

## Reading Traumatized Bodies in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*

**Jalal Sokhanvar**

Islamic Azad University, Tehran Central Branch, Tehran, Iran

**Neda Sahranavard\***

Islamic Azad University, Tehran Central Branch, Tehran, Iran

**Received: July 28, 2012**

**Accepted: November 6, 2012**

---

**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary literary trauma theory indicates that experiencing trauma creates a fear that destroys identity. In fact, experiencing trauma creates a new identity for the victim. The representation of the trauma and the formation of the new identity for the victim are the building blocks of trauma novels. Due to the nature of trauma, it seems impossible to fully describe traumatic experiences by language. Considering Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* as a trauma novel, this article tries to magnify the traumatized bodies that are depicted in Atwood's work. In this novel, Atwood compares traumatized bodies of her characters with colonized lands. In *Bodily Harms*, the traumatic moments are evident in the bodies of victims, violence, and politics. The wounded bodies tell a new story by employing verbal and nonverbal language. This article reveals that trauma is located at the intersection between body and mind, and body's reaction to such traumatizing actions is keeping the record of trauma on the skin. Although traumatizing institutions try to conceal the memory of violence, the traumatized bodies attempt to open their experiences to the public with the objective of seeking for revival and testimony.

**Keywords:** trauma, trauma narrative, bodily trauma, testimony.

---

Margaret Atwood takes issue with the Western writers' observation of the violations of human rights. Especially, she regards torture as a trauma to the body, and tries to portray this kind of torture in *Bodily Harm*. Atwood takes human atrocities to the body as a forefront issue in her works, and builds the aesthetic aspects of her work around the tortured subjects. Especially, in *Bodily Harm*, she tries to give voice to the marginalized as well as colonized subjects. In doing so, Atwood invites a new party to witness such traumas to human body, and that witness is the reader. By representing the traumatized bodies in her work, Margaret Atwood tries to engage her readers in observing the brutalities of the tyrannical governments. Atwood writes for the Western readers and tries to pave the way for a social change she is longing for. By arousing the feelings and sentiments of the readers, Atwood tries to expand the spectrum of those who are committed to human rights. In her conversation with Christopher Levenson Atwood states:

I don't think poetry expresses emotion. It evokes emotion from the reader, and that is a very different thing. As someone once said, 'If you want to express emotion, scream'. If you want to evoke emotion, it's more complicated. Listening to someone scream doesn't necessarily want you to scream. It makes you want to shut the window or say, 'Stop it!' (Levenson, 1990, p. 22).

Atwood's objective as a writer tempts her to educate the readers about the sufferings of innocent people in order to "stop" trauma to the body; therefore she makes her readers experience trauma

---

\* Corresponding author's email address: Neda\_sahra@hotmail.com

throughout her fictional recounts of traumatic moments. *Bodily Harm* is the story of Rennie Wilford who involuntarily gets involved in political upheavals in Caribbean Islands. She escapes from her gruesome life in Canada, but entangles in violence in the Caribbean Islands. Rennie, a vulnerable, disaffected, self-conscious, and insular person, creates a correspondence between moral responsibility and victimization. As a result, Atwood represents her own ambivalence toward the West through Rennie's characterization.

Atwood, a white middle class female writer, is very sensitive to trauma to the body. She is an educated writer who tries to present the traumatic moments of people from a spectrum of social classes. Atwood belongs to the first world as well as colonized world; therefore, she can portray both worlds artistically. In fact, Atwood detests the first world, and at the same time is infatuated with it.

Margaret Atwood wrote *Bodily Harm* in 1981 when post-colonial theory was not yet considered as theory. Although Aime Cessaire and Franz Fanon's works triggered the idea of post-colonial theories, Edward Said's publication of *Orientalism* in 1978 was the starting point. Other post-colonial works by Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabba were published after Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*. In fact, Atwood's work did not have any theoretical framework, but it introduced the issue she was concerned with.

