

BODILY HARM: FROM ALIENATED SELF TO SPIRITUAL SELF

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the inner life of the protagonist, Rennie Wilford, a young journalist. The novel gives us a peep as it were into the life of two tiny Caribbean Islands of St. Antoine and Ste. Agathe with its politics, pathos, comedy and tragedy. But the focus is on the protagonist who works her way towards the goal of specialisation through a life of tensions and conflicts. This paper focuses on the process of self-discovery and re-humanisation against the inhuman treatment and it succeeds both as a powerful psychological and political novel. As a psychological novel, it traces Rennie's movement from a superficial, alienated existence towards spiritual survival, which includes a deeper awareness of self and others.

In *Bodily Harm*, the protagonist Rennie Wilford is a Toronto based lifestyle journalist who visits two tiny Caribbean Islands ostensibly to write a travel piece for her magazine *Visor* and to recover from a partial ablation. Margaret Atwood traces her internal anguish in dealing with this, her troubled childhood, her relationship with men and a violent society at large. Rennie tries to escape the traumatic experiences of her own past but unfortunately she escapes to an area that is politically abandoned by the British. As a journalist Rennie always carries a camera which symbolises “her tourist vision and identity” (Wilson 137). It is “a prison narrative” (Howell 111) with female subjects for whom marginality has become a condition of being because during her visit Rennie gets imprisoned by the corrupt politicians of Caribbean Islands and she writes her travelogue in a prison cell. In her travelogue Rennie includes all sorts of bodily harm committed on women such as the pornographic violation of women as shown in the Toronto Policeman's Pornography museum; Jake, her lover's sadism and the situation of rape; the humiliations she suffers in the prison, the torture she witnesses of the people crusading for human rights and civil liberties in the Caribbean Islands; detection of

cancer; and Lora's "non-violent" rape by her vicious stepfather. "The most wretched of all bodily harms is the brutality, torture, rape and heartless mutilation of Lora, Rennie's fellow prisoner in the Caribbean jail" (Prabhakar 68).

She does not want to belong to anybody and take any responsibility. But she liked Jake because he gratified her need to be admired. It was a relief to have a man say "that he thought she had a terrific body" (BH 104). To satisfy her neurotic need she loses and makes herself merge first with Jake, then with Daniel.

In this novel Atwood portrays women's position in the society, as Rennie transforms her image of middle class Canadian who is free from the dangers that other people from other classes and other cultures have to face. She tries to break free from her past and grasp onto a brighter future.

The protagonist Rennie Wilford spent her childhood in the narrow and inhibitory town of Griswold in Ontario. This Puritanical town assumes that everything happens as the will of God and believes that people get what they deserve. Rennie says that in Griswold, "what can you expect, you deserve it...everyone deserves the worst" (BH 18). Rennie regards Griswold as a "backdrop" rather than as her background. In order to live a free life she escapes to Toronto as a university student. After college she starts her career as a freelance journalist specialising in *Lifestyles* and she meets Jake with whom she starts living there. She is shattered as she is diagnosed of cancer requiring a partial mastectomy. Her operation is clinically successful still she continues to be stalked by the fear of recurrence. Before her operation, Rennie and Jake seem to be perfectly suitable to each other but after operation she realises that Jake was all along packaging her according to his taste and pleasure till he realises that the packing was rotting from inside. She blames herself for allowing him to use her as a commodity and makes up her mind to leave him.

Rennie envisions her surgeon, Dr. Daniel Luoma, as a replacement of Jake and develops infatuation towards him but that too ends badly. He possesses the healing touch that she comes to obsess about in his hand and her want and need for them to touch her. He saved her once from the cancer and Rennie thinks that he now accepts her with her body. But their sexual encounter does not take her out of the darkness and insecurity that overwhelmed her after the operation. She feels violated, victimised, raped as Daniel manages to take something of her, which she had not expected. Shortly afterwards, in one afternoon she returns to her apartment to discover that somebody has broken into her home in her absence. The intruder has left a length of rope coiled on the bed and Rennie is afraid that he will probably return. This threatening incident actuates Rennie's decision to leave Toronto. She persuades Keith, the editor of *Visor* magazine to let her do a travel piece and ends up with an assignment "off the beaten track": a Caribbean Island she "had never heard of" (BH 22).

