

Negotiating Gender Roles in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*

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Abstract

Gender roles, in the context of the present study, specifically refers to traditionally accepted roles in patriarchal societies wherein women's subordination to their male counterparts is amplified. The study incorporates ideas of feminist theorists, and in particular, Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* where she explores the paradigm of gender roles provides the theoretical foundation upon which the primary text *Bodily Harm* will be analysed. Traditionally, women's roles are often confined within the domestic boundaries in which they are expected to fulfil the needs of their family, bereft of financial as well as bodily independence, subjugating them to passivity and submissiveness. Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* presents the nuances of gender roles, detailing how girls are conditioned, since their childhood, to conform to these gender roles. The present paper lays emphasis on the female protagonist's attempt to subvert these roles and the endless conflicts, both internal and external, that she has to endure to acquire agency.

Keywords: patriarchal, tradition, gender roles, conformity, subversion

Margaret Eleanor Atwood (b. 1939) is a Canadian writer celebrated for her poetry, novels, literary criticism and essays. Her first serious literary work, a collection of poetry titled *Double Persephone*, was published as a literary pamphlet in 1961 by Hawkshead Press and won the E.J. Pratt Medal in Poetry. She was inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame in 2001 for her contributions to Canadian literature making her the first novelist and poet inductee.

Margaret Atwood began publishing serious literature in the 1960s, a crucial decade when "strong waves of nationalism rocked literature, arts and culture in preparation of the centenary celebrations of the Confederation in 1967" (Dutt xxviii). In her theoretical works, especially *Survival* and her exploration of similar themes in her fiction, Atwood considers Canadian literature as the expression of Canadian identity. She writes, "Canadian identity has been defined by a fear of nature, by settler history, and by unquestioned adherence to the community" (*Survival* 32). In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Atwood asserts that "Canada as a nation can be represented as a victimised individual struggling endlessly against the hostile forces of physical nature and colonial conditions" (Dutt xxxiv).

Following the publication of her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, Atwood addressed the claim that the novel is a feminist novel by asserting, "I don't consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism" (Kaminski 29). While her novels contain and address important issues pertaining to women and gender roles, the core message of her fiction is that "art is a moral issue, and it is the responsibility of the writer/artist not only to describe her world, but also to criticise it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures – perhaps even to redeem" (Rigney 1).

In response to social media backlash related to her signature on a 2016 petition calling for an independent investigation into the firing of Steven Galloway, Atwood wrote an article titled “Am I A Bad Feminist?” for *The Globe and Mail* in January 2018. She states,

My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They’re not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn’t need a legal system.

Nor do I believe that women are children, incapable of agency or of making moral decisions. (“Am I a bad Feminist?”)

Bodily Harm was written in an era when women’s liberation movements initially began to make significant appearances in the social scene in North America. The changing roles of women at home and at the workplace, and how it impacted them become remarkable aspects in the novel. While chronicling the physical and spiritual journey of the female protagonist, the novel lay emphasis on these characters’ quest for identity in an oftentimes turbulent atmosphere.

The epigraph inscribed on the introductory page of *Bodily Harm* is an excerpt from John Berger’s *Way of Seeing*. It reads,

A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a women’s presence...defines what you can or cannot do to her. (7)

The above quote defines the current state of affairs regarding gender relation. *Bodily Harm* depicts the life of Renata Wilford, known as Rennie. Rennie is constantly haunted by memories of her past, especially those that concern her breast cancer and her relationship with her former boyfriend, Jake. The story begins “the day after Jake left” (11). She begins to navigate life to fill this void in an attempt to conform to societal norms.

In *Bodily Harm* the struggle for survival is an important motif that correlates to the struggle for power, or the escape from it. The female characters are subjected to different kinds of violence and abuse including physical, verbal and mental abuse. These are used in the narrative to highlight and question societal norms and traditional gender roles, ideals that the protagonist comes to resist later in Rennie’s life.

Rennie Wilford’s plight *Bodily Harm* begins with her mastectomy, but does not end there. The amputation of her breast results in a feeling of fragmentation and insecurity which makes Rennie feel cut off from her own self. Published in 1981, the novel tells the story of a young woman’s journey towards self-acceptance and power. Rennie is a journalist who works as a reporter for a magazine. Her diagnosis of breast cancer and eventual mastectomy marks the beginning of her undoing. The loss of her breast results in a loss of identity as Rennie feels that she has lost a part of her body which defines her as a complete woman. Feeling insecure and isolated, she pushed her boyfriend Jake away and began relying and seeking affection from the doctor who performed the operation, Daniel. “When Jake moved out, naturally there was a vacuum. Something had to come in to fill it” (39). The affair with Daniel did not last as he is a married man who refuses to leave his wife. Around the same time, an intruder enters Rennie’s apartment, leaving a coil of rope on her bed. Rennie feels that her safety has been compromised. With all the pressures she was facing at home, she decides to take a business trip to St. Antoine to write a travel piece on the supposedly peaceful and tranquil island. Rennie’s decision to escape the harsh conditions at home by taking a trip did not prove to be a solution to her problems, but a proliferation of it. However, her experiences on the island gave Rennie the chance to confront her own issues and thus she leaves the island with a new empowered identity.

