Chapter VI

Bodily Harm

Bodily Harm is the story of Rennie Wilford, a Toronto Journalist who visits two tiny Caribbean islands ostensibly to write a travel piece for her magazine Visor and to recover from a partial mastectomy. But, in reality, she is escaping from the ordinariness and humiliation of everyday living as she is afraid of the approaching death with which mastectomy threatens her. Ironically, her escape to those islands involves her in bewildering events. After one point, her story reads like detective fiction with real murders, rapes, tortures, political intrigues, corruption, CIA agents and the smuggling of contraband goods which land her ultimately in prison as an assumed spy. This turn of events evoked different responses and reactions from scholars and critics. One scholar points out that after Life Before Man, Atwood is looking "at the abuse of power in the public arena." According to B. W. Powe, in Bodily Harm, Atwood 'discovers' political commitment, which, however, is countered by Linda Hutcheon who feels that the novel is "about human rights and politics." The author also asserts that she was "writing a spy story from the point of view of one of the ignorant peripherally involved women."
That Rennie feels "peripheral" (BH, p. 226) is substantiated by her writings. She writes articles on life and superficial columns for magazines and newspapers and is content to lead an equally superficial and inconsequential life. She avoids what is in "bad taste" (26-27) or "out of date" in her professional life and remains an "expert on surfaces." In her interpersonal relationship, she denies herself the need to belong, because it made "you visible: soft, penetrable;" it made "you ludicrous."

It was foolhardy, and if you got through it without damage, it was only by sheer luck. It was like taking off your clothes at lunchtime in a bank. It let people think they knew something about you that you didn’t know about them, it gave them power over you (BM, p. 102).

All she wants is a relationship without "strings, no commitment." But she liked Jake because he satisfied her need to be admired. It was a relief to have a man say "that he thought she had a terrific [body]" (BH, p. 104). It is her neurotic need to lose herself and merge first with Jake, then with Daniel in clinging relationship.

To satisfy her basic needs she clings to her grandmother in childhood. Her holding on to the edge of her grandmother’s gown is symbolically her hold on "safety;" if "I let go I’ll fall" (BH, p. 53). She seeks the same safety in her relationship with Jake or Daniel. They are her "magic helpers." Erich Fromm, first used the term "magic helpers"
and Horney acknowledges it. The term represents the outside power on whom a helpless or dependent person projects all his longings and develops a symbiotic relationship. For a morbidly dependent person this relationship is his necessity. As Horney points out, "Assuming that she does manage to struggle out of her involvement by hook or crook. . . get out of one dependency only sooner or later to rush into another one" (NHG, p. 257). We get Horney's version of this relationship in "Self Analysis" and Fromm's in *Escape from Freedom*.

Rennie fits in the description of such dependent persons who crave for such magic helpers. Dependents as they are, they want someone to "protect, help, and develop" them and be with them constantly. People are bound to magic helpers because of "an inability to stand alone." Having no faith in her own efforts, Rennie hopes to satisfy all her wishes through the magic helper. Her object is not to live her own life but to manipulate her partner and make him responsible for her well-being. Their dependency "results in feeling of weakness and bondage" and a resentment that must be suppressed because it "threatens the security sought for in relationship." Love of Jake makes Rennie feel not only secure but invulnerable too. She feels protected when "She loved Jake, she loved everything. She felt she was walking inside a charmed circle: nothing could touch her,
nothing could touch them" (BH,p.72). It is a clear confirmation of fact that she is living with her idealized image. She feels different, "she was unique" (BM, p. 23), she says. She belongs to a special class of people who have an agreement with fate that they will be shielded from the worst brutality of life. She considers herself lucky because she is better placed than many others; "worse things happen to other people" (BH, p. 22) but she is saved from that fate. Her mainstay in life is Jake whom she glorifies not only in her private life but also in public. She writes an article on him in Visor and derives vicarious strength. In this way she surrenders to Jake.