Atwood believes that it is her responsibility to stand up against human atrocities. More importantly as a writer, she speculates that art and politics are not two separate entities, and placing them in two separate categories is too fancy for some countries to afford. Atwood documents the traumatized bodies in her work for the sake of seeking change in the present.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the victimization and traumatization of the marginalized subjects. The centrality of physical pain in *Bodily Harm* leads to the following research questions. What role does physical pain play in the depiction of the body? How communicative is the language of pain in the body? What is Atwood's aim at portraying traumatized bodies? How does it feel to witness the trauma? How successful is Atwood in sketching bodily traumas? What is the role of the reader of such works? What is the relationship between the language of trauma and the language of human being? How is it possible to write about an experience that defies representation?

To understand the various ways in which Margaret Atwood transmits traumatic experience, it is essential to explicate the nature of trauma and its potential effects on the victims. Therefore, the authors start out with the concept of trauma, and continue to examine the theories of body, especially, Julia Kristeva's idea of body and abjection. Later, the authors introduce a number of trauma and body critics as well as philosophers to create the theoretical underpinning for the representation of traumatic experiences of the body.

### **Theories of trauma and the body**

According to Traverso and Broderick (2011), studies that focus on the theory of trauma should acknowledge the fact that

the theory of trauma is not a single, homogeneous entity but that, on the contrary, an array of perspectives has been developed within diverse disciplinary traditions. Critical mappings of the field which disallow the possibility of collapsing diverse concepts of trauma into a single, undifferentiated one (p. 7).

Consequently, the study of trauma is diverse and complicated and it includes such fields as philosophy, psychology, history, visual arts and media, feminism, politics, and cultural studies. Therefore, an interdisciplinary method of dealing with trauma and the body is used in this study. The authors first provide an outline of the theories of trauma to create a background for the reading of Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*.

The word "trauma" comes from a Greek word that stands for wound. Trauma is a sudden and unexpected physical, emotional, and psychological injury that creates significant physical, emotional, and psychological damage. Traumatic experience exceeds the victim's ability to recount the event verbally, and disintegrates the victim's sense of selfhood. It disturbs the mind and memory of the traumatized person. Thus, the shock of the experience can exceed the human being's capability to process and assimilate the injury. Even though the individual may survive the trauma, the effect of trauma alters the person's psychological and physical life. Dennis Patrick Slattery (2000) believes that "the wounded body is sacred in some deep level of its existence; it is a body specialized and formed

by experience ... the wounded body gains something not possessed before" (p.7). As a result, the body and the mind of a traumatized victim change after trauma.

Experiencing trauma disturbs the victim's sense of integrity which shows itself in the delayed negative and unwanted symptoms such as hallucinations or tribulations. The topic of trauma was introduced in the middle of twentieth century in the European thought by the work of Sigmund Freud. Trauma is central to Freud's work that was written after the First World War, and it is an important concept in his 1890s studies on hysteria. Freud first used the term to describe the crucial events that liberate the associations of hysteria. At the end of the nineteenth century, inquiries about trauma became popular in France, and after World War I, trauma became a popular topic in England. Discussions of Trauma entered the United States after the Vietnam War.

Trauma has its root in the Holocaust. Although the Holocaust occurred in Europe, it found its way in the collective memory of the Americans. In 1992, Judith Herman published *Trauma and Recovery*. At the same time, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1991) published *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Significant studies linking literature and trauma appeared in the years following the publication of these seminal works.

Julia Kristeva (1993) acknowledges the difficulty of representing violent historical events. According to Kristeva, in the aftermath of the Holocaust "a monumental crisis in thought and word, occurred" (p.138). The testimonies of severe human suffering from the trauma of the Holocaust become "monstrous and painful spectacles" that not only "disturb mechanisms of perception," but also challenge representation of it. Also, they promote a complicated silence. Kristeva (1982) asserts:

[The] symbolic modes are emptied, petrified, nearly annihilated as if they were overwhelmed or destroyed by an all too powerful force. At the edge of silence, the word *nothing* emerges, a prudish defense in the face of such incommensurable, internal and external disorder. Never has a cataclysm been so apocalyptically exorbitant. Never has its representation been relegated to such inadequate symbolic modes (p. 139).

