Chapter IV

Political Survival: *Bodily Harm*

In *Bodily Harm* (1981), Margaret Atwood’s fifth novel, one finds a sense of commitment in Atwood to expose the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. It is no different from her previous novels in that it follows a character trying to break free from her past and grasp a brighter and more promising future. And yet, *Bodily Harm* takes this idea a step further by criticizing and questioning the actions of those in western culture. In this respect, *Bodily Harm* is Atwood’s most political novel. It drives home the message which is embodied in Atwood’s address of the World meeting of Amnesty International:

> Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings. If the imagination were a negligible thing and the act of writing a mere frill, as many in this society would like to believe, regimes all over the world would not be at such pains to exterminate them.¹

This gripping yet sensitive novel tells of Rennie, a young journalist in the process of re-evaluating her life and relationships after undergoing a major surgery. Feeling the need to escape, she gets an assignment to write a travel article about the fictional Caribbean island, St. Antoine and St. Agathe. ‘The idyllic island of her fantasies’, however, is in fact a depressed
country on the brink of revolution and uprising. More accustomed to writing about fashion and food, she is increasingly caught up in the revolutionary politics of St. Antoine, as the atmosphere in the island becomes more and more sinister.

Rennie struggles to absent herself from local politics for as long as possible, but after becoming infatuated with Paul, a shadowy player in the local scene, and being entrusted with the confidences of Mr. Minnow, a doomed candidate for the minority opposition, Rennie realizes that she has no choice but to become involved. With commitment comes responsibility and implication, and Rennie soon finds herself thrown into a nightmare she could not have anticipated. Her efforts to not only survive but comprehend and report ‘the swirl of events’ around her, lead her to new levels of personal and artistic awareness. The maze of wild events force Rennie and the different characters on the island to question their place in the world.

The contrast between her memories of the narrow minded community of her small town and the raw violence she is now encountering comes to a peak in the horrors of a prison confinement after an abortive revolution attempt. By turns comic, satiric and terrifying, Margaret Atwood’s Bodily Harm is ultimately an exploration of the lust for power, both sexual and political.
Rennie is a woman in her thirties used by the author to explore how “she reacts to oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological”.² Atwood, in her later novels and poems, seems to focus on the struggle in which she sees men and women caught up: she examines “who can do what to whom and get away with it”. Bodily Harm focuses on “the contrast between affluent thinking and the brutal reality of power and sexual politics”.³ The protagonist, Rennie, is a ‘lifestyle journalist’ who has just had a mastectomy. Atwood traces her internal torment in dealing with this trauma, her troubled childhood, her relationship with men and a violent society at large. Bodily Harm is hence a warning to young women of the ‘post – feminist’ 1980’s and after, who began taking for granted those rights that had been secured to women.

Renata Wilford, the “Camera narrator”⁴ of Bodily Harm is a Canadian free-lance journalist as well as a “Life Tourist” writer. She uses “pen” as a “weapon”⁵ to write her travelogue, “Bodily Harm”. She reflects Atwood’s poem “True Stories”.

The facts of this world seen clearly
are seen through tears;
why tell me then
there is something wrong with my eyes?

To see clearly without flinching
without turning away,
this is agony, the eyes taped upon 
two inches from the sun.

The razor across the eyeball
is a detail from an old film.
It is also a truth.
Witness is what you must bear.6

To comprehend the progression of Renata Wilford’s career as a free-lance journalist and a “Life-Tourist” writer, it is important to consider her early life in the small town of Griswold, Ontario.

Rennie is the child of an irresponsible man who has abandoned his family for a mistress in Toronto. She is brought up in an unhealthy and joyless environment in Griswold by her grandparents. For Rennie, her grandparents’ place is “a subground, something that can’t be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones” (BH 18). Rennie’s impressionistic years of childhood are suppressed and spoiled by her grandmother’s traditional approach.

She is never allowed to think and feel independently by her grandmother’s rules of do’s and don’ts. Rennie says: “As a child I learned [...] how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them [...] According to her, it was bad manners to ask direct questions” (BH 54). Apart from such an unhappy state of affairs in Griswold, Rennie feels hurt all the more as she is badly neglected by her
mother. Her mother had sacrificed her own life in order to look after her aged parents, but neglects her own daughter.