Horney’s remark "love surrender appears as a solution for everything and hence as a vital necessity" (NHG, p. 246) is quite appropriate in Rennie’s case. Her need for total surrender also makes it necessary for her to idealize the partner because she finds her unity only with Jake to whom she can delegate her pride: "he should be the proud one and she the subdued", says Horney. "Both her need to idealize him and her need to surrender operate hand in hand" (NHG, p. 252). True to these traits of compliant character, Rennie idealizes Jake. He is "good at what he did," attractive and successful as a small company owner at the age of thirty. Her ability to attract such a person gives her a sense of great power and worth. That she is "passionately and
voraciously desired" (BH, p. 101) lifts her image. She lives this idealized image feeling "unique" (BH, p. 23) as a "good travel writer," happy that "There's nothing to worry about," and that "nothing can touch her . . . She's exempt" (BH, p. 203). She gets reinforcement of her image from her friends. All those with whom she interacts find her "nice," "sweet" and open. Whatever expansive traits she has remain suppressed in her unconscious because consciously she does not want to be anything that nice. Paul's remarks are revealing when he chides her, "you're nice, you can't help it. Naive. But you think you have to prove you're not merely nice, so you get into things you shouldn't. You want to know more than other people, am I right?" (BH, p. 150). In Horneyan language making a self-image and living it tentamounts to the Faustian "devil's pact." Rennie was living in the self-constructed world of complacency.

Two significant events break Rennie's smooth "surfaces": a house break by a supposedly male burglar with the possibly implied threat to her life symbolized by the length of the rope he had left behind "coiled neatly on the quilt" (BH, p. 13) inspires fears because it dawns on her that she is not "exempt." She is ordinary and vulnerable. And second, the reality of an operation which shakes her and gives a glimpse of her irreparable shaken sensibility. "My life is the pits right now," she feels "she can't bear not
knowing she doesn’t want to know" (BH, p. 60) the final diagnosis. Her contradictory reactions to knowing the doctor’s diagnosis reveal her mental state. "She believed two things at once: that there was nothing wrong with her and that she was doomed anyway" (BH, p. 23). Her imagination takes full charge of her reasoning. 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 linked in her imagination with the impending doom. Her vision is blurred, there is a horrifying sense of mortality hanging everywhere. She muses, "she had the kiss of death on her, you could see the marks. Mortality infested her, she was a carrier, it was catching. She lay there thinking . . . Life is just another sexually transmitted social disease" (BH, p. 201). Rennie like Som Bhaskar in Arun Joshi’s The Last Labyrinth and Maya in Anita Desai’s Cry, the Peacock, is haunted by the death neurosis.

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, pp. 40-41).
Urooj Abdi in *Death Anxiety* says that "Death anxiety" is related to "the Purpose in life." It is, "an integral part of the cognitive motivational structure of anxiety neurotic personality." The absence of meaning or a disturbance in the meaning system of an individual only accentuates death anxiety. Both Rennie and Arun Joshi’s Som lose the meaning of life as they are rejected by their lovers. Anuradha vanishes leaving Som in a shock and Jake rejects Rennie which lands her in a vacuum.

Since Rennie defines herself in relation to Jake, his rejection devastates her. When he strikes against her feelings, she feels neglected, abused and it reinforces her clinging attitude: she alternately glorifies him and scorns him for being a self-righteous and proud narcissist. Her attitude towards such maltreatment is full of contradictions and leads her into more and more conflict. To begin with, 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 unbearable effort. She also resorts to rationalization that their relationship was without strings and commitment. Failure was, therefore, out of their "terms of reference." This rationalization does not hold ground when Jake gives blow to her pride by saying that she is of no use to him now. This makes her feel guilty. And being prone to feeling guilty she rather
agrees with him though his reproaches shatter her self-image. She responds to his treatment 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" (BM, p. 101) and talks of "life-long goals" (BM, p. 126). Jake’s reactions are 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" (BH, p. 126). He disregards her wishes to have babies. To Jake, having babies means to restrict one’s choices. "You don’t want to limit your options too soon, said Jake, as if it was only her options that would be limited, it had nothing to do with him" (BH, p. 126).