The term "nothing" refers to the silencing and incapability of human language to articulate trauma. Yet, Kristeva (1982) argues that "to bring the vision of this blinding and silencing monstrosity, into being" there should be a disclosure of the incomprehensible events of the Holocaust, which also requires a "profusion of images" (p.139). The interaction of silencing of the words and the images create the horror of the Holocaust. Kristeva suggests that these "often complement each other" (p.139). Kristeva's concept of "word nothing" is the same as Elaine Scarry's idea that traumatic experience devastates human language. Elaine Scarry (1985) analyzes the political and social consequences of the inexpressibility of the physical pain. Elaine Scarry refers to the ideas of Virginia Woolf (2002) in *On Being* in which Woolf refers to the poverty of language in describing bodily pain. According to Elaine Scarry, the fundamental characteristic of traumatic language is its defiance to human language. Elaine Scarry (1985) states:

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned (p. 4).

Elaine Scarry underscores that physical pain is inexpressible in linguistic forms. Bodily pain cannot be described in words, and actively destroys language. Experiencing trauma troubles identity and social boundaries that create abject state. Kristeva (1987) defines abject as "a wound with blood or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay ... There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being" (p.3). Kristeva (1986) underscores the unique power of literature that can give voice to the abject because "literature represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses" (p. 208). According to Kristeva (1997), literature unveils and discharges this destruction which is caused by abjection. Literature represents loss of identity, and destruction of language caused by the abject to the body. Therefore, representation of abject in literature reconstructs language. In this article, we find out that this abject represents itself in the image of wound or scar on the traumatized bodies of Atwood characters.

Freud (1922) believes that the experience of trauma disintegrates the victim's sense of self-understanding which is equal to the rupturing of the skin or fracturing the bones. One of the important features of trauma theory is focusing on belated or unclaimed qualities of the experience of an

unexpected suffer. According to Freud's (1976) theories of trauma, the victim does not fully register the event of suffering at the time when it happens. As a result, the traumatic experience returns to the victim's conscious life. Freud defines trauma as a life-threatening experience that frequently returns to the victim's unconscious, and terrifies him or her through unwanted discharges and eruptions.

Therefore, one of the symptoms of trauma is the gaps and interruptions that it brings to the psyche of the victim. These interruptions make it difficult for the victim to understand that he or she has survived the trauma. Cathy Caruth (1997) adapts Freud's (1976) theory of repetition compulsion and suggests that survival is repetition compulsion because the victim's compulsive repetition of scenes of trauma is betraying the victim's effort in mastering what is incomprehensible regarding the traumatic experience. Therefore, for the purpose of survival, the victim needs to claim his or her survival. To claim his or her survival, the victim should observe how much he or she has missed. In this sense, the backdrop of this article rests on the claim that trauma starts with a set of assumptions about traumatized bodies, testimony, and survival.

Since the recollection of the experience of trauma is incomprehensible, the experience resists representation. The traumatic experience avoids linguistic reference because the language of trauma is beyond bodily means. Cathy Caruth, paradoxically, gives traumatic experience time and space. She believes that representing trauma ironically accentuates the time and place of traumatic experience. Cathy Caruth (1995) believes that the ruptured and displaced recollection of traumatic experience directs it toward possible healing. Although trauma distorts the normal concept of temporality as well as spatiality, representation of traumatic experience makes repossessing of time and space to happen. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub underscore the fact that the victim of trauma cannot witness trauma from his or her own experience. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1991) state:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after ... Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (p. 69)

Therefore, the reference to the experience of trauma is indirect. This is the reason that Freud turned to literature in order to analyze his theories. The critics such as Caruth and Felman have stated in their work that literature is a unique way of representing trauma through which the belated authorization as well as witnessing of traumatic experience can occur. Caruth (1995) uses the image of trauma metaphorically on the body of the victim "that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (p.4). She believes that the traumatic event creates a gap in the victim's "experience of time, self, and world" (p. 4). This gap pilots to a "belatedness" of the recalling of the event (p.92). The traumatic experience cannot be completely comprehended at the time of happening. As a result, this "belatedness" makes the traumatic experience distinct from other experiences. Such an isolated, yet incomplete experience, does not fit to the normal structure of time, and attempts to be repeated at any time in forms of ruptured memories that have "disrupting force or impact" because it has the force of the original traumatic experience with it (p.115). This alien experience preoccupies the victim's mind and changes his or her psychological as well as physical life after his or her survival. The harshness of traumatic experience limits the life of the victim because it overtakes the victim's power and capability to communicate it.

