Bodily Harm is Margaret Atwood’s best known feminist text. It was written after the women’s liberation movement. In the 1970’s women were very hopeful and optimistic and they felt that they could change the society for the better. But their protest which was geared towards the restitution of rights for women failed to produce the desired results in the 80’s. Atwood is critical of the facile optimism of the post-feminist era concerning the state of women’s emancipation. She comments:

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.¹

Rennie Wilford, the protagonist of Bodily Harm, discovers in a dramatic moment that Canadian women’s power of compassion on its own in a world dominated by narcissistic men amounts to little power at all. When Rennie is sent from the Caribbean island of St. Antoine, where she has become entangled in brutal politics back to Toronto at the novel’s end, it is presumably to begin the final stage of progressive narcissism: the forming of alliances that weld the subversive identities of Atwood’s earlier women to Canada’s most promising male-invented political structures in order to produce newly
radicalized subjects, both women and men. "In other words, it is left to Rennie and Atwood's other female speakers in the 1980's texts to attempt to redefine power by joining male socialist political philosophy with experiences of love and work between women." Whereas the defensive kind of power wielded by young men fearful of disintegration of the social order they inherit has always been seen as harmful in Atwood's texts, another kind, held by men in marginal positions like her women, has quietly persisted.

Renata Wilford, the "camera-narrator" of Bodily Harm, is a Canadian free-lance journalist as well as a "Life-Tourist" writer. She uses the "pen" as a "weapon" to write her travelogue, "Bodily Harm". Rennie's travelogue addresses itself to the nature of violence and victimization of women. She writes the travelogue with a sense of commitment to expose the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. She uses her pen as a "weapon" to let the world know how the female body is sought to be abused, mutilated, and destroyed in prison cells. Her immediate goal is not to change society but to change the individual woman minimally to survive minimally with some integrity in that society.

Rennie's story involves her discovery of human love and compassion, a discovery that beyond the unthinking madness of mechanical action profound emotions are possible. Her Toronto friends' mottoes are, "go with the flow," "keep your options open." 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 abandoned his family for a mistress in Toronto. The environment of Griswold was both narrow and constricting. It was too strong in its rules of do’s and don’ts. What was perhaps worse was that women relished sacrificing their lives, serving others, being subordinates. It is not that they lacked either courage or confidence. Rennie realizes that women never did fall short of these qualities. They were only used in a negative way against their own selves, as was in the case of her mother. Her mother had sacrificed everything — husband, home, and family — to look after her aged parents. She was obviously self-effacing. It gave her the necessary courage and confidence to negate her own existence, individually. Let us consider here Rennie’s analysis of her mother’s life. According to Rennie, if she ever got hurt or fell sick, she learned to hide it, otherwise “her mother seemed to regard such things not as accidents but as acts Rennie committed on purpose to complicate her mother’s life. What did you do that for, she should say,” Obviously with anger. We comprehend from this that her mother did not obviously enjoy being either self-effacing or looking after everyone.
It is by giving Rennie Wilford a single obsessively recurring childhood memory that Atwood emphasizes family relationships in *Bodily Harm*. Rennie’s grandmother walks into her consciousness three times seeking “her hands”. “I’ve left them somewhere and now I can’t find them,” she says (57). Rennie’s childhood response was fear — “All I would think of at that time was how to get away from Griswold ... I used to pray I wouldn’t live long enough to get like my grandmother” (58). The grandmother has been her dominant parent.

One of the first things I can remember, says Rennie, is standing in my grandmother’s bedroom. The light is coming in through the window, weak yellowish winter light, everything is very clean, and I’m cold. I know I’ve done something wrong, but I can’t remember, what I’m crying. I’m holding my grandmother around both legs, but I didn’t think of them as legs, I thought of her as one solid piece from the neck down to the bottom of her skirt. I feel as if I’m holding on to the edge of something, safety, if I let go I’ll fall, I want forgiveness, but she’s prying my hands away finger by finger. She’s smiling; she was proud of the fact that she never lost her temper. (53)

This stern woman, who pries Rennie’s “hands away finger by finger,” has already lost symbolically the use of her own hands, lost compassion, long before she hallucinates their physical loss. She routinely shuts Rennie in the cellar as a punishment, a cellar where “small things” move around, “small things that might get on you or run up your legs” (53). In consequence, Rennie herself grows up afraid to do wrong, afraid to be noticed, afraid to use her
hands. "As a child I learned three things well, how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them." Later as an adult she will look at the world without touching it, write in banal words that don't touch their subjects, enter 'love' relationships that barely touch the feelings of the lovers.