Being a morbidly dependent person, she cannot openly express her rage at his ill-treatment which spurts in indirect ways, in complaints, suffering, martyrdom and an increased desire to cling. But Jake shatters all her pretences. "I’m not a mind man. I’m more interested in your body, if you want the truth" (BH, p. 104). He makes her ashamed of herself by withdrawing physically and psychically. He shocks her when he flaunts his relationship with another woman. That she has been merely a sexual object to him is nauseating for her, because it reduces her identity to zero.
Feminist critics view this as a male principle and correlate the fragmented or fractured identity with patriarchal tendency to break up and divide everything into polar opposites. Thus Elizabeth, Auntie Muriel, Peter, Arthur and all "male" principles in her novels divide the world into violent dualities. Jake too, like a typical male, sees Rennie in part-mind and body-rather than a whole person and though he adores her body, he does not acknowledge or care that she has a mind. For Jake "a packager", Rennie is a thing he can arrange and package. As Rennie says "It took her more time than it should have to realize that she was one of the things Jake was packaging" (BH, p. 104). He "liked thinking of sex as something he could win at." Jake's attitude symbolically constitutes the typical male-view of woman that inferiorizes the woman and thereby problematizes feminine identity. What Nandine in Joyce Carol Oates's Them says about women's lot may well be quoted here.

A woman is like a dream. Her life is a dream of waiting. I mean she lives in a dream waiting for a man. There's no way out of this insulting as it is, no woman can escape it. Her life is a waiting for a man. That's all. There is a certain door in this dream and she has to walk through it... She has no choice.

We are not working out a parallel here but only trying to show how men use women. Women writers are aware of this
victim position which damages their self-esteem. Atwood's heroines also feel dissatisfied and trapped and have the urge to run away.

This feminist interpretation can be substantiated with the help of psychological tenets of Horney. Rennie, the rejected beloved is feeling hurt. She hates herself as a loser. Her image is crushed, "I feel like a blank sheet of paper, she said. For you to doodle on" (BH, p. 105). She feels "useless" and reacts to this recognition with self-contempt and suffers the insult of rejection. According to Horney, "a rejection is an insult for anybody whose pride is largely invested in making everybody love him" (NHG, p. 245). 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. Something had to come in to fill it" (BH, p. 39). Horney emphatically maintains that morbidly dependent person cannot stand being alone. The narrator makes it look like a normal characteristic of the people of Griswold, her childhood home "People in Griswold, had a great fear of being left alone. It was supposed to be bad for you, it made you go funny, it drove you bats" (BH, p. 109). But to say that Rennie is affected by this general characteristic of the people of her town is to reduce her
problem to a simplistic formula. Hers is an individual case and need be understood in relation with her psychology.

The gap made by Jake's exist is filled in by Daniel. Fromm corroborates Horney by saying that if one relation ends with separation it "is usually followed by the choice of another object who is expected to fulfill all hopes connected with the magic helper" (pp. 175-77). Fromm's account resembles Rennie's morbid dependency on Jake which is followed by her relation with Daniel. Now Daniel is expected 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 rationalizes 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." In order to rationalize her new relationship she asserts to herself that she fell in love with the doctor because he knows something about "her she doesn't know, he knows what she's like inside" (BH, p. 81). Moreover, Daniel is "fantasy for her: a fantasy about the lack of fantasy, a fantasy of the normal" (BH, p. 237). Daniel also acknowledges this relationship, "I'm a fantasy for you. It's normal" (BH, p. 101). He, too, is dependent on her emotionally. Fromm says that if the helpers are also dependents it strengthens "the impression" that this
relationship is one of "real love."

Daniel is also a self-effacing man and he wants an escape "a little but not too much, a window but not a door" (BH, p. 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 am better at it" (BH, p. 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, 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, pp. 195-96).