When Rennie arrives on St. Antoine, she finds herself in the midst of a political campaign for the upcoming local election. Her profession as a journalist, and as a young female solo traveller makes her an easy target for the politicians and their campaigners to manipulate. While candidates such as Dr. Minnow and Ellis want to influence Rennie to write reports to expose the corruption of the current administration, their opponents want to get her off the island so that she will not interfere in the election. While some inhabitants think she is a spy, others who feel an impending revolution take advantage of her naivete and submissiveness, a result of her traditional upbringing, by manipulating her into smuggling firearms. Thus, Rennie unknowingly becomes the centre of attention from all corners ultimately landing her in jail. The harsh conditions she faces in prison give her the opportunity to finally confront her fears and insecurities, prompting her to prioritise herself for the first time since her surgery.

Prior to the publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, there has been a dearth of Canadian literature, especially novels. As a result, there was a lack of major traditions in the realm of fiction writing. Most of the existing literature at that period were composed by male authors. Atwood, along with writers like Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy are among the few who made enormous contributions towards the growth and popularity of the 'Canadian novel'. When asked if she encountered any particular problem as a woman writer, shortly after the publication of her second novel *Surfacing*, Atwood replies,

Back in the days when you were supposed to pay attention to the diapers and the washing of dishes, I was a threat to other women's life positions. Now I get made into a kind of hero, which is just as unreal. It makes me just as uncomfortable. It's turning me from what I am as a writer into something I'm not. (Ingersoll 11)

The portrayal of women in fictional works is of interest to many scholars and the accuracy of their representation has been a subject of debate for quite a long time. In their study of Victorian fiction, Gilbert and Gubar are of the view that women have always been portrayed in novels either as "angel" or "monster". According to them, women are either portrayed in novels as either virtuous, incapable of committing any crime or seductive, manipulative, and evil and often regarded as "mad". Neither of these two binary characterizations are accurate portrayals but rather, this kind of representation of women reduce them to mere objects.

According to Marxist feminists, society is divided into two classes based on gender. From their standpoint, society is divided into hierarchies where the dominant class are the male and women are victims of male oppression. Women on the other hand are merely objects to satisfy the physical, emotional as well as the economic needs of the men who are at the top of the pyramid. Shulamith Firestone believes that the oppression of women begins in the family. She claims-

The term family was first used by the Romans to denote a social unit the head of which ruled over wife, children, and slaves – under Roman law he was invested with rights of life and death over them all; *famulus* means domestic slave, and *familia* is the total number of slaves belonging to one man. (Firestone 74)

Thus, family becomes a social organization where all rights, power and authority is concentrated in the hands of the male head of the household, and the rest of the family are subjected to his rule. There are several instances in the novel that can be cited as proof to Firestone's assertion, such as the relationship between Rennie's grandparents, as well as Rennie's relationship with her family. These two relationships show the repression of women within the household, and more importantly, the suppression of women's voices in the family unit and the society at large. Firestone further denotes,

...the power hierarchies in the biological family, and the sexual repressions necessary to maintain it – especially intense in the patriarchal nuclear family – are destructive and costly to the individual psyche. (Firestone 72)

According to French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, sex and gender are two different aspects. While sex is determined by birth, she argues that gender is a cultural construct. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes “One is not born a woman, but becomes one.” This implies that culture and society shape and condition individuals. So culture, in a way, is responsible for bringing about the oppression of women. But at the same time, it provides an arena for the oppressed to negotiate their state of dominance. This further affirms that the subjugation of women has its roots in culture. In patriarchal societies, attitudes toward a male child and a female child are different. Society imposes gender roles and the lack of flexibility to cross this abstract boundary, especially represses women who are confined to domestic life. While young boys are taught that strength, courage and bravery are qualities he must grow up with, girls are taught obedience and femininity in that same vein. While boys acquire myriad outdoor skills, girls are told to behave so that they may end up with a good husband as marriage is the proper goal for them. In traditional societies, there is no life beyond the domestic realm for women. This is clearly depicted in *Bodily Harm* where Griswold is represented as a centre of these traditional notions. Griswold is a tiny town where the protagonist Rennie was brought up. She tries to dissociate herself from Griswold by passing ridiculous jokes about the folks living there. Here, girls are taught from an early age that submissiveness, decency and femininity are virtues that they must uphold.