Persisting and recurring memory of trauma creates psychologically disintegration state for the victim to the extent that they experience alteration in time. Judith Herman (1992) suggests "chronic trauma" state that leads traumatized bodies to "doublethink" (p. 90). Traumatized bodies, according to Judith Herman, live in the past and present at the same time. For them, the traumatizing memories of past are so severe that makes their present faint and blurry. The characters of Margaret Atwood possess the double think state. All of the characters of *Bodily Harm* live in a blurry state of present that is haunted by the intense suffering of their past. Rennie, for instance, lives in a psychological dimness of isolation in the course of the novel even before her experience of prison. She lives in a time filled with disrupting intersections of the past and present.

The linguistic representation of trauma is a daunting task. It needs to accord with the truth of traumatic experience that happens within the boundaries of the body, yet free from linguistic forms. It is paradoxical that literary representations of trauma are mediated by human language that cannot fully represent the event to the limited capacity of linguistic forms in the course of trauma. Moreover, the fragmentation that is involved in the recounting of traumatic experiences makes the representation of trauma a complicated and difficult task. In the course of seeking testimony to traumatized bodies, Margaret Atwood uses the body literally on which trauma is recorded in order to overcome the limitations of linguistic forms.

Narratives of trauma surpass trauma as their theme, and depict the detail, process, and limitations of representations of trauma. Moreover, due to the nature of trauma, the representation of trauma displays materials as well as experiences that may be alienating for readers due to their disturbing content. Traumatized bodies try to remember their traumas through alienated, broken, and uncertain memories reflected in narrative disarray, breaks, and distresses. The account of traumatization creates an image for the internal and external suffering and conflict.

Margaret Atwood re-presents suffering that runs counter to life, healing, and psychic integrity through the mind's denial of and rupture from the body. Atwood's major characters live in a blurry state of present that is haunted by the intense suffering of their past. Rennie, for instance, lives in a psychological dimness of isolation in the course of the novel. She lives in a time filled with disrupting intersections of the past and present. Rennie, who is suffering from mastectomy, gets into the political instabilities in Caribbean Islands. She visits the island when there is an uprising coming up. Atwood shows a spectrum of Rennie's suffering, from bodily trauma of being ill to receiving torture in prison. The traumatic experiences of Atwood's characters destroy the victim's relation to the reality of the external world after trauma.

Trauma inherently destroys language, time, space, mind and the body. The undeniable nature of the body keeps the site of trauma as concrete evidence. The body and its vulnerable position becomes an important site for addressing trauma. More than a visible reminder of what occurred, the body works in complicated and complex ways in reconnecting the survivor's body to her mind.

LaCapra (2001) addresses the significant connection between writing and trauma. LaCapra believes that fictional narratives of trauma create psychological effects of these experiences on their readers. He has discovered two ways that traumatic experiences emerge in a fictional account of trauma. The two ways through which trauma appears in fiction are "acting out" as well as "working through" (pp. 21-22). LaCapra (2001) does not mean forgetting the trauma and leaving it behind. His idea is very similar to Kristeva's idea of abject. Both critics believe that trauma should be presented in details. LaCapra and Kristeva's idea regarding the importance of the representation of trauma by writing attends to what Atwood accomplishes in *Bodily Harm*. She uses the materiality and corporeality of her characters' bodies to approach the memories of trauma caused by surgery, and politics. *Bodily Harm* ends with a promise of healing. The reengagement with the world that might begin for the characters is possible through testimonial act of the readers. In this regard, LaCapra (2001) asserts that although "working through" involves repetition, this repetition is significantly different from the compulsive repetition occurring during the "acting out" process of remembering trauma.