In terms of Freud, her persistent demands for physical intimacy can be called "oral erotic." But when interpreted from Horneyan tenets, "Sexual relations may stand out as the only satisfactory contact . . . Sex may mean for her the only assurance of love" (NHG, p. 250). Not only this, she gets a feeling of being "wanted." Both Daniel and Rennie are unsure of their needs for love. As Rennie remarks "she
wasn't sure whether she wanted it or not, an affair with Daniel" (BH, p. 155). It was not a question of their wishing it. Both being dependents have neurotic needs for love. Both are needy. Here is the love that says "I love you because I need you." Erich Fromm terms it "immature love." It does not give the sense of sharing and openness rather it produces a feeling of dependency. Fromm and Horney acknowledge the possibility that both parties may be dependents. Here is the case of mutual morbid dependency although Rennie is far more enslaved than Daniel. Their neurotic needs and compulsions clash and produce much of Rennie's emotional turmoil and genefate intense anxiety and self-hate.

Neurotic pride is the enemy of love and that is why Daniel recoils from touch or physical nearness. He refuses to go to bed with her and gives the reason that "It would be unethical, he said. I'd be taking advantage of you. You're in an emotional state" (BH, p. 143). If we probe into psychological reasons for this, we see that Daniel is living up to his "shoulds": a married man "should" not go for extra-marital relations. If he acts contrary to it, he would be shattering his neurotic pride and falling a prey to self-hate. Keeping a safe distance from Rennie is his strategy to guard his neurotic pride. As for Rennie, she fails to understand Daniel's psyche. Daniel's approach
tentamounts to rejection. She is probably a "vacation" which he thinks "he shouldn't have taken. She felt like a straw that had been clutched, she felt he'd been drowning. She felt raped" (BH, p. 238). She was ashamed of herself for falling in love with the married man which ordinarily middle aged married women do. That she has been refused and rejected is further unbearably shameful. Under the grip of self-contempt, she berates herself as an "event, a freak." She cannot accept the fact that Daniel is needy like her and ashamed of like her. She feels revolted to accept that he needs the same compassion and understanding. Horney is of the opinion that it is natural for a compliant person to dislike another compliant one. In this sense, Rennie's reaction to Daniel's behaviour and needs is natural. She muses, "He had no right to appeal to her like that, to throw himself on her mercy. She wasn't God, she didn't have to be understanding..." (BH, p. 196). True to her compliant character, she fails either to forgive him or believe in his needs:

The fact was that he had needed something from her, which she could neither believe nor forgive. She'd been counting on him not to: she was supposed to be needy one, but it was the other way around. He was ashamed of himself, which was the last thing she'd wanted (BH, p. 238).

Rennie cannot commit herself to others selflessly because
she lacks faith in herself. Fromm observes that in such cases "while one is consciously afraid of not being loved, the real, though unconscious fear is that of loving. To love means to commit oneself without guarantee." When Daniel does not show intimacy, she blames him for being needy. She has ingrained in herself the habit of blaming others for her calamities. In her childhood, when she was unable to feel what she was supposed to, she would blame her mother. She also blamed her father for leaving her behind in her mother’s care. Then it was Jake and Daniel and later it was her body. 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 hurls accusation 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, p. 82). While blaming her body, she is externalizing her self-hate. Thus it is revealed that she is not only alienated from her body but is impaired emotionally. It has affected her spontaneity and sensibility. She confesses to Daniel, "I don’t feel human any more, . . ." (BH, p. 83). Even her breast cancer with its obvious serious implications becomes merely a possible subject for her life style’s columns and she thinks she
could do a piece on it, "Cancer, The Coming Thing" (BH, p. 27). This shows that her fears of Bodily Harm have a strong hold on her.