Rennie detests the servile existence in Griswold. She also detests the self–abnegation of her mother: “I don’t want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her - everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint – I didn’t want to be like her in any way” (BH 58). Thus, Rennie remains an outsider in Griswold and leaves for Toronto to free herself from the oppressive environment, and to lead a life of freedom. Griswold therefore, forms the background to her career of freelance journalism as well as her travelogue.

Rennie begins her adult life in Toronto as a versatile writer. She gets commissioned to write articles for ‘Pandora’, a woman-oriented magazine, and for ‘Visor’, a man oriented journal. These two offer her enough scope to write about both men and women. The three things which she has learnt from childhood: “how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them” become deeply “ingrained in her” (BH 118). “Rennie looks, which is her function” (BH 88) and reports what she sees in as light-hearted a manner as possible.

In the course of writing a piece called “The Young and the Solvent” for Visor, Rennie comes into contact with Jake who works as a designer of appearances for a packaging company. Rennie is of the view that she is a product of the post – feminist era. She seems to be over-confident that she
can stand upon any crisis situation without any harm either to her body or her psyche. But little does she realize that Jake is an exploiter.

In spite of all her care and intelligence, she allows herself to be sucked into the evil designs of Jake. He uses all his tricks to use and abuse her just as he does things. Later on, she realizes that his interest in her is limited to the gratification of his carnal desires. Michael Dixon rightly says that “As a packager of images for advertising he shares her taste for the superficial and her distaste for massive involvement”\textsuperscript{7}. Her relationship with Jake remains as if it were a “newly renovated house” (BH 102) without a strong foundation.

In fact, Rennie takes the stance of the non-feminist, quite satisfied with Jake. Everything seems to underline the power relations between male and female: he asks and she complies. He extends his day time job to their relationship: she is one of the ‘packages’ Jake is using.

Rennie gets trapped “in things that are beyond (her) control” (BH 47) when breast cancer is diagnosed in her by Dr. Daniel Luoma, a male gynaecologist. Jake feels ill-at-ease in the company of Rennie following her mastectomy. He imagines the scar on her breast as “the kiss of death on her” (BH 20). Jake abandons Rennie, feeling that life is not enjoyable with a diseased woman. Rennie regrets that she has allowed herself to be used by Jake as a commodity - a kind of ‘raw-material’.
More than the mastectomy, it is Rennie's passive adherence to Jake's every whim that eventually drives him away. He loses interest because she is so passive and accepting of his oppressive and abusive nature. Even when Jake leaves her, she takes it upon herself to be the absolute cause. In doing this, Rennie tries to embody the victimized woman, the innocent one in a perverse world of wrong-doers. Thus, Rennie's maiden encounter with love in Jake ends abruptly, leaving her bruised and battered, physically and emotionally.

Rennie represents all women who, through the influence of culture, become passive and allow themselves to be taken advantage of by men whom they are anxious to please. She allows herself to fulfill the male desire and becomes an exhibitionist object to fill the man's gaze. The concept of the detached body comes in repeatedly in Bodily Harm. It is represented in the second picture that Jake hangs up in the apartment wherein a woman sprawled on a 1940's sofa is seen separated from her head due to the angle from which it is taken. This image presents the female in terms of a body rather than in terms of a face; once again, the body becomes a replaceable object and the subject (the head) is denied.

This disconnection is rooted in Rennie's mind. Not only does she imagine Jake's lover as 'a headless body', but also feels this alienation with her own body. After her mastectomy, she regards the operation very little in terms of a salvation; she views it more as an evil violation by man,
her body and self cut away from each other and marked by male ‘probers, the labellers and cutters’.

