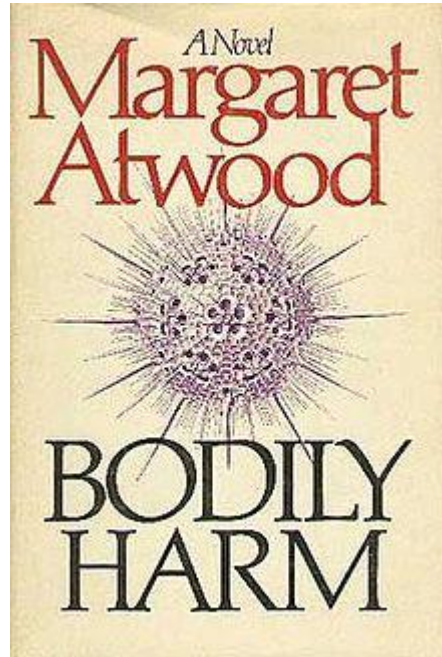


Canadian Feminist Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's
Bodily Harm and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Canadian women's writing played a key role in setting in motion many radical ideas in terms of women's individuality and power and politics through own language. The aim of Canadian women's fiction is to make women critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structures. Many of the women's stories narrated by these writers are about the lives of girls and women. They are concerned with the exploration and survival, crossing boundaries, challenging cultural and psychological limits and glimpsing new prospects. Thus, women's writing in Canada is committed to bring about remarkable changes in the lives of Canadian women and society. Margaret Atwood is one of those few modern Canadian novelists in English, who have tried to understand intimately the predicament of their female protagonists. Her writings are based on the feminist consciousness of her female protagonists through her novel. Margaret Atwood's fiction is often organized thematically around images of both cultural

and individual issues of survival; she has sought to portray the entrapment of women in patriarchy. In this paper I will try to present the above factors through the analyzing of two of her novels.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Canadian women, cultural and psychological limits, feminist consciousness.

Women's Encounter with the World

Margaret Eleanor Atwood throws light on the women's encounter with the world in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood places her female protagonists in conflict with the patriarchal or sexist society with prejudices on the basis of gender, depicts her struggle to assert her individuality and to gain acceptance. In her fictional world, Atwood reflects various modes of gender victimization of women in the name of tradition, modernity, technology, and marriage. The protagonists in the two novels which form part of this study emerge from the elite section of the society. In the course of their interaction with the world around them - nature, men and women their experiences are enriched; their enlightenment is sharpened and their horizons of understanding are widened. Thus they open "the doors on their prisons, and take truer control of their images of self and their future directions." (Anna parsons 109) They learn the cruel lessons of life and subject themselves to a careful scrutiny in order to derive lessons for their future. The rebellious streak in each of the protagonists checkmates effectively the designs of male-centered society to manipulate and exploit her.

***Bodily Harm* – Power and Sexual Politics**

In *Bodily Harm*, Atwood focuses on the contrast between affluent thinking and the brutal reality of power and sexual politics. The protagonist Rennie is a 'lifestyle journalist' who has just had a mastectomy. Atwood traces her internal torment in dealing with this, her troubled childhood, her relationship with men and a violent society at large. Looking back on her life, Rennie realizes that all the men she has known have been oppressors in one way or another. She remembers her grandfather from her childhood and now understands that he had been a tyrant towards his daughters. Her boyfriend Jake engages in sadistic sexual pranks with her, and Paul, her lover in the Caribbean, where she goes on a vacation, is inhumanely remote and