Apparently, the title Bodily Harm stands for Rennie's breast cancer "the way she was damaged, amputated" (BH, p. 198). One scholar views it not only as a plot device but also 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." To Linda Hutcheon in Bodily Harm, "themes of violation--physical, psychological and ideological--are the focus for Atwood. Rennie feels not only violated physically "raped" in her relationship but 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, p. 82). The novelist highlights Rennie's fear of exposure and how she associates her disease with "maggots," "diseased fruit." A clear picture of Rennie's psyche is provided in terms of various motifs, dreams, 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, p. 83). The centipedes relate her with the kind of thing 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, p. 80). Her resemblance 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.

Rennie's emotional withdrawal has become so complete that her grandmother's delusion is now her own nightmare. Shannon Hengen calls it Rennie's "regressive narcissism. One sign of which is repression of feelings associated with intimacy, vulnerability, interconnection." In her dreaming, she is searching for lost hands. Rennie dreams she is "rummaging through her slips, scarves, sweaters . . . It's her hands she is looking for, she knows she left them here somewhere, folded neatly in a drawer, like gloves" (BH, p. 116). The search for lost hands in dreams can be interpreted as her search for lost identity and cancer stands for a threat to her whole self.

The operative surgery for her breast-cancer metaphorically reinforces the idea of Rennie's incompleteness--like her grandmother's. Images of severance and sawing off in physical terms symbolically point to Rennie's fractured identity. The memory of her
grandmother's "lost" hands further reinforces the idea of Rennie's incomplete identity. The memory of her stern and heartless grandmother who pries away young Rennie's hands "finger by finger" (BH, p. 53) and shuts her up in cellar where, "there were things, . . . that might get on you and run up your legs" (BH, p. 53) impinges upon adult Rennie's consciousness. As a child, Rennie learns three important things: "how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them" (BH, p. 54) and to "keep her options open." She defines herself against Griswold, "Griswold is ingrained in her mind" (BH, p. 118). Her Griswold syndrome is: "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." "If you can't keep your word, don't give it." The meaning of life to Rennie lies not in the realisation of self but in the realization of these Griswold values.

According to one scholar "Griswold does not offer commentary but it does help to define the absences or lacunae in Rennie's personality." It would be appropriate to point out here that in Margaret Laurence's novels, women relate themselves to Makawana-macrocosm of cultural heritage to gain identity and self-definition. But Rennie's Griswold was a place without compassion and their old Victorian house of her childhood is a place of emotional withholding without touching or intimacy. It is related to the memory of her
grandmother who has lost her hands. "My other hands" as she says, "the ones I had before, the ones I touch things with" (BH, p. 57). The grandmother, like Elizabeth in Life Before Man is a woman who embodies the forces of repression and domination that account for Rennie's passivity and subservience. The grandmother has problematized her perception and self-perception. Rennie views herself without any worth. Her prominent wish is not to displease her grandmother, in case, she has inadvertently displeased her, she insists on her forgiveness. Karen Horney categorically refers to these 'injurious influences' which prevent a child from arriving at correct self-evaluation. In addition to Griswold's puritanical culture, and grandmother's influences, the saintly performance of Rennie's mother greatly affect her psyche. Rennie recalls: "everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint-I didn't want to be like her in anyway" (BH, p. 58). Karen Horney elaborates such influences, she remarks, "A rigid regime of perfectionist standards [saintly] may evoke in him a feeling of inferiority for not measuring up to such demands. . . . Moves towards autonomy or independence may be ridiculed" (NHG, p. 87). This alienated Rennie from her mother's world. Early in life, she stopped telling her mother "bad news," since her mother does not understand her and regard such things
not as accidents but as acts Rennie committed on purpose to complicate her mother’s life. Hence she refrains from telling her about such a traumatic experience of her operation and Jake’s decision. Rennie believes that the "operation, too, she [her mother] would see as Rennie’s fault" (BH, p. 82) and "something you brought upon yourself" (BH, p. 82).