Since Jake had seen her in completely sexual terms, she initially turns to Daniel (her surgeon), the male protector, who is seen in contrast to Jake the predator. He possesses the healing touch, so that Rennie comes to be obsessed with his hands. She wants and needs his hands to touch her. But he is not able to get her reconciled with her body. He does not tear her body. He does not tear her out of the darkness and insecurity that overwhelms her after the operation. She feels that she has saved him in some way. Subsequently, she feels violated, victimized, since in his ordinariness Daniel still manages to take something of her which she had not expected. He too has ‘won’. Her fantasy is unfulfilled. Rennie begins to look at Daniel as “the man with the knife, the bringer of death”. She is the man with the scalpel mutilating the female body.

Rennie experiences the trauma of mastectomy. She is emotionally disturbed by the mark of scar on her body. Cancer destroys her trust in appearances. She feels that she has her malignancy uncured. She has nightmares and asks her surgeon anxiously: “Either I’m living or I’m dying” (BH 60). Daniel evades her question and says: “You’re not dead yet. You’re a lot more alive than many people” (BH 60). Daniel, who is afraid of “emotional commitment, is unable to offer her anything but platitudes”. But Rennie wants something definite, the real truth, one way or the other. Then
she will know what she should do next. “It’s this suspension, hanging in a void, this half-life she can’t bear. She can’t bear not knowing” (BH 60).

Rennie is aware how she has been the “raw-materials, violated and doctored” by Daniel.

Rennie awakens to the fact that she has been surgically as well as sexually violated by Dr. Daniel and Jake. She regrets that she has allowed herself to be used, manipulated and debased by Jake and Daniel as a kind of “raw-material” according to their own impoverished values.

On the day following Jake’s departure and the dead-end relationship with Daniel, there is an attempted crime in Rennie’s apartment. A man leaves a coil of rope on her bed in Toronto as a reminder of his visit. She takes the coil of rope left on her bed as a sign that she has long been confined and fettered by her situation as a woman. The rope symbolizes bondage and entanglement; it also seems to be drawing Rennie towards some kind of new awareness.

Rennie’s concept of reality is what lies at the core of her tragedy. The narrative seems to force Rennie to see what she has for too long tried to ignore. Every time she is in personal crisis which requires her involvement, she detaches herself by trying to turn the event into some piece for a magazine, using dark humour to evade actually thinking about things too much. After her mastectomy, she walks home, thinking of possible titles that might suit this sort of topic. To counteract the shocking incident of a man
who breaks into her apartment leaving a rope on her bed, she tries to take on a write-up on pornography. When events start to take their toll on her, to escape from her all-too-real reality, she opts for a travel article on a ‘paradise’ island. But the paradise is never actually what it sets out to be and confrontation inevitably returns. She has to see the reality.

The article she chooses to write is a form of escapism. She opts for superficial ‘life style’ writing and evades the truth - what ultimately art is meant to portray. She refuses to see and only looks at the surface of things. This is, of course, one of the first things she learnt during her stern upbringing in Griswold: “how to look at things without touching them”.

It is Paul, a tourist guide in the Caribbean island, who eventually rescues Rennie, who gives her back her body. She falls in love with Paul because of his impressive manners and ideals. She feels that Paul is a good substitute to Jake, the exploiter and seducer. She hopes against hope that she might be able to live with him while keeping her ‘options’ open. She is of the view that she might be able to strike a meaningful relationship with him. Dorothy Jones rightly comments: “Unlike Jake, who tries to make her over into something else, or Daniel who sees her as the answer to his emotional needs, Paul accepts Rennie for what she is”. Unlike Jake, Paul does not hate or abandon Rennie on the grounds of the scar on her body. She thinks that he has some compassion for her damaged body. Experience with Paul gives her a new life and his touch enlivens her.
The age-old maxim, familiarity breeds contempt, seems to influence both Paul and Rennie. Very soon, she realizes that he is an immature person interested in sporting and wielding a gun needlessly. She begins to detest him because she is scared of the very sight of the gun. She is gradually disillusioned with him. She realizes that she has had yet another meaningless relationship with Paul. She feels that involvement in love affairs is “like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles” (BH 102). She realizes her female passivity and her inability to establish meaningful relationships with anyone of her male associates. She feels a sense of urgency to run away from all her meaningless and loveless involvements with men. Rennie says: “I should take my body and run. I don’t need another man. I’m not supposed to expect anything” (BH 227).