According to Levenson, the body "speaks louder" than the "simple scar or wound" in the course of corporal sufferings (p.73). She continues, "The wound inflicted on the skin can be read as a sign of trauma's incommunicability, a figure for the traumatic real" (p.72). LaCapra (2001) dedicates a chapter to the role of witnessing. Although his main subjects of traumatic experience are victims of Holocaust, he does not limit his theory to those groups. He talks about victims of trauma who are pleading to be understood through their "body language." In his introduction to his book, he states that "testimonies serve to bring theoretical concerns ... They also raise the problem of the role of affect and empathy in historical understanding itself" (p. xiv).

In *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Dori state that "literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated" (p. xviii). They believe that twentieth century is the age of testimony in which the reader of fictional narratives of trauma is a vehicle through which the victim of trauma can "articulate and transmit the story, literary transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again inside" (p. 69). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub believe that "Testimony is ... a

discursive practice, as opposed to pure theory. To testify – to vow to tell, to promise and produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement” (p.5). Therefore, the story of trauma can be passed on in order to be healed. Through a focus on Margaret Atwood, this article finds the ways in which she creates the crisis of witnessing in her work. The novelty of this article is in showing the fact that describing the traumatic memory helps the victim to heal the scar.

### **Reading traumatized bodies in *Bodily Harm***

In *Bodily Harm*, Margaret Atwood mixes fiction and history to reveal a period of terror and violence where a land is in the process of becoming a colony. By involving and inserting her fictional characters into real historical events, Margaret Atwood uncovers the lies of a repressive political regime. She combines the personal and national trauma of her characters resulting from large-scale brutality in her work. *Bodily Harm* engages Rennie in political struggles against the Caribbean Islands’ colonization.

Atwood testifies to the impossibilities of communicating traumatic experience through written words. She re-presents the condition of traumatized bodies after their loss and uses the site of the wounded human body to reveal destructive outcome of living with experience of trauma. Although Atwood’s traumatized characters and speakers cannot utter the truth of the past completely, their bodies speak instead of them. Atwood’s accounts of trauma challenges the speechlessness of traumatic experiences by situating the body at the center of her work. Therefore, the traumatized characters of Atwood in *Bodily Harm* feel the disintegration of their bodies from within as well as without. They assume that their bodies are working against them. As a result, they are not able to claim their bodies. The central theme of the novel is the objectification of the traumatized bodies. These bodies are diminished to objects that are wounded, marked, beaten, tortured, violated, and raped.

In *Bodily Harm* there is not a clear cut boundary between victim and victimizer. Likewise, there are lots of stories in the novel that negate each other. Rennie “believes there was a right man, not several and not almost right, and she believed there was a real story, not several and not almost real” (p.62). Later in the novel, she realizes that in the Caribbean Islands she receives “at least three versions of everything, and if you are lucky one of them is true” (p.135). The plurality of ideas in the novel is the characteristic of trauma narrative. Rennie undergoes a change in her belief that no story is reliable and true, and “she no longer trusts surfaces” (p. 48). The events do not happen in the novel clearly. Everything is vague to the eyes of the reader who should put vague pieces of information together. Every reading negates the previous one. Nothing is clear, nor do things happen for a reason.

Another ambiguity in *Bodily Harms* that places it in the category of trauma narrative is the problem of space. The spatial ambiguity of the novel adds to the unclear and equivocal lives of Atwood’s characters as victims of trauma. The ambiguity creates and conveys the sense and atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, and suffering. There are a lot of references to enclosed places in the novel. There is fear of harm, death, and destruction in enclosed spaces in the novel. The prison, for example, is where torture to the body happens. Other references are Pandora box, coffin, Rennie’s small apartment, basement, and “a hole in the ground” (p.249). The novel’s ambiguous treatment of time and space creates an ambiguity in the plot. Although there is a plot for the reader, any story leads to another vague one. The trauma to the body in hospital or jail is presented to show the confinement of body. The traumatized bodies in the novel are parallel to Atwood’s country, Canada. She astutely portrays the ways in which political as well as medical powers traumatize the body. Traumatizing institutions harm the fragile and susceptible body with no reservation.