Rennie's mental peace is disquieted by two significant events – first, a house break by a purportedly male burglar with the possible inculpated threat to her life symbolised by the length of the rope he had behind "coiled neatly on the quilt" (BH 13) invokes fears because it dawns on her that she is not "exempt". She is ordinary and vulnerable like any other ordinary person. And second, the reality of an operation which shakes her and gives a glimpse of her irreparable shattered sensibility. "My life is the pits right now", she feels "she can't bear not knowing. She doesn't want to know" (BH 60) the final diagnosis. Her mental state is revealed when she gives contradictory reactions of knowing the doctor's diagnosis. "She believed two things at once; that there was nothing wrong with her and that she was doomed anyway" (BH

23). Her imagination controls over her reasoning as she sees death lurking somewhere nearby. It is personified by the presence of a faceless stranger with a coiled rope in the room. Thus, the theft is associated in her imagination with that of the approaching fate.

Rennie decided she was being silly and possibly neurotic as well. She didn't want to turn into the sort of woman who was afraid of men. It's your own fear of death, she told herself. That's what any armchair shrink would tell you. You think you're dying, even though you've been saved. You should be grateful, you should be serene and profound but instead you're projecting onto some pathetic weirdo who's never going to bother you again (BH 40-41).

In the beginning, she is simply helpless and pretends not to see the reality of the operation and lets Jake also pretend that everything is normal. For that she has to make an intolerable effort. She also resorts to rationalisation that is a defense mechanism by which she conceals her true motivation by explaining her actions and feelings in a way that is not threatening. She assumes that their relationship is without strings and commitment, therefore failure is out of their "terms of reference". This rationalisation does not hold ground when Jake boasts his pride by saying that she is of no use to him now. This makes her feel guilty and his reproaches shatter her self-image. She responds to his maltreatment by becoming anxious, despondent or desperate, but she does not fight back. She hopes to win him by the appeal of passivity and on the ground of love. Thus she insists on "quiet companionship" (BH 101) and talks of "life-long goals" (BH 125). But Jake reacts contrary to her expectations, "if you don't like the road, don't go, said Jake, smiling at her. I'm not too good at life time goals. Right now I like the road" (BH 125). He ignores her wish to be pregnant as to him, having baby means to limit one's choices. "You don't want to limit your options too soon, said Jake, as if it was only her option that would be limited it had nothing to do with him" (BH 125).

Rennie is morbidly dependent on Jake so she cannot openly show her rage at his ill treatment which forges in indirect ways- in complaints, suffering, martyrdom and an increased desire to cling. But Jake damages all her pretexts. "I'm not a mind man. I'm more interested in your body, if you want the truth" (BH 104). He makes her ashamed of herself by withdrawing physically and psychically. Rennie is offended on seeing him having relationship with another woman. The thought that she has been merely a sexual object to him is nauseating for her, because it reduces her identity to nothing.

When Jake broke off their relationship, Rennie was thrown into the turmoil of despair and shock, particularly because he discarded her by saying that he did not want to go on with her after this operation. "When Jake moved out, naturally there was a vacuum. Daniel fills the vacuum made by Jake's separation in Rennie's life. He, a male gynaecologist, has performed a partial mastectomy on her. He takes his job very seriously and works hard to help his patients recover both physically and psychologically.

Rennie expects Daniel to fulfil all her hopes connected with the magic helper. He provides her safety and saves her from fear of exposure which has badly affected her psyche. Rennie rationalises that with the doctor, there is no fear of exposure as he already knows her inside out and it was "safe, there was absolutely nothing he could demand" (BH 143). In order to rationalise her new relationship she asserts to herself that she fell in love with the doctor because he knows "something about her she does not know, he knows what she is like inside" (BH 81). Moreover Daniel is "fantasy for her; a fantasy about the lack of fantasy, a fantasy of

the normal” (BH 237). Daniel also acknowledges this relationship, “I’m a fantasy for you. It is normal” (BH 101). He, too, is dependent on her emotionally. Daniel violates the professional ethics by taking advantage of her in her emotional state.