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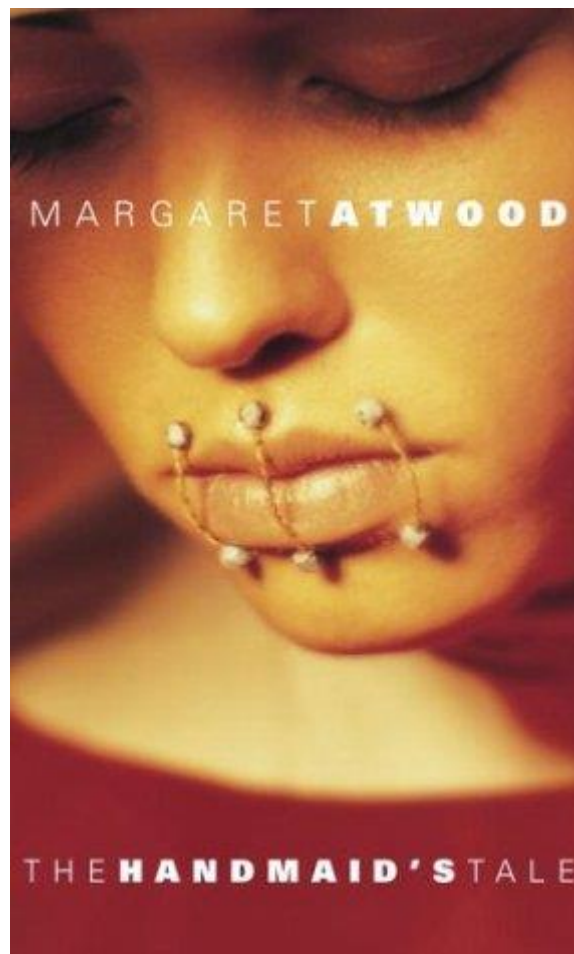
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uncommitted. In Toronto she visits an exhibition of pornographic pictures that is held in a police station. One picture is of a nude woman with a live rat in her vagina. Male sexual violence and sexism are shown with merciless realism in this novel, with Atwood wanting to expose the full horror of it. Threatened by a rapist in Toronto, Rennie goes south to the island of St. Antoine, only to encounter more violence, sexual and otherwise. She becomes involved in the political turmoil on the island, and ends up in prison along with Lora. She looks down on Lora, but is gradually forced to realize that her behavior contains an element of generosity and that she, Rennie may have something to learn from her. In prison both Rennie and Lora feel lonely and victimized by the male. Thus throughout the novel the main character of the novel Rennie is victimized by the male in the patriarchal society.

Offred in *Handmaid's Tale*



In the same way Atwood's other female character Offred in the novel *Handmaid's Tale* victimized by the patriarchal society called Gilead. Offred is a Handmaid by her profession treated as a child-bearing machine by the commander of the Gileadean Army. Offred is denied the use of language, writing is a forbidden act for women in Gilead. In Gilead, The segregation of women, and their further division into classes, prevents them from forming a unified front. The female groups hold the least power among the various classes. All individual women hold some trivial form of power over other women, which is channeled into further dividing women, rather than into building a common front. In particular, Aunts are used to control other women. Thus, among women in similar positions, there is conflict. Written and oral female traditions are effectively prevented. Women's power of procreation is devalued through couvades. Where alienation might lead to rebellion, controls are instituted. Handmaids and Jezebels, who are reproductive and sexual prostitutes, are the most dissatisfied female classes. They are the most alienated women, so they are controlled the most tightly, and victimized by the authorities. Even they do not know their real name, they are known only by their commander's name with the prefix Of like Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren, etc. The protagonist compares her life to that of pigs cooped up in Pens, rolling coloured balls around in order "to have something to think about... I wish I had a pig ball." (HMT 86) According to Margaret Atwood:

The Most Lethal Weapon – Human Mind

The most lethal weapon in the world's arsenals is not the neutron bomb or chemical warfare, but the human mind. In Gilead, personal identity is determined by functions and especially gender functions. To be a person is to inhabit one of the functions and the differences between people are given hierarchical status depending upon their function in the society. Male infertility in Gilead is unthinkable as the protagonist says: "there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law." (HMT 75) In this society women are divided into groups: a group of women who are recruited for 'breeding purposes' are called "Hand Maids" and these hand maids, are according to Rigney, "personification of a religious sacrifice, temple prostitutes doomed to a kind of Purdah in perpetuity." (Barbara Hill Rigney 117) These Hand Maids are not allowed to knit, smoke, read, write, listen to music or go for walk. (HMT 85) They are in total social isolation, women with viable ovaries. The novel, therefore, depicts the separation of women into rigid, subservient gender roles and deprivation of basic Human rights.