*Bodily Harm* starts with the phrase, “This is how I got here, says Rennie” (p. 17). The reader does not know what Rennie means by “here” at the outset. This “here” might be anywhere it might be Caribbean Islands, St. Antoine, the airplane, the prison, or Rennie’s troubled mind after traumatization. Then, Rennie starts telling her story from the day that her boyfriend, Jake, left her. Therefore, the reader understands that the narrative structure does not rely on a linear fashion. It is notable that even the boat on which Rennie was travelling in Caribbean Islands is called “memory.” The narrative is based on the memory of Rennie, Lora, and in some parts, Jocasta. The shattered memory of traumatized victims is parallel to the story telling technique of Margaret Atwood in *Bodily Harm*. The narrative structure of *Bodily Harm* blurs the lines between personal memory, reality, and

historical events. The novel's structure is fragmented, and various narrative voices express the events. The haunting of trauma creates the lack of consistency in the story telling fashion of the novel. In *Bodily Harm*, the past and present occur simultaneously, this is the result of the ruptured minds of the traumatized characters in the novel that Cathy Caruth (1995) explains regarding the belated nature of traumatic memories. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth states:

Traumatic experience ... suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic – event which remains unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight – thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (pp. 91-92)

Since narrators of *Bodily Harm* never find peace with their memories, they are urged to tell their stories of traumatization. They live in the present that is haunted and disturbed by the memories of their past.

A lot of important traumatic moments are told in recounting the events in the novel. The reader becomes aware of the harms to Rennie as a subject of traumatic events through these events. For instance, the reader gets to know about the Rennie's mastectomy from the very first page when she is telling the story of Jake's leaving. She says:

There wasn't as much to carry now that Jake wasn't there anymore, which was just as well because the muscles in my left shoulder was aching, I hadn't been keeping up exercises. The trees along the street had turned and the leaves were falling onto the sidewalk, yellow and brown, and I was thinking, well, it's not so bad; I'm still alive. (p. 17)

Although there is no exact reference to Rennie's breast cancer, the reader understands that she had undergone something terrible on the left part of her body that makes her appreciate that she is still "alive." The falling of the leaves creates the gloomy mood in which Rennie lives her life in the novel. Atwood transfers this gloomy mood of the novel to her reader artistically. Atwood puts her readers in the midst of the aftermath of trauma in order to make them feel and go through trauma.

The scene in which Rennie's apartment is robbed suggests an intrusion into her privacy; this scene resembles the invasion of her body by cancer. It is ironic that she tries to convince the police officers that the robbery was not her fault, and to prove that she shows her scar to them. Although there is no direct reference to the mastectomy, Rennie's suffering from the mastectomy is evident. Rennie is asking the reader to experience the trauma she is suffering and witness the harm her body has endured. To share the experience of a missing part in her body, she encourages the reader to follow her bodily trauma throughout the work. In doing so, Atwood uses Kristeva's (1997) idea of abject to illustrate the scar of mastectomy on Rennie's body. Furthermore, the removal of Rennie's breast represents the loss of her womanhood. When she is flying on the airplane to the Caribbean Islands, "she's afraid to look down, she is afraid she'll see blood leakage" (p. 28). Rennie feels her body betrays her by taking her femininity from her. The missing part of the body is in harmony with the narrative style of the novel. For instance, after the operation, Rennie does "not want to look down, see how much of herself was missing" (p. 34). Rennie, also, sees her surgeon as a person who amputates others and makes a "living cutting parts off other people's bodies" (p. 176).

Rennie's attempt to keep others at a distance is the result of her traumatization. Her whole self turns to bits and pieces; even her body is distanced from her soul. She experiences a gap in all aspects of her life. Sonia Mycak (1993) argues that "Rennie's fragmenting body may be seen to be a kind of return to original traumatic moment when the body is separated, thereby affecting a discontinuity between it and the Real" (p. 471). The disintegration of Rennie's body is the result of traumatization experience. Her body possesses a shattered identity and it is separated from her mind. Elaine Scarry (1985) addresses the break between body and mind as a torture that separates the victim's voice from her body:

For what the process of torture does is to split the human being into two ... only latent distinction between a self and a body, between a "me" and "my body" ... It

is in part this combination that makes torture, like any experience of great physical pain, mimetic of death ... (p. 49).