Rennie's impressionistic years of childhood are suppressed and spoiled by her grandmother's traditional approach. She detests the servile existence in Griswold and leaves the place in order to lead a life of freedom in Toronto. Rennie's mother did not obviously enjoy being either self-effacing or looking after everyone. Rennie chooses to break away from such an environment, which was too oppressive with self-abnegation and the sense of 'duty.'

I didn'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. (58)

She leaves in order to lead a life of freedom, where there would be no fetters to bind to such an extent as to kill her own individuality and identity. After all such a kind of life had become 'a lamode' in the post-liberated women's period — and women apparently were in full control of themselves.

Rennie begins her adult life in Toronto as a versatile writer. She gets commissioned to write articles for Pandora, a women-oriented magazine and
for “Visor” a male-oriented journal. These two offer her enough scope to write about both men and women.

In the course of writing a piece called “The Young and the Solvent” for Visor, Rennie comes in contact with Jake who works as a designer of appearances for a packaging company. She is of the view that she is a product of the post-feminist era. She seems to be over-confident that she can stand up to any crisis situation without any harm either to her body or her psyche. But she soon learns that “people get trapped in things that are beyond their control ... (47). 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 pack her just as he does things. Later on, she realises that his interest in her, is limited to the gratification of his carnal desires. Her relationship with Jake remains as if it were a “newly renovated house” (102) without strong bonds.

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” (201). 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.” Thus Rennie’s maiden encounter in love with Jake ends abruptly leaving her bruised and battered physically and emotionally. And with his exit she awakens to the fact that Jake was all along
packaging her according to his taste and pleasure till he realises that what he was packing was rotting from inside.

Later on, she gets involved in love with Paul because of his impressive manners and ideals. She feels that Paul is a good substitute to Jake, her first lover, who turns out to be an 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. Unlike Jake, Paul does not hate or abandon Rennie on grounds of the scar on her body. She thinks that he has some sense of compassion for her damaged body. She is involved in bouts of sex with him for a brief spell.

The age-old maxim, familiarity breeds contempt, seems to influence both Paul and Rennie. Very soon she realises 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. This marks yet another meaningless relationship with Paul. She feels that involvement in love affairs is “like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles” (102). She realises her female passivity and her inability to establish meaningful relationships with any one of her male associates. She feels a sense of urgency to run away from all her meaningless and loveless involvements with all men.
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. Women, says Jocasta, might ostensibly think that they are liberated, but the subordination still exists. Nothing has really changed with "sexual revolution" – They are just big words impressing, naive and pretentious women who want to believe that they are liberated. The bitter truth, however, is that men have always been and still are interested in having full control over women. As we comprehend Jocasta, we learn that men are not interested in either love, understanding, or "meaningful relationships." They still want sex, says Jocasta "but only if they can take it. Only if you’ve got something to lose, only if you struggle a little" (67). Jocasta, liberated and enlightened as she might feel at times, has the apprehension that neither she nor any other woman has reached the goal that women's movement so loudly and pompously called liberation:

I think it would be a great idea if all 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 when they got changed back, I mean. (156)

This fantastic idea of Jocasta gives a clue to the sad predicament of the so-called liberated women. It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed.
Rennie is convinced with Jocasta's view that women's liberation continues to be a distant dream and a lot has to be done to realise the desired goals. 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" (93).

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 views life-sized mannequin tables. She realises how art is abused to depict women as ugly creatures meant for violence.