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Carole Pateman argues that the notion of “ownership” of one’s body can lead to a variety of “social relations of subordination” including prostitution and surrogate motherhood. (Carole Pateman 148)

With Courage and Fortitude – Atwood’s Strategy

But at last, Atwood’s protagonists confront all the adversities with courage and fortitude. They are involved in a grim struggle to attain “freedom and full human status after millennia of deprivation and oppression.” (Kate Millet 367) they are conscious of their own power and proclaim that they are no longer victims. Thus the reader can find unprecedented growth and release of energy in Atwood’s protagonists who had been long suppressed. Their feminist consciousness articulates the hidden and suppressed voice there by generating power in the victimized women out of their own victimization. They also have a reverence for life. Through these protagonists Atwood suggests the following strategy for women’s liberation:

Ignore your victimization, and sing a song like “I enjoy being a Girl”

Think it’s the fault of Biology, or something, or you can’t do anything about it; write a literature on How Awful it is, which may be a very useful activity up to a point.

Recognize the source of oppression; express anger; suggest ways for change.
(Atwood critical prose 145)

In other words, Atwood teaches women to

refuse hobbles and deformity and take possession of their body and glory in its power, accepting its own laws of loveliness.... have something to desire, something to make, something to achieve, and at last something genuine to give....to claim the masculine virtues of magnanimity and generosity and courage. (Germaine Greer 328)

Guides to Help Follow the Right Direction

Thus Atwood attempts to instill pride, confidence and dignity in women through her novels. She pleads for the need to create a conducive atmosphere for the development of the personality of a woman corresponding to her tastes, interests, and sensibility. She also castigates the social system that assigns roles to women. In that way Atwood in *Bodily Harm*, portrays the

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protagonist Rennie. Though she is a victim, but also guilty of passivity and detachment, she meets various guides who point her in the right direction, so to speak. The beggar is one, Minnow another, and he encourages her to write about the corrupt conditions on St. Antoine and thus contribute something to a solution. Lora also is one who opens up new vistas for Rennie and broadens her horizons. The key word, the thing that all of these people have in common is expressed in the word involvement, and Rennie uses the phrase “massive involvement”. (BH 34) This refers to the spreading of a cancer, but also, as she begins to understand, to the general need for a person to become involved with others, the world and its problems, in a serious way. Only by becoming more active can Rennie break out of her inactive role and do something about her neglect of her talent as a journalist author. She has tended to shy away from the important issues and has dealt mostly with trivia and superficialities in her work. However, the world refuses to let Rennie alone, and she is forced into closer contact with reality as the political unrest develops. She sees people being tortured and knows that some are murdered, but at the same time she also discovers human faithfulness and charity. Rennie knows whose side she is on, but she hesitates for a long time before finally taking the leap, so to speak, into the depths, beneath the surface of things.

Change Does Come

The leap, or change, occurs at the end of the novel, in a scene charged with symbolic meanings. Lora has been beaten almost to death by the dictator's soldiers, or guards, and is thrown into the cell occupied by herself and Rennie. The latter, who for so long has preferred to look the other way, now helps Lora the best she can. It is suggested, not stated directly, that she licks Lora's bloody face, and she gives her all the love and support she can muster. Now she has realized that “there's no such thing as a faceless stranger” (American studies 299), and that the people who resist oppression, sexist and otherwise, must stand together.

Significantly, Rennie takes Lora's hand, trying to pull her through, as it were, saving her life. “She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born”. (BH 299) Rennie has abandoned her detachment, become involved. This means that she has returned to life, the

essence of which is love, relatedness. If she succeeds, Lora will return to life again, be reborn, and Rennie herself will be born, or reborn, into life. This also means a reawakening of her talent.