Fromm says that if the helpers are also dependents, it strengthens the impression that this relationship is one of real love. In her relationship with Daniel, Rennie wants something ‘definite’, the real truth, one way or the other to know what she should do next. She is unable to accept this abeyance, dangling and ignorance. “She can’t bear not knowing” (BH 60) but Daniel is afraid of emotional commitment, and is unable to offer her anything but banalities. He is also a self effacing man and wants an escape, “a little but not too much, a window but not a door” (BH 195). He admits that he is fond of Rennie but neurotic compulsions would not let him express it. “I’m not good at that sort of thing, Daniel said. I’d resent you for it and I don’t want that. I care about you. I care what happens to you. I guess I think I can do more for you as your doctor; I’m better at it” (BH 196). But Rennie is not satisfied with this, she has an aggressive urge for sexual union with him:

She wanted to lie down beside him and touch him and be touched by him; at the moment she believed in it, the touch of the hand that could transform you, change everything, magic. She wanted to see him lying with his eyes closed, she wanted to see him and not be seen, and she wanted to be trusted. She wanted to make love with him, very slowly, she wanted it to last a long time, she wanted the moment just before coming, helplessness hours of it, she wanted to open him up (BH 195-96).

During her visit to the Caribbean Island, Rennie has to face some political situations. She is accused of massive involvement in the Island’s current political affairs. Rennie is arrested for about two-weeks in a Central American prison where she comes in contact with Lora Lucas, a fellow prisoner. Lora tells Rennie about her upbringing and the eventual rape by her stepfather. Lora says, “He hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him” (BH 114). Her mother is also a helpless victim and she lives her life as the will of destiny. Her life with her husband is much like an accident. Her mother occupies the victim position number two that is to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but the acceptance of it as something inevitable.

Lora belongs to the lower class, a loose, dishevelled woman who gets what she deserves by Griswold’s standard. She attacks her step father and escapes from home and starts working in a boat. She is shocked to know that all men around expect her to sleep with them and the condition is either to comply or to lose the job. The social and sexual oppression that Lora experiences is different from Rennie’s. In a male-dominated society, her voice remains unheard. Lora is exploited by the prison guard for sex in return for news about her lover Prince of Peace. She is finally silenced, victimised, beaten and killed by the policemen. For Rennie, Lora thus becomes a symbol of the weak and helpless mass of humanity.

Another victim Rennie finds in prison is a “deaf and dumb man” whom she encounters several times. He is a homeless, victimised beggar whom Rennie first sees lying on the steps of her hotel. She is frightened as he ran after her to shake her hands. The next time she sees him being beaten by the police in the street. Though he “has a voice but no words” (BH 290), he manages to convey the truth to others. His physical condition and the expression in his eyes gain sympathy from Rennie. He represents “the vast mass of people in the world crippled by

poverty whom ignorance and political tyranny have deprived of their capacity to proclaim the suffering and injustice of their plight” (Jones 96).

Rennie represents all women who, through the influence of culture, have become passive and allowed themselves to be taken advantage by men whom they are eager to please. She allows herself to fill the man’s gaze as she is observed and feels observed by the intruder who seems to know her and once again turns her into a commodity of desire, an attempt to visually ascertain her feminine sexuality.

As Rennie does not have faith in herself, she cannot devote herself to others altruistically. Her self-alienation is at its height when she considers her body separate from herself. She feels it is her enemy and feels outraged and thrusts blame at the body: “Feeling that she’d been betrayed, by a close friend. She’d given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden it junk food and cigarette smoke, allowed it a normal amount of sexual release she’d trusted it, why then had it turned against her” (BH 82).