In reality, her mother has her own psychological compulsions. She shows her neurotic urge to win over Rennie and her sympathy when she breaks the news of her husband’s betrayal. This can be termed as the need to get "nurturing" from the daughter. Feminist psychologist Nancy Chodorow, P. Caplan, Juliet Mitchell and Alice Miller have studied women’s need for "nurturing", which, they feel, is a kind of projection, the mother-daughter identification. This pattern is manifested in the role reversal between mother and daughter. The under-nurtured mother looks to her own daughter for re-inforcement and validation. This is injurious to the daughter’s life as it demands "sweet compliance" and "good girl" behaviour. Caplan argues in her study Barriers Between Women that mothers who are themselves overburdened with family responsibilities and have been under-nurtured as daughters will push aside their own daughters’ needs to get nurtured as least important and most troublesome. Karen Horney in her diary describes her
relationship with her mother. Her attitude is often protective which is expressed in her phrase "poor little mutti." Explaining women's need for nurturing and its ill effects on the daughter, Marcia WestCott terms it as "female altruism" which is ultimately damaging for the girl child. This is damaging for Rennie too. It killed in her the natural urges for growth and creativity. She did not want to become a mother:

I didn't want to be like her in anyway. I didn't want to have a family or be any one's mother, ever; I had none of those ambitions. I didn't want to own many objects or inherit any. I didn't want to cope. I didn't want to deteriorate. I used to pray that I wouldn't live long enough to get like my grandmother, and now I guess I won't (BH, p. 58).

Happy marriage and internalizing gender-role of creativity are the secret of feminine fulfilment. But, Rennie cannot enact such a role without internal conflict that is partly a reflection of her "basic anxiety." To Rennie they tentamount to traps in which women like her mother get caught. As far as she is concerned, she refuses to fall a victim to these societal traps. However, she is trapped, "One man I'm not allowed to touch, she thought, and another I won't allow to touch me" (BH, p. 198). Rennie has an exaggerated opinion of herself which falsifies reality. She has not learnt how to cope up with reality, this produces much of her emotional and intellectual turmoil.
Rennie's claims clamoured for extra-special treatment from fate. Realizing that fate is relentless and it has struck her comes to her as a blow. "Rennie had not intended to have a life crisis and she did not feel in need of support. But now she did" (BH, p. 163). This makes her vulnerable; that she is ordinary and liable to be buffeted by fate is unacceptable to her. Moreover, she cannot accept the fact that the men in her life are ordinary. Atwood's heroines hate putting up with mediocre heroes who want ordinary joys of life and lead ordinary life. Rennie is shocked to realise that "she'd fallen in love with, the absolutely ordinary raised to the degree of X" (BH, pp. 196-197). Daniel with his ordinariness offends Rennie. When she realises that she herself is mediocre, she "couldn't stand being guilty of such a banality." To live the life of an ordinary human is beyond the scope of her neurotic claim.

Self hate is the logical outcome of a conflict between Rennie's pride system and her real self. The result is that she has scorn for herself. She sees herself as an "idiot" "a hypocrite" (BH, p. 137) "fradulent" (BH, p. 227) "Dumb, gullible, naive" to believe people. "She feels superfluous and both invisible and exposed: something so much there that nobody looks at it" (BH, p. 233). Her expansive side wants her to master this negative image; to do something about it. At this time, it is her neurotic need to present herself as
normal. To satisfy this need, she looks into the mirror and wants it to approve her as a normal person. Hengen remarks, Rennie’s "mirror stage is the most prolonged and dangerous but also potentially the most effective of those experienced by Atwood’s central females." Unlike Marian, however Rennie starts her movement towards self-knowledge in that state of disorientation beyond or behind mirrors." Mirror becomes her glorified self. As in case of Conrad’s "The Secret Sharer," Rennie’s secret image merges with the mirrored self. She examines her face in the mirror checking for signs and she feels satisfied when she looks normal.