Paul, who helps Rennie reconcile herself to her body, is typically a male. His taste for danger fits him neatly into the role of renegade hero. He lives on the edge, he deals in drugs, and he rescues maidens in distress. The reasons for his actions are purely amusement. Rennie grasps the truth about knights - ‘the maidens were only an excuse; the dragon was the real business’. In his attempt to save Rennie during the uprisings at St. Agathe, he fails and she remains imprisoned. For the rest of the novel nobody knows what becomes of him, just as nobody really knew where he had come from. Rennie’s attempts at having him disclose anything about his life fail. The photos she finds reveal little and she must take that little to make him
any more than a one-dimensional figure. In fact, one can almost equate him with the faceless stranger with the rope.

Every attempt that Rennie makes at actually identifying the man with the rope fails her. She tries to identify him as Jake, as Daniel, as Paul, until, terrifyingly, she begins to realize that this facelessness is the possibility of any male in society: “he is an agent of male oppression”. He represents the potential in all men to brutalize women. This is not the individual brutality of a certain person inflicted upon another but the collective consequence of a patriarchal structure. It is the need for male dominance and female subordination.

Rennie’s association with Jocasta, a feminist activist, raises her consciousness of herself and helps her understand better the villainous attitude and victimizing nature of the male world towards women. She is convinced that woman’s liberation continues to be a distant dream and a lot has to be done to realize the desired goals. Jocasta toys with the fantastic idea of reversing the role of men and women. She says: “I think it would be a great idea if all the men were turned into women and all the women were turned into men, even just for a day. Then they’d all know exactly how the other ones would like to be treated” (BH 156). Jocasta’s assessment of man-woman relationship illuminates Rennie’s thinking. She begins to assess all her love relationships from a fresh perspective. For Rennie, Jocasta represents a complete and complex socio-gender system. Under the
influence of Jocasta, she publishes an article entitled, “Burned out”, on the alleged death of the women’s movement. In this piece, Rennie reasons out why and under what circumstances women take to odd, mean and degrading vocations like “bitching” and “trashing” (BH 93).

Rennie treats relationships with irony in her little articles on how to combat boredom in a relationship, but paradoxically also fantasizes with her friend Jocasta about taking on Jake’s role in altering the appearance of men: “Pick a man, any man, and find the distinguishing features. The eyebrows? The nose? The body? If this man were yours, how would you do him over?” (BH157). Despite her attempt at being or seeming to take on the role of power, Rennie does not actually go as far as Jocasta whose ‘drain-chain’ jewellery is an absolute mockery of the female sexual slave, and who has no qualms about seeing men as little more than sexual commodities, to be used and passed on.

When Rennie repeats Jocasta’s idea of men and women swapping sex for a day in order to see how either would like to be treated, Jake’s answer allows the reader to peep into Jake’s perception of his female-male relationships: “The women would say, now I’ve got you, you prick. Now it’s my turn […]. They’d all become rapists” (BH 156). In this inversion of reality, we can only see it as man actually acknowledging playing the part of the empowered rapist and the female playing the role of ‘the victim’.
Jake’s eyes, the reversal of the sexes would give a female a ‘go’ at what they have to suffer.

Rennie takes to writing as a serious and full-time occupation. She does a piece on pornography as an art form from the ‘woman’s angle’ for “Visor”. She interviews Frank, an artist, who depicts pornography as an art form. She even visits the Toronto policeman’s pornography museum along with Jocasta when she writes the article. It points out the abuse of women in the so-called civilized countries and stresses that they are primitive, as far as brutality of a woman’s body is concerned. Rennie realizes that women are stripped of their identity and are reduced to raw-materials. She also feels that men destroy women’s individuality from behind a mask of anonymous authority and power. She realizes that she too is part of the ‘raw-material’.