The article on pornography takes Rennie to visit the Toronto policeman's pornography museum along with Jocasta. She is horrified by the sight of nude film clips of women meant for display and exhibition at the museum. Naked forms of women in different postures of brutality are displayed. Some of the films project women copulating with animals leading to the mutilation of their bodies. The purpose of all these ugly and horrible films seems to be to display bodies of women as maps of violence. Looking at the
films Rennie thinks that such things could not be real and "it was all done with ketchup" (210). This seems to have been "deliberately contrived by a filmmaker for sexual titillation which indicates the utter depths of human depravity and cruelty." It points out the abuse of woman in the so-called civilized countries which are primitive as far as brutality of a woman's body is concerned. She realises that women are stripped of their identity and they are reduced to raw materials. She also feels that men destroy women's individuality behind a mask of anonymous authority and power. Rennie realises that she too is a part of the "raw material." Rennie 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 status and identity. She 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."

Rennie detects that the voters' list contains dead people's names while many living people's names are excluded. Floods are like 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. The bodily harm done by others, Rennie decides, is far worse than the body’s betrayal. Amputation is a saving phenomenon if the body is rotting from inside, but it is worse if the body is healthy. It amounts to crippling others with pleasure.

The victims are mostly and predictably women. Women, Rennie discovers, are still where they were a century ago. The much spoken about freedom and identity are only delusions. She realises that people enjoy torturing others, especially women. For instance, a man is privileged enough to be disloyal to his woman. But a woman dare not. Here we can consider the following incident. If a woman who is not even the wife is disloyal, then beating is not the only punishment for Marsdon. The more important form of chastisement is,

he made her take off all her clothes, ... – and then he covered her with cow-itch. That’s like a nettle, it’s what you do to people you really don’t like a whole lot. Then he tied her to a tree in the backyard, right near an ant hill, the stinging kind. He stayed in the house, drinking rum and listening to her scream. He left her there five hours, till she was swollen like a balloon. A lot of people heard her but nobody tried to untie her. (214-215)
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 in contact with Lora Lucas, a fellow prisoner. To a stunned Rennie, her own obsession with her pinched up flesh seems insignificant compared to the physical persecution of the women in the Caribbean.

In her travelogue, Rennie includes the tales which Lora narrates in the prison. Lora’s tales further shatter her attitude towards the high voltage feminism. In Canada itself, according to Lora, the situation of women is not all that bright as one would assume. Lora, who had spent all her life in the cellar, had led a life of complete terror under the gross exploitation of the so called step-father. It takes Lora nearly ten years to realise this:

He didn’t hit me because I was bad, like I used to think. He hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him. (113-114)

And it takes her a couple of more years to grasp the fact that most men do such things because they know they can get away with it.

Lora’s mother, of course, in keeping with her breeding and the tradition, lives her life as the will of destiny. Her life with her husband is much like an accident. One has to live with a broken leg. Probably she hated her husband as much as Lora did, but she was trapped and obviously did not know how to get
out or what else to do. One can easily think of her in the context of the victim position two of *Survival*, where Atwood explains that "it is easier to thrust the blame on destiny or biology rather than confront the situation."6

We learn more from the gruesome experiences of Lora as she takes us from one story to another, much as Rennie also does. When she finally stabs her step-father and flees, not because she wanted to but because he was trying to rape her, her exploitation as she had hoped is not over. There are many more who are eager to exploit her, if she is willing to be weak and give in. It also strikes her that all the places, be it in Canada or the Caribbean, are the same and it is one’s foolishness to leave one to enter another. When she had first started working in a boat, she was surprised that all the men around expected her to sleep with them and the condition was either to comply or to lose the job:

They think if they’re renting the boat they’re renting everything on it. Maybe I’m for sale, I’d tell them, but I’m sure as hell not for rent. (214)

The assumption that a woman, especially so in a post-liberated age, is for rent shows that a man’s attitude towards woman has changed for the worse. It is probably acceptable if men think that women are for sale. That is better than considering them as rentable objects. Sexual exploitation is everywhere, be it in the sophisticated, seemingly forward Canada or the rustic Caribbean. The difference might only be in degree, not in quality. Rennie watches from
the prison cell with impotent rage the barbaric killings of people who oppose the ruler. She is a witness to some riots in the prison cells following which the male prisoners have been tortured and their heads shaved off with bayonets.

