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Feminist Interpretations of Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*

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Abstract:

The present critical research paper reflects post-feminist perspective in the novel titled *Bodily Harm* by Margaret Eleanor Atwood. She is a multidimensional Canadian personality. She is a poet, essayist, literary critic, environmentalist, teacher, inventor but especially a feminist novelist. Feminism started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Feminist perspective is a form of women-empowerment, fashion, sexuality, individual choice, independence, hybridism, humour, and consumer culture. Atwood's staunch feminist approach is manifest in her novels, especially in *Bodily Harm* (1981). She advocates human rights, privacy, individual choice and fundamental freedom. She exhibits the reconstructing and redefining of gender and identity. She, like a surgeon, operates the annihilating of gender, i.e. the subjugation of women. She strongly promotes *live-in-relationship* in her novel under critical exploration through the character of Rennie Wilford, a Canadian journalist. Rennie Wilford hates marriage but fully enjoys sexuality in her private relationship. Marriage is a socio-cultural taboo for her. The novel under critical inquiry, being a post-feminist text, delineates the violence and atrocities done to the protagonist's body in institutions like hospital and jail. Here Margaret Eleanor Atwood seems to imply that any type of harm, physical or psychic, internal or external, sentimental or intellectual, to a woman's body is nothing but a crime, and in fact it is not less than a sin. She expects for an instinctual change in male-hegemony to create a hassle and harm free, safe and rapeless, dependable and crimeless social scenario. Self-reliance, self-discipline, self-empowerment, and individual morality are the prerequisites of the extant scenario to achieve a peaceful and tranquil society and man-woman relationship.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Bodily Harm, gender, identity, feminism, male hegemony, live-in-relationship.

Introduction

As per feminist assumptions, an advocate and champion of equal rights for women is called a feminist. Both men and women may be feminists. Online Merriam-Webster dictionary writes, "The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities," is nothing but feminism. It emphasises "social, political, and economic equality." Bell Hooks, a feminist activist calls it, "a movement to end *sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.*" Feminism underlines that no man can touch a woman's body without her permission, what to say to have sexual pleasure with her, even her own husband, needless to say, a boy friend. Women are most often victimized of patriarchy, sexism, racism, gender bias or gender politics, multilayered exploitation, misogyny. They experience *bropropriated*. Bropropriating is a male-hegemonic haughty concept that they are always second sex because when a woman proposes some idea is silenced but the same idea when proposed by man is considered the great one. Margaret Atwood is a *feminazi*, a staunch & radical feminist. Feminazi is a portmanteau word– Feminist +Nazi (a committed feminist or a strong-willed woman)

Three Waves of Feminism: An Overview

According to Elaine Showalter, there have been three phases of feminism: feminine, feminist, and female, implying *imitation, protest, and self-discovery* by women writers.

1. The Feminine Phase/Imitation Phase (1840-1880): Women writers *imitated* the male writers in their norms and artistic standards. Showalter says that the women writers of the 19th century adopted masculine names, *male nom de plumes*, or otherwise gender-ambiguous pseudonyms to publish their works without prejudice in male-dominated circles. For example, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, Mrs. Oliphant, and others faced male-hegemony.

2. The Feminist Phase/Protest Phase (1880-1920): Women authors rebelled against prevalent patriarchal attitudes. This phase was marked by the demand for *autonomy* on the part of women and the initiation of an "*all-out war between the sexes.*"

3. The Female Phase (1920-1960): The phase of Self-discovery/ *distinct female identity*, style and content, as opposed to the identity granted by patriarchy. Showalter detects Freudian and Marxist influences in the women writer of the Female phase.

Implications of Feminism

Feminism comes under the orbit of postmodernism, which emphasises rejection of universality of binary oppositions, stable identity, hierarchy, categorization and promotes self-referentiality, eclecticism, and pluralism, etc. One should keep in mind that nothing ever ends. So It also seems to adhere to gender equality and women-empowerment but it denies a rigorous critique of still-existing patriarchal norms, and institutions. It seems to promote *reciprocity* on either side. Simone de Beauvoir, a staunch feminist of the second wave of feminism writes in her *magnum opus* titled *The Second Sex* (1949) bewailing the anti-feminist approach of *eternal feminine*, “Women who assert they are men still claim masculine consideration and respect” (Beauvoir 5). She exhibits her social rebellion against male-chauvinism, male-hegemony and male domination, “Be women, stay women, become women” (4). Martine Reid, the editor of *The Second Sex* 2008, for Gisele Halimi writes so-called and so-inhaled male-hegemony and male domination:

The domination of man over woman, pervasive everywhere, needed to be analysed and criticized and the subject brought into the open wherever it should itself, thought out in all its forms, and from all points of view. Biology, history, philosophy, politics, and anthropology are all converted to put this domination on trial, and even more so as its relevance to the situation of workers ... (Reid xix-xx).