While blaming her body, she is externalising her self-hate. Thus it is revealed that she is not only alienated from her body but also is impaired emotionally. It has affected her spontaneity and sensibility. She confesses to Daniel, “I don’t feel human any more...(BH 83). Even her breast cancer with its obvious serious implications becomes merely a possible subject for her *Lifestyle’s* columns and she thinks she could do a piece on it, *Cancer The Coming Thing* (BH 27). This shows that her fears of bodily harm have a strong hold on her.

The title *Bodily Harm* stands for Rennie’s breast cancer, ‘the way she was damaged, amputated’ (BH 198). It is viewed not only as a plot device but also as a metaphor for a malignant world. The disease really to be feared, Rennie comes to realise, is the capacity to take pleasure from another’s pain. Rennie feels not only violated physically but also raped in her relationship and psychologically she is deeply affected. She has started associating herself with something rotten and malignant. “So it’s my fault if there’s a recurrence? I have cancer of the mind? Said Rennie” (BH 82). The novelist highlights Rennie’s fear of exposure and how she associates her disease with “maggots” and “disease fruit”. A clear picture of Rennie’s psyche is provided in terms of various motifs, dreams and other recurring symbols of bodily harm such as “centipedes and maggots. “I feel infested... I’m full of white maggots eating away at me from the inside” (BH 83). The centipedes relate her with the kind of things she has been having bad dreams about. Her obsessive fears grip her. She remarks. “Her real fear, irrational but a fear, is that the scar will come undone in the water, split open like a faulty zipper and she will turn inside out” (BH 80). Her resemblances to ‘split fish’ and ‘infested body’ are linked by the central metaphor of the title *Bodily Harm*. It is indicative of her morbidity due to her fears and its various manifestations, the ingrained fears of death are at the bottom of her weird dreams.

Lora’s tales further go to completely shatter her attitude towards the much talked about feminism. She thinks that condition of women is not acceptable in the society and wants Rennie to include her tales in her travelogue. By her tales, Rennie learns that in this society there are many more who are eager to exploit, if she is willing to be weak and give in. Lora says, “They think if they’re renting the boat they’re renting everything on it. May be I’m for sale, I’d tell them....I’m not for rent...I may be pretty but I’m not cheap” (BH 213-14).

These lines show that in a post liberated age men’s arrogant attitude towards women has not altered and they think that women are like commodities that can be used on rent. Lora’s brutal experiences in Canada and Caribbean Island shock Rennie’s feminist sensibility.

The heartless mutilation of Lora is symbolic of the limited gender-specific role of women in society. The brutality done to Lora is the real “bodily harm”. When prison guards beat up Lora, Rennie wishes that someone would cover her eyes, something she achieves for herself through fantasising about her own release from prison. She realises that women are victimised by male power and understands that no one is exempt:

...nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only because they haven't thought of it yet, they're still amateur... she has been turned inside out, there's no longer a here and a there. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything (BH 290).

Rennie witnesses the causeless cruelty in Caribbean Island and is shocked by a dark revelation of universal complicity in evil. Lora's death obligates her to think in terms of some kind of positive action against cruelty on women. She finally understands that she is not afraid of cancer or amputation. Her scar has no significance and it is a very minor accident of her life, instead she comes to see men in the light of the power they wield, through violence as well as through language, “She is afraid of men and it's simple. It's rational, she is afraid of men because men are frightening” (BH 290). Now she becomes a sadder but wiser person. She emerges as a new human being. She has begun to see things differently. As Howells says:

Rennie's effort to tell the story is, like her effort to save Lora, an exercise of the moral imagination, being both reportage and invention.... As she is a reporter she determines to 'report', offering her interpretation of contemporary lifestyles in two different countries but now with an edge of moral engagement. . . [she] does more than report; she tries to imagine things differently and better than they are... (125).

Rennie emerges as an audacious and seditious journalist who is bold enough to narrate her experience in the form of a travelogue called *Bodily Harm*. She uses “pen as a weapon” (Prabhakar 80) and ends up as an activist. She realises her responsibility to report and to bring forth the truth about the cruelty imposed women.

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