Yet another victim Rennie finds in the prison is an islander, a deaf and dumb man whom once she sees in the street being beaten by the police. 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 whom ignorance and political tyranny have deprived of their capacity to proclaim the suffering and injustice of their plight."7

The final scene where Lora is sexually assaulted and beaten, perhaps to death, by the very custodians of society – namely the policemen – leaves Rennie gaping with horror and a new consciousness. Purged of all the misconceptions, the naive heroine is finally radicalized. The awareness that women are still where they were centuries ago and might continue to remain so, despite the best efforts of a few much publicized movements, makes Rennie feel impotent. The brutality done to Lora is the real "bodily harm" which surpasses both in agony and shock the little mastectomy done to Rennie. The heartless mutilation of Lora is symbolic of the limited gender-specific role of women in society. What is worse is that amidst the local revolution and chaos, the police thought it the best opportunity to enjoy assaulting Lora. The police,
Rennie realises, did it not because they had orders or even that they had the power, but because they enjoyed mutilating Lora.

Rennie, despite the uncertainty which Atwood allows to surround her physical fate, clearly becomes new psychologically. Her haunting unconscious recollections of her senile grandmother’s search for her ‘hands’ and her childhood memories of fearing to touch because of fearing to fail culminate at the climax of the novel in her sudden acquiring of ‘hands,’ in her acquiring both the courage and the power to touch another. The girl who “could not bear to be touched” by the “groping” hands of her grandmother, who “puts her own hands away” and afterwards dreams of herself handless, is enabled by her reclaiming of these lost memories not only to take the gravely injured Lora’s hand in her own but to pull her back towards life:

She’s holding Lora’s left hand, between both of her own, perfectly still, nothing is moving, yet she knows she is pulling on the hand, as hard as she can, there’s an invisible hole in the air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through, she’s gritting her teeth with the effort, she can hear herself, a moaning it must be her own voice, this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she’s ever done. She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born. (299)

What will get born, what will “live again,” may not be Lora but will be at least the essential ‘touching’ potential that is Rennie herself. This, precisely, is the feminist consciousness of Rennie. She is committed to immortalizing

The brutal and heartless mutilation of Lora impresses upon Rennie the idea that cancer or partial mastectomy of her breast has no significance and it is no more than a minor accident of her life. She is not afraid of cancer or mastectomy. “She is afraid of men and it’s simple, it’s rational, she’s afraid of men because men are frightening” (290).

Rennie feels an enlightenment in her. She returns to be a victim although she has “her scar, her disability, her nibbled flesh, the little teeth marks on her” (284). Rennie’s body which has been maimed, dismembered, altered, and fragmented symbolizes the crippled human beings all over the world. Rennie realises 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”.

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 says, “This is what will happen” (293). In her travel piece, Rennie encompasses a reality of “bodily harm” which merges past-present-future. She asserts that “bodily harm” is everywhere – both inside and outside the prison, both in civilized and
uncivilized countries, and 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 their continued imprisonment.

Rennie rejects her submissive role as a woman. She is prepared to speak out the truth, the disturbing truth about all those exploited people and women in particular. She becomes subversive and bold enough to narrate and publish her experiences in the form of a travelogue called "Bodily Harm." She discovers her identity through her newly assumed "subversive role" as a free lance journalist.

Rennie uses her pen as a 'weapon' to depict her experiences in her travelogue. She pledges to devote her life in the service of the weak and women. To cite Helene 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 stride all the 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. She also looks forward to a day of better and healthy relationships between men and women.
In the seventies, women were hopeful and optimistic because it was believed that they could change the society faster. But now after a decade one knows that this has not happened. However, as Atwood says, there are men who are good; one cannot negate the total absence of them: “They may be hard to find, but think of it this way: like diamonds, in the rough or not, their rarity makes them all the more appreciated.”10 The black man, though a minor character, is one such good man in Bodily Harm, who is over-enthusiastic to protect human rights, and who is concerned about the welfare of both men and women alike.
REFERENCES


6. Atwood, Survival. The Victim Position two, as Atwood explains is “To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to explain this as an act of fate, The Will of God, the dictates of Biology,” (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) 37.


8. Dorothy Jones, 86-87.