A normal person does not need to put a "shiny new lock" on her past as Rennie does. She also avoids thinking of future. She lives in present that also on surfaces. When she cannot face realities in the present, the only alternative is to escape. She is convinced that "failure is easy to avoid. All you have to do is walk away" (BH, p. 203). Unable to cope with what seems an increasingly threatened existence in Toronto, Rennie attempts an escape. She ends with an adventurous assignment on the Caribbean islands, "She had never heard off." She escapes to Caribbean island to take "small absences from real life" (BH, p. 16) and from her past "since out was where she needed to be " (BH, p. 16). Thus she makes a move away from people. She adopts the strategy of detachment,
withdrawal. She protects herself by renouncing her desires. "She had given up expecting anything . . ." (BH, p. 237) she feels that that was the right way to do it, never to expect anything. She flaunts her "who cares" attitude with Dr Minnow, Lora and Paul. This solution is not without satisfaction. Not only does it protect her against self-hate which she incurs when she does something foolish but also feeds her pride. This is reflected in her remarks that "she can make her own choices, she doesn't need to have them made for her" (BH, p. 234). She is ready to pay the price by stopping all human communication. Now she does not want to start a conversation. Conversations lead to acquaintances and "acquaintances are too easy to make on these trips. People mistake them for friendships" (BH, p. 88). She refuses herself this.

She believes in the possibility of being "away . . . invisible . . . safe." But the reality of the situation is that rather being invisible, she is watched wherever she goes. In a place where corruption and unbridled power mean that "nothing is inconceivable" (BH, p. 133), Rennie learns that there is no such thing as safety, "neutrality" and "invisibility;" once for all she abandons the notion that "she's tourist, she's exempt" (BH, p. 203). In Caribbean island "massive involvement" becomes unavoidable. Paul sees the change "you're getting too involved" (BH, p. 234), he
says. This helps her to recover and define herself alone in relation to men and women she meets amidst the violent political upheaval on St. Antoine. That is why a critic says that "Essentially the plot is about recovery." Rennie recovers her capacity for sexual pleasure in a brief affair with a small town local drug runner--Paul. Though, "She knows nothing about him, she doesn’t need to know anything, he knows nothing about her, it is perfect" (BH, p. 100). For her, "love is tangled, sex is straight" (BH, p. 223) and she knows her urgency for sexual intimacy. "This is something she wants to do, again, finally, she wants it so much her hands are shaking" (BH, p. 100). This is an unhealthy drive to achieve mastery of life, but in case of Rennie, she owes it to Paul for giving back her body. She no longer feels untouchable. It is the beginning of her attempt to participate in life at large.

Rennie’s ritualistic reaching out like Elizabeth in *Life Before Man* recovers her capacity for compassion in her relationship with Lora. Lora is Rennie’s cellmate after Minnow’s assassination, they are put in the jail as subversives. Lora is also Ontarian living on St Antoine and is vulnerable to men, she has become involved with "Prince," who is the second opposition candidate. Lora and Rennie are "unlikely companions." In contrast to Rennie’s middle class upbringing, Lora is the child of poverty and abuse.
Lora is street-wise while Rennie is university-educated. To hardened Lora, sexual favours to the guards are simply survival tactics. It is "not any different from having some guy stick his finger in your ear" (BH, p. 286), but to Griswold wise Rennie, "it isn't decent." It is repelling like her hands which are dirty, finger nails bitten to the quick and the skin chewed. But Lora's passionate love for the leader of political uprising--Prince--and her eventual brutalization by the police force are seen by Rennie with open eyes. At last, against her will Rennie is doing what Minnow has asked her to, "Look with eyes open." "She doesn't want to see, she has to see, why isn't someone covering her eyes?" (BH, p. 293). She wanted to feel compassion but she couldn't. "She looks down at her hands, which ought to contain comfort. Compassion. She ought to go over to Lora and put her arms around her and pat her on the back, but she can't" (BH, p. 286). As Lora lies senseless on the prison floor, Rennie takes her hand believing that if she tries hard enough "something will move and live again, something will get born" (BH, p. 299).

