



# Examining the Politics of Body in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*

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## Abstract:

The body is one of the most contested sites of intellectual and philosophical realities. A woman's affinity with body/nature is reinforced by biological essentialist and determinist paradigms defining a woman following her reproductive physiology. Feminist Discourse Analysis identifies how women have historically been dominated primarily through their bodies, and how gender ideologies stem from supposed biological differences between the sexes. Contextualizing the hindsight above, Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* explores how the female body is a site of struggle and contestation, with power being perpetuated through the imposition of norms and expectations that regulate and discipline bodily behavior through nature, culture, and medicine. The present paper will try to explicate how gender, and more specifically femininity, acts as a discipline producing bodies and identities that serve as an effective form of social control. Through the stream of Feminism, Body Politics, and Gender Studies, the paper will also deftly explore the performativity of individuation, fluidity, and mobility, rejecting stabilized gendered forms.

**Keywords:** Body, Culture, Discipline, Femininity, Gender, Sex

Within the confines of a heterosexist culture, what it means to be a woman and what constitutes her body and consciousness has been a matter of great concern since the development of Greek or Roman metaphysics. It is indeed baffling to see how the body of the woman which happened to be a biological phenomenon passed through the complex rubric of social, economic, and cultural realities making it a matter of cultural discourse. Michel Foucault in his *magnum opus History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1976) has stated that the body of the woman is overladen with sociological, economic, ethnic, linguistic, and psychological factors that constitute the politics of women's bodies. It serves as a platform on which the politics of power and knowledge is exercised and abuse is practiced and in turn, rehearsed. Additionally, Simone de Beauvoir in her feminist bible *The Second Sex* (1949) talks about the ideological and repressive apparatus that are deeply

inscribed upon the biology of the woman's body which transforms her into an object. Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982) asserts two distinct types of bodies- the symbolic body and the imaginary body, what she calls the abject body. She explains that the female body is viewed as the abject body because of its distinctive functions, "Unlike the male body, the proper female body is penetrable, changes shape, swells, contracts, lactates, bleeds and gives birth. The woman's body reminds man of his 'debt to nature' and as such threatens to collapse the boundary between human and animal, civilized and uncivilized" (102). In addition, Andrea Dworkin in *Woman Hating: A Radical Look at Sexuality* (1974) writes, "In our culture, not one part of women's body is left untouched, unaltered...From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification" (113-114). Axioms of knowledge and truth have long been understood as being subverted by the body, which is the embodiment of emotion and desire. The mind and the body are seen as binaries in Enlightenment philosophy. Margrit Shildrik and Janet Price in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (1999) explain how the body seems to be the complete antithesis of the mind because, throughout conventional knowledge, the intellect has always been the most important determinant, "As, the intellectual tradition of Judeo-Christianity, for example, saw the body as the mundane path to higher, valorized, spirituality, the post- Cartesian modernist period is marked by the rejection of the body as an obstacle to the pure rational thought" (2). Following this, the distinction between *res extensa* (the corporeal substance that resembles a machine) and *res cogitans* (the powers of intelligence and the locus of selfhood), which Rene Descartes explains in the Cartesian dualism, mind/body splits, became a subject of utmost concern to the phenomenon of Feminism. Shaista Malik in her article "Women's Objectification by Consumer Culture" (2014), points out that historically, "Man was associated with thought, rationality, meditation whereas the woman was considered a deviation from the norms hence she was associated with body and feelings divorced from intellect. This association of women by philosophers and intellectuals led her confinement to reproductive and aesthetic purpose" (88). The constant struggle of mind/body, reason/emotion, self/other, head/heart, active/passive, nature/culture, and sun/moon has been intuited within the culture of gender distinction. These binaries cast deliberately on the right side are subjected to feminine characteristics. Therefore, existing in otherness to the self, their bodies are represented, objectified, marketed, and consumed. Immanuel Kant in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1960) comments on the woman that "she is beautiful and captivates, and that is enough" (78). The constant struggle following this perspective constructs the woman's body for the gratification of man's pleasure and the fulfillment of societal needs. Barbara Omolade in the article "Hearts of Darkness" (1995) claims that the female body is used as a labor force and has been ravished by the capitalist culture throughout centuries:

"Her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands are divided from her womb and vagina...Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family as domestic servants whether she was technically enslaved or legally free. Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment- the capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus". (345)