Martine Reid critically analyses the foundational and patriarchal patterns of thinking that has given an *eternal feminine* structure to the relations between man and woman for millennia, “the man sees, the woman is seen; man is subject, woman is object, *other*, *second*, irremediably so; man is culture, woman is nature, prisoner of her physiological condition, of womb that subjects her to her destiny, maternity” (xxi).

Reid further writes about the radical attitude of Beauvoir who strongly believes in Jean Paul Sartre’s *existential philosophy* of which the central conviction is that “existence precedes essence” (xxi). “In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre says that since ‘man is nothing else but

what he makes of himself' and since 'there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it'" (Sartre, "What Does 'Existence Precedes Essence' mean?").

Both Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre tried to establish that existence is preferable to essence or soul. Therefore some kind of feminine essence makes no sense. Women are free how and what they do and live. They should not be guided and instructed by patriarchal conceptions. Post feminism tries to found a notion somewhere in between feminism and anti-feminism. It implies reciprocity on either side for peaceful, happy human existence.

Feminist Interpretations of *Bodily Harm*

The themes of victimization, *eternal feminine* and hellish survival of the fir sex in world literatures especially in the Canadian literatures is very common. Margaret Eleanor Atwood as a novelist, is intuitively and wholeheartedly concerned for man's alignment of power dynamics and she exhibits socio-political, socio-economic and physical control of man over woman to break and surrender her to him. She is of the opinion that man and woman are complementary to each other and she is not less deficient both physically and intellectually than him. In case a piece of work, barring some exceptions, is assigned to a woman; she is able to do it in a better and organized way than her counterpart. If both of them are assigned a power, they both employ that power effectively and efficiently.

In most of her novels, Margaret Atwood deals with the themes of feminine victimization and their survival. In her novels the chief protagonists are women but their progress is not smooth and hassle-free even then they emerge triumphant and victorious through multiple tactical withdrawals and retreats. Her female protagonists are portrayed as a part of Canadian cultural ethos and they are actively involved in the problems, which are not just national concerns but also socio-political, socio-economic issues, which determine the survival of the country. The prevalent symbol of the American literature, as Margaret asserts, is frontier, the dominant, presiding and governing image of the Canadian fiction is survival, the unheroic survival of victimized. Mary Morris, an American travel writer, remarks:

The question of the status of woman has been an issue in Atwood's work and feminists have seized upon her writings as a product of the movement. Atwood has also made other

political and philosophical issues themes in her work, such as Canada's struggle to create an identity and in recent years, her concern for human rights. (Ansari 153)

As a feminist writer, Atwood mainly throws light on the theme of gender and sexual politics and men's mistreatment of women. Along being a feminist, she is also a realist and writes about the imagery of caste, colour, and creed, etc., to showcase her ideas. She picks her themes from real socio-political and socio-economic scenario as her writing exhibits sufferings, pains and predicament, mental agonies and feminine victimization. Her characters are wives, aunts, and maids, etc., who are treated as only sexual objects and displayed as sexual slaves.

The novel *Bodily Harm* (1981) is the story of Rennie Wilford, a Canadian journalist who interviews people and writes their views on various subjects. She presents in the novel from the beginning until the end of it. The novel depicts the world in which the survival of the protagonist is almost impossible. First she is a woman and second she is alone. "She falls a prey to the ruses of men who dominate this world. They exploit Rennie sexually and use her for their purpose and leave her in such a situation as she is unable to come out. She ends in prison for no fault of her" (Mazhar 130).

Male Hegemony and Female Identity Crisis

In the world of *Bodily Harm*, men are to be blamed for Rennie's all trials and tribulations. They are effectively exhibited mixing things with politics and bringing a revolution and it is evident that all the violent people beating and threshing the people, for instance, are men. They love power, but they do not know how to use it for people's good. Indeed, the novelist has created a situation of not only male molesting female but also they represent people seeking power above all, oppressing any opponent in order to acquire it. The novelist, therefore, expresses the battle of every disadvantaged group to acquire the right to exist and live in equality with the people governing them. Through her novel, Atwood poses multiple questions and invites the reader to contemplate them. She is successful in doing this, because she does not only show the reader the obvious problem of our world, but also man's hidden faces and the way their different aspects are mingled.