Holding Lora, Rennie acknowledges that her healing is a "gift." The gift of healing is related to women's enduring, unspoken powers in the character of Elva, the Caribbean grandmother and masseuse who informs Rennie that the "magic" (BH, p. 194) of her hands is a "gift I have... from my
Shannon is of the opinion that "in order to find the renewed identity," Rennie has to "empower the goodness which both her matrilineage and national history provide by joining it to subversive writing." Stouck sees in this compassion of Rennie for Lora "the new stance" in picturing one woman helping another woman. Only in the collection titled *Two Headed Poems* (1978) does Atwood picture the joining together of women and there it is in terms of matriarchal lineage. He remarks, "In her novels to date there is no female tradition, no warm female friendships, no nurturing mother figures or places to call home, only enemies and alien territory. Rennie reaching out to Lora may seem more hypothetical than actual, but its significance should not be dismissed." Another critic asserts that at the end of the novel "we don't know whether Rennie has accomplished a miracle, only that she has tried." This "trying" itself is significant because in doing so she has learnt to reach out to others.

Whether she accomplishes a miracle or whether she still fantasizes are not important. But that there is a change in her perception which is the point of importance: "What she sees has not altered only the way she sees it" (BH, p. 300). Right perception is the beginning of a right action. She is showing right perception in her altered attitude towards
life and death. It is revealed in her understanding that she can no longer ignore the faceless strangers in the world crying for help, "there's no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone's, it has a name" (BH, p. 299). This knowledge not only frees her from aloof detachment towards others but also releases in her for the first time "genuine compassion for the hurts and sufferings of her fellow beings." Thus she reaffirms her allegiance to humanity and symbolically she regains her identity as a whole human being. In the enlarged understanding of life, she accepts death personified as the stranger with the rope. Thus she is relieved of her death-neurosis and accepts the mortality of the body. Nobody lives for ever, who said you could?" (BH, p. 204) and realises "who was at the end" (BH, p. 41) of rope

In Maslowian terminology it is "B-Cognition." "In B-cognition, the experience or the object (experienced) tends to be seen as . . . detached from relations, from possible usefulness, from expediency, and from purpose. . . ." Maslow often used the phrases "peak-experience" and "B-cognition" interchangeably. Just as a self-actualizing person sees reality more clearly as a matter of course, so does the ordinary person see it more clearly in his peak experience. It is seen in "itself and for itself." Rennie, being an ordinary person, sees it in peak experience in
jail. It is not compared or evaluated or judged, it is simply beheld, that is what Rennie has done. In William Golding's *Free Fall*, the protagonist Sammy Mountjoy has peak experience in a cell in the German camp which changes his perception. It infuses one who has it, says Maslow with "a profound sense of humility, smallness, unworthiness before the enormity of experience." This is exactly how Rennie feels: that her suffering and scar are insignificant. She is reconciled. "She may be dying, true, but if so she's doing it slowly," relatively speaking. She accepts her fate, not under compulsion but after reaching understanding of the human situation.

Towards the end, this experience has changed Rennie from a woman who "can't make a sound" (BH, p. 293) of protest when Lora is beaten to a woman who is resolved to be a "reporter." All the strategies Rennie adopted to achieve the "neutrality" and "invisibility" have been dropped. She fantasizes about her release from prison but in fantasy also she is thinking of reality: she will report if she survives, "the way she sees it." She is filled with positive thoughts and power of emotional bonding. She is lucky if she is released, if not, no outside force has the power to break her. She has emerged "unharmed" and suffers from no fear of death or mortality. A man/woman is known by the choice he/she makes. She has chosen her future.
Notes and References


3. Margaret Atwood, address delivered at a conference "Imagined Realities in contemporary women writing," Dyffryn House near Cardiff (October, 1982) organised by the Welsh Arts council.


11. Shannon Hengen, Margaret Atwood's Power, p. 95

12. Annette Kolodny, "Margaret Atwood and The Politics of Narrative," p. 100


18. Jerome H. Rosenberg, p. 133

19. David Stouck, *Major Canadian Authors*, p. 290