She is commissioned to do a travel piece for ‘Visor’ and it takes her to the Caribbean island. She carries a camera bag which symbolizes her tourist vision and identity. Rennie travels around the Caribbean island for the next six days meeting people. She lives in the real world. She finds her tragedy reflected in the tragedy of mute and innocent masses all over the world. She discovers that all human principles and issues like democracy, liberalism, individual dignity and even love are used as pretexts to get “rid of people you don’t like” (BH 240). The malignant cancer cells within her body function as a metaphor for the malignant manifestations of power in the external world. The growing cancer within her and her inadvertent
involvement in the political intrigues on the Caribbean Islands of St. Antoine and St. Agathe shatter her complacency and she realizes for the first time in her life that anything can happen to anyone, anywhere.

Rennie detects that the voter’s list in the Island’s elections contains dead people’s names while many living people’s names are excluded. Floods are a boon to the rulers because these fetch charity and aid which are used for purchasing votes. Thus, the political scene on the island has no room for love, decency and humanity. Women are treated as non-entities. They are tortured and even sliced off into pieces. So Rennie discovers different victims in the Caribbean island. She understands that women are not different from common people because both of them are powerless and hence are abused. Rennie’s travel piece expands and extends the implications of the term ‘woman’ to cover all the exploited and abused people in the world.

Rennie finds out that women are still where they were a century ago. The much spoken freedom and identity of women are only delusions. She realizes that people enjoy torturing women. She recognizes that the Caribbean is essentially as bad as Canada, which to her represents the civilized world. Rennie points out in her article that women everywhere are abused just like the helpless poor. In this way, she equates women with the poor throughout the world.
Rennie visits women prisoners in a Caribbean prison along with Dr. Minnow who is known for his rebellion against the tyranny of the government. Minnow, who is one of the politicians of St. Antoine, plays a significant part in guiding Rennie into touching things, into realizing the core of things, the ugly truth:

There are still things that are inconceivable [...]. Here nothing is unconceivable. I wish you to write about it [...] 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 a reporter, it is your duty to report (BH 270).

The reality that Atwood points at is the male violence against women which seems to have been brought out "to counterbalance women's recent self assertion". Although this isn't wholly true in Rennie, this self-assertion is understandable when one takes women's progress in the last few decades. Nonetheless, men's behaviour, as brought out in the novel, takes on a chilling aspect.

Rennie is accused of massive involvement in the island's current revolution and in its political affairs. Following an out-break of violent disturbances on the island, Rennie is arrested. She is accused of being an outraged tourist. She suffers incarceration for about two weeks in a Central American prison where she comes into contact with Lora Lucas, a fellow prisoner.
In her travelogue Rennie includes the tales which Lora narrates to her in the prison. Lora's tales of woe and brutality completely shatter Rennie's over-confidence in woman's liberation. Lora narrates the story of her life of terror under the gross exploitation of her step-father, which had led her to stab him and leave the place for good. Lora's account of her childhood brings home to Rennie, the vulnerability of the female.

Following her escape from home, she is hired to work on a boat. Lora's experience at this place of work turns out to be still worse. She is shocked to know that all the men around expect her to sleep with them. Either she has to comply with them or lose her job. The very assumption that a woman is meant for rent, smacks of male arrogance towards women. The tales of Lora's experience in Canada and in the Caribbean shock Rennie's feminist sensibility.

Lora's 'better' and more violent stories are intertwined with Rennie's. When Lora begins to tell another one of her tales, Rennie wishes she could not hear her. She fixates on Lora's opening and closing mouth. Rennie's attitude is much like that of her society, which marginalizes women like Lora. Lora belongs to the lower class of loose, dishevelled women who get what they deserve by Griswold's standards. The social and sexual oppression that she experiences are different from Rennie's. In a male-ordered society, her voice remains unheard. Women like her, of her
standing, are not taken any notice of unless her dialogue and experiences are placed alongside Rennie’s.

This is why Lora is finally the silenced, victimized woman – she is attacked after a threat she lashes out at the guards. Therefore, despite Atwood trying to make Lora’s story heard, she is still muted and Rennie’s tale is made predominant again. What Atwood thinks and believes to be needed in all of us is massive involvement; the need to take in and take part in the reality around us.