Identity Crisis is a postmodern or post-feminism aspect. Atwood shows in *Bodily Harm* how Rennie struggles to find her identity, both as a woman and as a person and to define the

limits of her body are mingled. These problems put her in jeopardy. This is tightly connected with her relationship with men, since, the same time, they create and solve her problems. She is physically and psychologically attacked by men. Those who employ the circumstances of taking advantage of Rennie are hypocritical by nature as she is in a state in which she turns to men to find help. The situation presented in the novel is an extreme one, indeed, it makes this novel appealing, because the parts of the events may have happened to the reader.

A Misogamist

Misogamy is a hatred of marriage. Rennie Wilford likes free lance life. She is a misogynist. She prefers to *live-in relationship* rather than to follow marriage for traditional child-bearing and child-rearing. But she is always exploited and cheated by her male partners. First she comes in touch with her childhood boyfriend-Gary. She wanted to marry him and have kids but not like her own mother. But after some time they starts quarrelling with each other and parts forever. This is the first fraud with her. Secondly she comes in touch with Jake, a fellow advertising designer. She starts living with him in *live-in relationship* but unfortunately she becomes a patient of breast cancer but he comes to know about her disease; he leaves her forever. That is her second trauma. She has to undergo a successful operation by Dr. Daniel but she is in one sided love with Dr. Daniel and wants to be taken care of by him. She asks him one day, "Either I'm living or I'm dying. Please don't feel you can't tell me. Which is it?" The doctor said to her, "You're not dead yet. You're a lot more alive than many people" (Singh 91). That is good enough for Rennie. She wants something definite, the real truth, one way or the other. Whatever way she tries to follow, she fails in her approach. The novelist hints that females should be careful from males' tricks and fraudulence.

Eternal Feminine

Rennie suffers a lot because of her ailment of cancer but this ailment shrinks to naught when compared to the cancer caused widespread in the male hegemonic world. Other women also suffer because of their sex and they are tortured in many ways which could not have happened, had they not been women. Atwood writes about the eternal feminine concept, "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 and cannot be done to her" (Ansari 156). Jennifer Walter also comments in her interview, "The men use their hands to choke, beat, otherwise torture the

women in the novels; the women's hands are cut off. They can do nothing on their own behalf except very occasionally alleviate each other's pain within the concept of their powerlessness" (156). Rennie says that the women are abused everywhere like helpless poor. She, therefore, equates women with the poor throughout the world. She is arrested on her accusation for revolution and from prison she sees violence against women and says, "They are still things that are inconceivable... Here is nothing inconceivable. I wish you to write about...all I ask you to do is look... Look with your eyes open and you will see the truth of the matter. Since you are reporter it is your duty to report" (157).

In order to get over her trauma of cancer operation and theft nightmares, she escapes to the Caribbean island of St Antoine from Canada. With this the second part of life journey began. She decides not to take things for granted and have her own rules for survival. She sees her life with a bodily harm as a gift because Dr. Daniel told her, "Positive attitude does wonders." On account of her unnecessary involvement in the election on the island and opposition of the government and her association with Paul and Lora in the smuggling trade, she is held up and thrown into jail along with Paul and Lora. On account of the involvement of the Canadian government, Rennie is released from jail. She is rescued on account of her good luck.

Rennie as a New Woman

Through the character of Rennie Wilford, the novelist seems to suggest to all the women that it is a hard nut to crack to follow a new path in this male dominated world, if not possible. Rennie lives as a new woman with her own rules of survival. She is against the traditional approach of her mother. She never takes life seriously. She never pays attention to males' hypocrisy and ego. She never faces dangers and fears of life. She is just a green horn (inexperienced person). She is always unprepared to face the unexpected shocks and sufferings of male-dominated life. "Gradually, Rennie understands her own complicity with the social order. The deconstruction aids her in revealing the reasons for her current dissatisfaction, distance from life, behaviour, situation, and feeling of loss" (Cykman 65).

Conclusion

The experience that Rennie has on the new island changes her mind. Her positive attitude to life does wonders with her. She regains her self-confidence and discovered new things

in life and learns how to live with dignity and decency in spite of her bodily harm. She gets a new insight and a new lease of life. She is not only a re-born woman but also a post-feminist woman. Finally she comes to how to live in this male dominated world. Thus, Atwood is a lover of positive attitudes and values and her works answer the question--how to live?

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