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...Clothes could be decent or indecent. Mine were always decent, and they smelled decent too[.] (55)

Recalling her childhood days, she hints at an indoctrination of the said gender beliefs by saying,

My grandmother worshipped my grandfather...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 the bandages and that was about all anyone ever said about that. (56)

This is an indication of the gender-based distinction in terms of professions where men hold higher positions and are revered in society whereas women are only capable of working for and under men. Rennie sees these as being outdated and harmful for individual progress. “Griswold, she hopes, is merely something she defines herself against” (18). Her protestation of traditional roles is seen in her own words,

All I could think of at that time was how to get away from Griswold. I didn't want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her – everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint – I didn't want to have a family or be anyone's mother, ever; I had none of those ambitions. I didn't want to own any objects or inherit any. I didn't want to cope. (58)

The traditional role accorded to women by patriarchal culture is being a good wife and mother. Her function is to “provide the society with children” (446) as well as to “satisfy a male's sexual needs and to take care of his household” (Beauvoir 447). Rennie's insecurity is a result of her mastectomy, which in turn leads to the fear that she will not be able to find a partner, or bear children. Whereas men are perceived as a complete individual and socially independent, women are thought to be incomplete beings and dependent on men. As such, the “appropriate” approach to study women is by situating her in this traditional role. In patriarchal societies, as seen in the aforementioned feminist theories, subjugation of

women does not occur because of an individual male or a specific group of males, but rather, the society as an institution is conditioned to oppress women.

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. (Beauvoir 445)

The notion that women are vulnerable without men and that at their age ought to be married and are safer in the company of their husbands, forces Rennie to lie about her marital status in order to avoid further scrutiny. Like the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing*, Rennie is met with the question “You have a husband? ...Perhaps he will join you later?” (31) while flying to St. Antoine to which Rennie answers, “Not with me” (31). She gives this appropriate response to ward off unsolicited advances as well as to avoid further interrogations. The prospect of a female travelling alone in an unknown territory is considered inappropriate, and dangerous. She is considered weak and incapable of defending herself without a male chaperone. Rennie too, becomes a target of manipulative characters during her stay in St. Antoine. She has to endure harsh weather, food and the lack of myriad luxuries she gets at home.

From the onset of the novel, Rennie is plagued by a trauma that results from her mastectomy. She suffers from a lack of self-esteem due to the removal of her breasts, a symbol of her femininity. This crisis gradually impacted her relationship with her boyfriend. Her failure to embrace her new image reduced her into an emotional, weak and dependent being. She becomes needy and clings to her doctor for approval and sympathy and eventually begins an affair with him. Rennie is unable to put her life back together at this stage because she sees herself as a victim of circumstances. Despite the misfortunes that await in St. Antoine, it was this trip that finally motivate her to get her life back on track.

Rennie’s transformation towards self-acceptance came after she met Paul in St. Antoine. Seeing that Paul is not bothered at all by the missing breast, she comes to an understanding that her physical amputation does not define her. However, by this time, Rennie has fallen too deep into the pit of self-deprecation and naiveté that almost completely destroys her life. Rennie’s newly found freedom and identity needs to be subdued as she could pose a threat to the government, the unjust system that runs St. Antoine. As a journalist, Rennie has the capability to expose the corruption and abuse of power on the island. She does not seem to recognise her ability before her enlightenment as she keeps referring to herself as a travel writer in the beginning of the novel. The tragic incidents that she experiences in St. Antoine eventually bring about an emergence of a new and empowered Rennie who now understands the meaning of life. She is finally able to observe people and act accordingly.

She will pick her time; then she will report. For the first time in her life, she can’t think of a title. (300)

This passage suggests two things. One is the impact of the narrator’s change in perspective towards life which made her confused as to how to take a precise step ahead. Second, which is a result of the first, is that with the new identity that she has acquired, there are innumerable opportunities before her and an equally wide areas how she can approach them. Either way, it indicates that the limitations and setbacks she used to encounter in the past are no longer issues that she is willing to be bothered with. This change is also denoted in the manner she responds to a fellow traveller who asks her to dinner. While her ‘old and complaisant self’ had no power to disagree with others and was easily influenced and controlled, her reformed ‘self’ transformed her into an independent and liberated being with the power to decide her own courses: “He asks her to dinner and she wonders what to say” (301). Here she contemplates alternate

responses to escape the truth, “She could say that her husband is meeting her at the airport or that she’s a lesbian or that she’s dying, or the truth” (301). Her decision to reject the man’s proposal proves that she no longer sees herself as an object, seeking men’s approval which is in stark contrast to her former self-perception. Her choice to tell the truth also shows her prioritizing herself, marking a shift from her old self who was scared of offending people.

She says unfortunately she doesn’t have enough time, she has to meet a deadline, and that’s the end of him, he feels rejected, he’s embarrassed, he moves back to his own seat and opens up his briefcase, it’s full of paper. (301)

The study of Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harms* finds that women’s subjugation in patriarchal societies begins in the family. It shows how Rennie Wilford is conditioned to conform to traditional roles since her childhood, and her struggles to break away from them. She undergoes physical and psychological hurdles in order to redefine herself, but in the end, the study finds that Rennie’s defiance of societal norms and traditions, and her ability to achieve physical, financial and emotional independence, contrary to what she was being taught, finally emancipates her.

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