The sight of the neglected and uncared for dead body of Lora touches the very core of Rennie’s being. She feels a sense of empathy with her. Lora’s face is not a face any more, it’s a bruise, blood is still oozing from the cuts [...] the mouth looks like a piece of fruit that’s been run over by a car, pulp [...] it’s the face of a stranger, someone without a name, the word ‘Lora’ has come unhooked and is hovering in the air, apart from this ruin [...] face off with, all the cloth in this room is filthy, sceptic, except her hands [...] there’s no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone’s, it has a name (BH 298-99).

Rennie feels, touches and finally licks the dead face of Lora as animals do to their newly born offspring. This is how she identifies herself with the tragedy of Lora. Feeling the hand of Lora, Rennie imagines the possible
resurrection of the dead. She mutters: “Something will move and live again, something will get born” (BH 299). This precisely is the feminist consciousness of Rennie. Rennie is committed to immortalize Lora in the form of a book she wants to do as per Lora’s death wish. Lora tells Rennie: “The story of my life, you could put it in a book” (BH 270).

Rennie and Lora in their prison cells symbolize how women in all walks of life are victimized and oppressed by male power and authority. The brutality done to Lora is the real ‘bodily harm’ which surpasses both in agony and shocks the partial mastectomy done to Rennie. The brutal and heartless mutilation of Lora is symbolic of the limited gender-specific role of women in society. It finally dawns on Rennie that cancer or partial mastectomy of her breast has no significance and it is no more than a minor accident of her life.

Rennie feels enlightenment in her. She refuses to be a victim although she has “her scar, her disability, her nibbled flesh, the little teeth marks on her” (BH 284). Rennie’s body which has been maimed, dismembered, altered and fragmented symbolizes the crippled human beings all over the world. Rennie realizes that human malice is as dangerous as cancer. As Dorothy Jones says: “Fear of death by a disease like cancer is weighed against those threats to life which result from human malice – poverty, malnutrition and political violence”.14
Rennie tries to figure out the 'bodily harm' done to Lora, and other modes of harm which might be done to other bodies in future. She reflects: "This is what will happen" (BH 293). In her travel piece, Rennie encompasses a reality of 'bodily harm' which merges past-present-future. Rennie asserts that 'bodily harm' is everywhere – both inside and outside the prison, both in civilized and uncivilized countries, both in political and personal fields. Thus, there are no fixed hard boundaries to 'bodily harm'.

Free-lance journalists like Rennie never leave the prison cells as the rulers will ensure her continued imprisonment. Rennie does have some sort of epiphany. She eventually tries to save Lora (after she has been beaten up by the guards), by touching her hand and by calling her name. In recognizing that Lora's prostitution is braver than her cold, impermeable self, and in licking away the encrusted blood on Lora's face, she accepts Lora's humanity – Lora gave herself up sexually and maybe even dies for them – and so comes into contact with her own humanity. And once she escapes, she realizes her duty to write, to report the truth; she will choose her time: then she will report.

Though Rennie sees herself in a moment of anguish as "afraid of men because men are frightening" (BH 290) and seems to imply that it is only women who suffer at the hands of men, the novel shows that men too are victimized by those who have power. Thus, it is not true to say that all the women in the novel "are victims because of their sex and as a result of their
sex they are brutalized in some way” for, besides Rennie, Lora, Elva and the young mother and child at Fort George, Dr. Minnow, the deaf and dumb man, Prince, Marston and probably even Paul, also suffer bodily harm.

The deaf and dumb man is beaten up by the police in the street. He is brought to the prison in a bad shape. He is a crusader for human rights and civil liberties. He represents “the vast mass of people in the world crippled by poverty that ignorance and political tyranny have deprived of their capacity to proclaim the suffering and injustices of their plight”. From her prison cell Rennie watches with impotent rage the barbaric killings of people who oppose the ruler. Rennie is a witness to some riots in the prison cells following which the male prisoners are tortured and their heads shaved off with bayonets. Bodily Harm challenges the chauvinisms of class, culture, race and nation by emphasizing the need for mercy, pity and love in our power-mad world.