Several philosophical discourses have traced the body through many experiences, and throughout the centuries, women's bodies have been viewed as objects. She is reduced from a person to a body that is

measured, objectified, and marketed within the social strata as a commodity. Following this, objectification will be the key term in our analysis. The Marxian concepts of 'use value' and 'exchange value' are analogous to this. The various body parts acquire use value when they are objectified, and exchange value is imprinted on them when they are rendered into commodities for trade. The theory of Objectification, originally propounded by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi Ann Roberts in "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks" (1997), postulates that several women are subject to sexual objectification and are valued for their use by others, "the common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (174). Sexual objectification disregards the personal and rational potentiality of a woman by reducing her to the status of a mere instrument used as a means. Therefore, she is spoken of or interpreted only as a body, the whole body is objectified or individual parts fetishized. Ronald Dworkin in "Liberty and Pornography" (1991) explains the phenomenon of sexual objectification using Kantian language, "Objectification occurs when the human being, through social means, is made less than human, turned into a thing or a commodity, bought and sold. When objectification occurs, a person is depersonalized, so that no individuality or integrity is available socially or in what is an extremely circumscribed privacy" (3). Aligned to this, objectification is also discussed by Catherine Mackinnon, an American feminist whose work primarily aimed at the sexual abuse of women and their unequal stature, in *Feminism Unmodified* (1987) where she explores that "...A sex object is defined based on its looks, in terms of its usability for sexual pleasure, such that both the looking-the quality of the gaze, including the points of view-and the definition according to use become eroticized as part of the sex itself."(173)

Following this, in a sexist society, all the ideological, socioeconomic, and cultural forces converge to create a sexually alluring female figure- weak, futile, passive, and docile. This body now undergoes a process of sexualization that occurs in various forms ranging from sexual assault to sexualized appraisal, which can even involve stealing a furtive glance at a woman's body. Now this body, an instrument, is used as a means, a property of exchange in several interpersonal practices including forced marriages, escort services, strip shows, phone sex/cybersex, pornography, and prostitution. Her sex, ovaries, and even her babies are appropriated. Her agency, subjectivity, autonomy, and sexuality are denied, and the power of the male consumer is reinforced in the process. Beauvoir (1949) talks through her philosophy of the objectification of women. In this, she analyses the relationship between a man and a woman in which the man is representative of both, the positive and the neutral, as suggested by the frequent use of the word 'man' to designate the entire human race in general, and the woman only the negative, as determined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. In a misogynist society, to be a good woman is to be feminine, which means to function admirably in the designated societal function for women, which at least in part entails acting as a sexual object for men to satiate their sexual urges. She declares, "Woman is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called the sex, meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him, she is sex, so she is it in the absolute." (26)

The aforementioned discussions on women's bodies have made it clear that the body of women is not merely a biological edifice rather it is a cultural texture having an intricate and deeply embedded relationship with

the psychological, economic, and social realities. The eclectic and critical writing on the body of women has represented the reality of women's bodies as far as their existence within the postmodern and technological world is concerned. Therefore, how female bodies are negatively embedded with meaning has incited several theories by feminist authors to attempt to decode the female body by critiquing as well as emancipating it from the traditional and patriarchal discourse. One of the authors who provide an astute and tangible exploration of the female body within the cultural space is Margaret Atwood. The work of Atwood has underlined the materialistic and phenomenological realities of women's bodies. Patricia F. Goldblatt in his essay "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists" (1999) claims that her work unveils a society in which women "must be made malleable to men's desires, accepting their proposals, their advances; and if they do not submit to these roles, they are determined by the society as demons" (277). In *Bodily Harm* (1981), Atwood examines the deep connection between the body and its socio-cultural environment, demonstrating how external influences shape identity and self-perception. The novel explores themes of power, control, oppression, and collective versus individual identity, all mapped onto the physical body as part of a broader framework of "bodily harm." It is no surprise that Atwood, in an interview with Elizabeth Meese in *Crossing the Double-cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (1986), acknowledged her ongoing engagement with the concept of the body, stating that individuals experience themselves largely through their physical forms and the societal narratives attached to them (104). Atwood draws a compelling parallel between physical illness—particularly cancer—and the deterioration of society, using the protagonist Rennie's experience with an imperfect body that fails to align with cultural expectations. Rennie's cancer diagnosis and mastectomy leave not only visible scars but also force her to confront shifting notions of femininity, desirability, and self-identity. Atwood's protagonist, Rennie, initially perceives her body through the lens of societal expectations, particularly in terms of beauty, desirability, and health. Her cancer diagnosis and subsequent mastectomy disrupt this perception, forcing her to confront the fragility of her body and its detachment from idealized femininity. The devastating impact of the diagnosis and subsequent mastectomy extends beyond physical scars, challenging Rennie's sense of self and compelling her to reassess her priorities, as well as her relationships with men and the world at large. It affects her psyche so much that she suspects her efficacy to be a wife and to nurture a child in the future. She feels as if some part of her body has been missing and is reduced to a "damaged, amputated" piece (Atwood 198). Even after the physical pain of the unilateral partial mastectomy subsides, Rennie continues to feel damaged, her altered body leaving her with a profound sense of loss. Her feminine psyche, deeply intertwined with her physical form, experiences this amputation as a wound to her very being. Her body is no longer just her own—it has become a site of trauma, a reminder of both survival and disfigurement (Atwood 226). Such a crisis of self-worth reveals how deeply her identity has been entangled with societal expectations of the female body. Suddenly, her own body feels unfamiliar, as if it has become something other than herself:

"The body, sinister twin, taking its revenge for whatever crimes the mind was supposed to have committed on it. Nothing had prepared her for her outrage, the 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, and allowed it a normal amount of sexual release. She'd trusted it. Why then had it turned against her?" (Atwood 82)

Rennie has been treating her body as a machine to be kept in good repair, as something subordinate to what she considers to be her real self, and has accordingly tended to regard illnesses such as cancer as no more than the outward manifestations of some mental disability. Rennie finds it increasingly difficult to live at the same level as before, and, as she anxiously probes her body for symptoms of recurrence, she reflects that "from the surface, you can feel nothing, but she no longer trusts surfaces" (48). 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 had 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" (Atwood 82). 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" (Atwood 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" (Atwood 80). Her body possesses a shattered identity and it is separated from her mind. Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of The World* (1985) addresses the break between body and mind as torture that separates the victim's voice from her body, "For what the process of torture does is to split the human being into two ... only latent distinction between a self and a body, between a "me" and "my body" ... It is in part this combination that makes torture, like any experience of great physical pain, mimetic of death ..." (49). Coral Ann Howells in *Margaret Atwood (1996)* feels that "Rennie is a woman on the edge of collapse, for huge gaps have opened up in her imaginative topography of self and personal relations as she faces the breakdown of all her fictions of femininity and romance" (114). The mental confusions that are created by these corporal experiences make the characters feel that they are betrayed by their bodies. Rennie believes that her body is so vulnerable that it is prone to any source of destruction. When she sleeps, she "lies with her arms folded" to prevent her body from falling into pieces and fragments" (Atwood 49). When Rennie is in her hotel room in the Caribbean Islands, she feels her body is working against her:

"She lies down on the bed again, hearing the blood running through her body, which is still alive. She thinks of the cells, whispering, dividing in darkness replacing each other once at a time; and of the other cells, the evil ones which may or may not be there, working away in her with furious energy, like yeast. They would show up hot orange under, like the negative point of the sun when you close your eyes". (Atwood 91-92)

Iris Young in *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (2005) explains her use of terms, specifically that of "body experience," a term used to go beyond taking bodies as "objects or things to observe, study, or explain—" instead, they take the aim to "describe subjectivity and women's experience as lived and felt in the flesh" (9). This analogy highlights how women's bodies and identities have been treated

as passive surfaces onto which cultural expectations are projected. Universalizing this notion with Rennie's experience as J. Brooks Bouson in *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (1993) remarks, "As a blank sheet of paper, Rennie's body becomes a cultural text on which Jake inscribes the narrative of male desire" (115). According to Catherine MacKinnon in *Toward a Feminist Theory of State* (1989), "Men have been conditioned to find women's subordination sexy, and women have been conditioned to find a particular male version of female sexuality as erotic — one in which they are defined from a male point of view" (140). Thus, we see how men are socially trained to perceive women's subjugation as attractive, while women are taught to view a specific male-constructed version of female sexuality as desirable—one in which their identity and desirability are shaped through the male perspective.

## Conclusion

Atwood uses cancer as a compelling metaphor to question traditional notions of women and society, portraying both as suffering from affliction and in need of urgent restoration. However, for women, this affliction is internalized, symbolizing their alienation from both themselves and the world around them. The novel externalizes this inner turmoil, demonstrating how women's disconnection from their own identities is reflected in their strained relationship with their bodies. Rennie, like many women, has been conditioned to perceive her worth through societal standards that prioritize male-defined ideals of beauty. Her body serves as both a conduit for engaging with society and a site where she navigates her sense of belonging.

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