of penis-envy need not be taken as simply concerning the male physical organ itself... , but as concerning the organ as an emblem of social power and the advantages which go with it". (Barry 131). Power is the major theme and Rennie gains physical, psychological and moral power to speak for the victimized and horrifying status of women. She conveys the message "In the woman's objectification, the female is nothing but the body and the female body is representative of sexuality" (Tandon 123). Radical feminists wish "to remove women's subordination without erasing their difference" (Herman 95).

With a sense of incompleteness, Rennie begins to withdraw herself from Jake as she avoids being "seen, the way she was, damaged, amputated" (BH 220). Her vulnerable feminine psyche gives her a feeling of being wounded due to the amputation of one of her breasts. She shows Paul "the scar, the missing piece, the place where death kissed her ..." (BH 226). Rennie embodies the victimized woman in a perverse world of wrongdoers. She becomes rigid and senses Jake's withdrawal from her and anticipates his plan to terminate his sexual relationship with her. Hence, she slowly tries to establish a relationship with Paul. Her longing for love makes her feel "grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched" (BH 226). Later, she realises that "Lately I feel I'm being used.... Raw material, she said" (236).

Joan (*L O*) too suffers physically and psychologically as her bodily harm-overweight - affects her relationship with men and alienation, depression, fear, and feeling of depravedness experienced by her whose childhood memories as an overweight child and her mother's constant criticism of her affected her self-worth and her relationship with men. Haunted by such memories, she visualises her mother as "the embodiment of her own failure and depression" (67). Joan's father an anaesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital is an insensitive and irresponsible husband who kills her by his suspicion of infidelity. This doctor 'healer' becomes a

‘killer’ as he goes to war abandoning his pregnant wife and returns home when Joan is five years old. His heartless behaviour makes Joan’s mother a silent victim at the hands of her father as a result of her undesired pregnancy. Joan feels unhappy to know that she is an accidental child of an insecure, unhappy and “menacing and cold” (LO 214) relationship. Joan is “a victim of sexist social pressures” (Ingersoll 75).

As a grown up woman, Joan in *Lady Oracle* fakes her own death with the help of two acquaintances, and then flees to Italy. Her affair with an eccentric man named the Royal Porcupine makes Fraser Buchanan who has found out about her secrets, blackmail her by threatening to tell her husband about it. Joan breaks her affair off with the Royal Porcupine and shortly after their breakup, Joan fears that Arthur knows about her affair and hence she fakes her death by drowning and creates a new life for herself as a novelist somewhere else under her pseudonym Louisa K. Delacourt. A woman’s right to pen her thoughts and establishing her identity as a writer is not welcome in this male-oriented world. Through this novel, Atwood exposes the destiny of women and their hopelessness forcing them to surrender themselves with the consequence of allowing their selves being destroyed. Social, cultural, political, physical, and psychological tribulations keep them internally and externally oppressed. This unfavorable situation due to physical, mental and social constraints, adversities and threats of a male chauvinistic society are responsible for their suffering and fragmentation.

Subjectivity is a philosophical feminist concept which specifies “how gender defines women’s treatment, occupations, and so on, but also how women perceive the personal, social and political meanings of being female” (Wikipedia). “In short, a subject in the Hegelian sense is subjected to subjection” (Wikipedia). The fragmented body of the woman is presented in the body of the objectified Rennie who is dictated by a marginal sensibility in *Bodily Harm*. The fragmentation of the personality of a woman leads to “indeterminate sense of identity” (BH 126). The postcolonial writer Atwood deals with the theme of victimization due to the female predicament and the writer through the protagonists attempt to “disrupt the dualistic polarizations, such as between the centre and the periphery” (Miura 147) and subvert the marginal body of a woman. The state of marginality is both real and imaginary for the female victims. Nancy Gibbs states: “Throughout history, any time women tried to loosen their corsets and breathe more freely, they met with a suffocating counterattack . . .” (43).

Female body gives woman the status of otherness which is often humiliated. Reasoning holds that women should cover their bodies. Atwood’s depiction of marginalized body has some identifying characteristics. Woman is imprisoned in her body and she is a prisoner in her house. Thus her marginal position in the society due to the objectification, fragmentation, and physical and epistemic violence infuse in her guilty conscience and the “objective, immanent body” (49) in Atwood’s novel explores this dilemma of a woman’s objectivity, and her predicament and readiness to open herself to anyone who offers her love. The subjectivity and the marginalization of female body happen as long as women, like Rennie, remain unaware of their power. Once the change occurs, “What she sees has not changed; only the way she sees it” (BH 300).

The motif of food, eating, and hunger is dealt with in *Lady Oracle* which is more implicit, an undercurrent at a symbolic and metaphorical level. “Fat is a feminist issue”, and “excess of body becomes symbolic of female resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions appropriate” (Molly Hite). Atwood questions society’s especially men’s attitudes to women’s body. In “*Lady Oracle: The Politics of the Body*” Marilyn Patton observes: “Margaret Atwood takes on the issue of cultural control of women (and women’s bodies) as represented in literature and in prescribed images or roles for women;” (31)

The issues of body, power, otherness, gender, class, ethnic orientation are handled with care with the representation of food, eating, and hunger by Atwood. The novels do not represent the voice of the other but the author exposes decadent society which lacks moral values which make Atwood's protagonists individuals with divided selves. Their voices are muted due to immutable differences, gender power-struggle, schizophrenic experiences, emotional vulnerability, sense of powerlessness, and colonial mentality which are identifying characteristics of the other.

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