Rennie is set free at the instance of a Canadian diplomat. However, she continues to be a living witness. Rennie uses her pen as a ‘weapon’ to depict her experiences in her travelogue. She takes a pledge to devote her life to the service of the weak and women. According to Helena Cixous, Rennie puts herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement. ‘Bodily Harm’ is what Rennie has reported to the world as her novel.
The name 'Renata Wilford' implies "Born again". She takes in her strides all her ugly and unpleasant encounters of her life. In this process, she is born anew and lives in the present with a meaningful message for the future. In her new role as a committed writer, she uses pen as a 'weapon' to expose the cruelty and brutalities on the weak and women. She also looks forward to a day of better and healthy relationships between men and women.

But does this actually happen? In using the future tense in the ending, Atwood evades closure. The open-endedness allows the protagonist to be saved once again, or else it could be her imaginings of the possible endings. Rennie is now more open to life and sees more:

She doesn't have much time left for anything. But neither does anyone else. She's paying attention, that's all. Rennie 'will never be rescued' and yet 'has already been rescued'; although she is not 'exempt', she is 'lucky', suddenly, finally, she's overflowing with luck.

Atwood liked the idea of the reader participating in the writing of the book. So it is left up to us whether or not we should see Rennie released. With this positive ray, the average reader would like to hope for a happy ending. It is hoped that Rennie returns to Toronto to write of these occurrences, defyng all, becoming the voice of those who remain
oppressed. Although the male rescuer does not appear in Bodily Harm, the humanity found in others allows the survival of the female protagonists.

Rennie decides she will report. Her keeping of this diary that makes up the novel finally makes her a heroine.

I keep going with this sad and mutilated story, because after all, I want you to hear it. By telling you, anything at all, I’m, at least believing in you […] Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light (BH 14).

Her experiences are found recorded on tapes and this is “for Atwood as well as for her heroines, the final irrevocable commitment to one’s society and to one’s own humanity.”

For Atwood, as stated in the epigraph to the novel, “the act of writing” is not “a mere frill”; it is a subversive weapon or a tool which projects the alternative reality. So a novel for her is “a vehicle for looking at society – an interface between language and what we choose to call reality” (BH 246). Thus, in Bodily Harm Atwood states explicitly the moral function of writing, which does more than “take what society deals out and makes it visible” (BH 208).

Bodily Harm is Atwood’s best known post-feminist text to date. The novel shows that the legal, economic, political and social conditions of women are still bleak and that they are still where they were a century ago.
Though women have become conscious of their rights, they are exploited, oppressed and deprived of their basic human rights like all the weak and powerless in the world. In the 1970's feminist activists were very hopeful and optimistic about the transformation of the society for the better. But their efforts which were geared towards the restitution of rights for women failed to produce the desired results even in the 80's. Atwood, who is critical of the facile optimism of the post-feminist era concerning the state of women's liberation, comments thus:

It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed [...] the goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the same subject.\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, \textit{Bodily Harm} draws our attention to the horrifying status of women in the post-feminist era. The novel, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen says is "a different kind of therapy to gender victimization – the kind of open conversation or consciousness raising session central to the development of the feminist movement".\textsuperscript{20} In \textit{Bodily Harm}, gender politics are contextualized within "the brutal injustices of modern global politics".\textsuperscript{21} As an active member of Amnesty International, Atwood is interested in gender power politics and demonstrates in \textit{Bodily Harm} "how power operates and who has power over whom".\textsuperscript{22} Therefore, \textit{Bodily Harm} is in no way the
“immense failure” as J.A Wainwright contends, nor is it “a piece of overt misogyny” as Jennifer Waelti Walters thinks. The novel succeeds both as a profoundly humanitarian text and a powerful political feminist novel.