Rennie is eventually released, and on the plane back to Canada she decides to take up controversial issues in her writing and thus try to do something about the world's ills: "In any case she is a subversive. She was not one once, but now she is a reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report". (BH 301) She realizes that it is her duty to report on the evils perpetrated on St. Antoine, the sexist and political oppression and injustice. The victims, as always, are women and people who are exploited and thus share in the condition of women.

Rennie's determination to resist, to make her own decisions, is also exemplified concretely. As always, the end of the text finds the Atwood heroine poised for a new kind of life, a new independence and creativity.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist Offred also gets out of her subjugation through her usage of language, even though speaking and writing is forbidden to the women in Gilead. Through some incidents like scrabble game with the commander, and the secret messages passed between the handmaids, Offred discovers the power of language and she rediscovers herself also. She also recalls more of her past life even when she is trapped in the sitting room or anywhere else in Gilead. In her own room, Offred learns to preserve her body with the butter, which further indicates her instinct of maintaining her own body like in the old times.

Through these gestures of self-preservation, Offred reveals her strong intention of retaining her old identity, not as Offred, but as herself with a real name that identifies her as an individual. Her thoughts, views, memory and what happened to her have all been textualized as tapes, and that has somehow become a latent threat to and a possible obsolete of Gilead society. That is to say, through Offred's story-telling, she has turned her mouth into a tool of resistance because narration can be taken as an act of reconstruction and imagination; Offred becomes willing to identify with the rebellious organization at the end of her story. She rediscovers her strength and manages to move beyond the limited space where she is trapped.

Against a powerful society like Gilead that she may have confronted, Offred struggles to find a way for her to withhold her identity and escape subjectivity under an absolute patriarchal sovereignty. Atwood cynically presents the politically powerful patriarchs, who believe in literal interpretations of the Bible, as power-hungry hypocrites; in fact, the most cynical men in *The Handmaid's Tale* are also the ones who hold the most power.

Recognize and Reject Victimization

The novel is a warning against what could be if women fail to recognize and reject victimization. Atwood has displayed excellent ability of narrative art in both novels to support the feminist consciousness in both the novels.

Atwood uses symbolism in both of the novels. The mirror stage is one of the most effective techniques used by Atwood; in *Bodily Harm*, the characters Rennie and Lora do not have any mirror in their prison cell, so they depend upon each other to reflect their faces through their eyes.

But in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred has no such partner, so she saw her face only through the reflective surfaces of windows.

Metaphoric Camera

Atwood uses metaphoric camera images in *Bodily Harm*. Rennie carries a camera bag throughout the novel, which symbolizes her tourist vision. Then she used comic book images to compare the characters like Daniel as Rox Mergan, and M.D. Paul as Tarzan.

Like in *Bodily Harm*, Atwood frequently uses metaphors, symbols and images in *The Handmaid's Tale* also. Offred playing scrabble is a symbol of reading and writing, and it is also functions as a spatial metaphor of the freedom for Offred in the novel. Offred's empty room is a symbol of her own empty inner space. The Ibsenite image of a doll is a symbolic representation of women's estrangement in an alienating environment. The rug space of her room is a metaphor of the occupant's struggle to make something meaningful out of her life. Then Atwood uses pearl references in *The Handmaid's Tale* to render character elucidation and crystallize the central

issue of the novel. Atwood uses flashback technique in both novels; this technique takes the reader back and forth in time. Atwood uses magic realism as a technique to insinuate the presence of a climax as a realistic one. Atwood's techniques cover the entire range of her experience on which she paints her subject matter. The strength of her fiction lies in the mimetic presentation of her experiences.

Atwood brilliantly explores the sufferings of women in a patriarchal society and how they become powerful by their own feminist attitude, overcome their struggle, assert their identity through language and other feminist attitudes, through her novels *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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