**Bodily Harm** addresses itself to the “violation of human rights”. It is a violation of human rights when thousands of women are subjected to rape, brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation in the process of dealing with the nature of violence, human cruelty and victimization of women. Atwood has for **Bodily Harm** a very apt quotation from John Berger’s “Ways of Seeing” as epigraph: “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”. The epigraph clearly indicates male aggression and female passivity. It is evident from the epigraph that the novel focuses on gender / sexual power politics. As Howels says: “**In Bodily Harm** female bodies are all passive, distorted, dismembered or coerced, witnesses to the sexual power politics of the Berger epigraph”. The novel presents poignantly the abuse, torture, mutilation and finally the destruction of the female body in hospital beds and prison cells for purposes of male sexuality. According to Lorne Irvine, **Bodily Harm** illustrates, ironically, the “inscription of the female body and, by connecting hospital room and jail cell, dramatically presents the injury to the female body that results from its confinement”.28
The subject of Bodily Harm is also depicted in Atwood’s collection of poems entitled True stories which appeared the same year: "the knife that cuts lovers out of your flesh like tumours leaving you breastless and without a name, flattened, bloodless, even your voice cauterized by too much pain". The metaphoric relationship between the female body and the country, Canada, here, as in Bodily Harm, insists on the connection of the politics of sexual power with the politics of colonial domination, for like women, Canada is only now emerging from a ‘deadly brainwashing’. Atwood seems to suggest that such a brainwashing has clearly interfered with both Canada’s history and her literature.

The sexual battlefield with its various power plays is paralleled in certain nationalistic themes that appear from quite a different perspective in the opening section of Survival. While discussing the ways in which victimization seems to dominate the Canadian imagination and offering her thematic study as a “map of the territory”, she uses as a dominating question Northrop Frye’s frequently quoted statement about Canadian literature – “Where is here?” The opening sentence of Bodily Harm - “This is how I got here” – thus alerts the reader to the novel’s interest in Canadian nationalism and to its political intentions.

The refrain, “the sweet Canadians”, reiterated by ‘the shrunken Fisher King’, Dr. Minnow, means different things at different points in the novel. Sometimes, it implies the naivete of the Canadians, a theme given physical
representation through the character of Rennie, who, like the narrator of *Surfacing*, represents the country in which she lives. Like Canada, Rennie is perceived by many different characters as naïve, politically uncomplicated and obscurely old-fashioned. Paul says this about her: "For one thing you’re nice [...] You’d rather be something else, tough or sharp or something like that, but you’re nice, you can’t help it. Naïve. But you think you have to prove you’re not merely nice, so you get into things you shouldn’t" (BH 15). At another point, an old couple questions Rennie: "You’re Canadian, aren’t you? We always find the Canadians so nice; they’re almost like members of the family. No crime rate to speak of. We always feel quite safe when we go up there" (BH 186).

In this respect, then, the novel ironically attacks the Canadian simplicity by dramatizing the massive involvement of Rennie in the political affairs of a country she knows so little about. Far from keeping her safe, her naivete is responsible for her ultimate victimization. No one, not even the Canadians, can stay outside contemporary political violence or placidly castigate other countries for encouraging such violence. As Dr. Minnow says to Rennie: "Everyone is in politics here, my friend [...] All the time. Not like the sweet Canadians" (BH 124) and, later, "There is no longer any place that is not of general interest [...] The sweet Canadians have not learned this yet" (BH 135). Furthermore, even Rennie, who at the beginning
emphasizes her own neutrality, is embarrassed by the Canadian official in his safari jacket, attempting to play neutral.

Bodily Harm which superficially follows a narrative logic, and offers the reader a plot to hold on to, thus appears to have its attention on varied images of Canada. The novel fulfills its expected function of offering the right co-ordinates to recognize and comprehend the "here", which evidently is the desperate need in the Canadian context. The availability of the geography of the "here" guarantees survival and prepares the right environment for the voicing of the vital question "Who am I?"

The novel also tells us that "nobody is exempt from anything" (BH 290). Most of us are as complacent as Rennie. By reducing individual sufferers to statistics, the newspapers and the media help create the feeling that we are 'safe' and that all the terrible things that take place in the world happen, and can happen, only to others. Atwood feels that it is necessary to get rid of this illusion and recognize the fact that the ubiquity of evil cannot be wished away. Similar feelings are expressed by her in her deeply moral short prose piece “Bread”. Our world is a prison cell in which we are all inescapably caught. Some of the prisoners terrorize the others by virtue of their brutal strength. Those of us, who, like Rennie, are fortunate to suffer less, must do all we can for our worse off fellow beings and reach out towards them with love and genuine compassion. Indifference to their misery implies acquiescence in evil.