Atwood's narrative technique addresses the disintegration between mind and body. The past resides in the minds of Atwood's characters who try to pull their bodies together in the fragmented world in which they live. The mental confusions that are created by these corporal experiences make the characters feel that they are betrayed by their bodies. To help explain this confusion between body and mind, we borrow the term "body memory" from Roberta Culbertson (1995). She contends that it is important for the victim of trauma to tell the story of her traumatization even if he or she faces challenges in retelling the experience because "it is not known in words, but in the body" (p.170). Culbertson states:

These memories of the body's response to events are primary, prior to any narrative, and they may well surpass the victim's narrative ability because they pass beyond his knowledge ... They obey none of the standard rules of discourse; they are the self's discourse with itself and so occupy that channel between the conscious and unconscious that speaks a body language. (p.178)

Culbertson's notion of "body language" shows the inability of the victims to tell the story of physical wound linguistically. As a result, the wound starts to tell the story of the traumatized body by bodily means.

It should be noted that Rennie is not an intelligent woman, but she is left to find solutions for the pseudo-adventurous problems around her. She leaves Toronto because she has broken up with his friend after her mastectomy, and someone has robbed her place. As a journalist, she travels to the Caribbean Islands to write an article for the magazine she works for. Rennie finds a new friend in St. Antoine, but she ends up in prison. She encounters Lora who suffers from trauma in the prison. The novel ends enigmatically, and it is not clear if Rennie is released from prison or not. The novel ends with the phrase "this is what will happen" (p. 293). The reference to the future makes the conclusion more enigmatic. The reader does not know what will happen because it is not clear if Rennie's freedom from prison is something that she longs for or not. This is what Cathy Caruth (1995) names the belatedness of traumatic memory.

In *Bodily Harm*, there is also a discrepancy between appearance and reality. The brutality that Rennie observes in the Caribbean is the same brutality that exists in Toronto, but it is so covert that it is not visible to the Canadians. As the reality of Rennie's life unfolds to the reader, the reader understands the differences between what Atwood describes as reality in the novel and the reality that exist in the subtext of the novel.

In *Bodily Harm*, every piece of information is contradicted by another piece. For instance, Rennie believes that cancer makes her body betray her. She thinks that despite her healthy skin, her cancerous cells are conspiring against her. This feeling of betrayal runs through the novel from the very beginning to the end. Rennie wonders why her body has turned against her when she "trusted it" (p.77). She had "given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden it junk food and cigarette smoke" (p. 77). Cancer makes Rennie distrust her boy to the extent that she thinks it is "rotting away from the inside". (p. 24)

Rennie's bodily trauma made her relate the strangest things to her body. She thinks that her body has viruses, worms, and insects that make her friend leave her. Time after time, she feels something is going out of her body. She also feels that her body is disintegrating. On the airplane Rennie thinks that her "blood" is "coming out" (p. 27). Rennie believes that her body is so vulnerable that it is prone to any source of destruction. When she sleeps, she "lies with her arms folded" to prevent her body from falling into pieces and fragments" (p. 49). When Rennie is in her hotel room in the Caribbean Islands, she feels her body is working against her:

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

After the operation, Rennie escapes from swimming because she senses that her body is betraying

her. She does not trust her body anymore and she thinks that “the scar will come undone in the water, split open like a faulty zipper, and she will turn inside out” (p. 72). This feeling of disintegration and betrayal indicates the separation of mind and body. Rennie’s past memories disturb her present. It is worth noting that the descriptions of abject in bodily images in the novel create the image of scar for the reader. In fact, whenever the language of human is not capable of recounting the events, the body starts to recount the traumatic memory. The nature of trauma prevents Rennie to talk about her pain, and Atwood lets Rennie’s body to speak for her.

After the surgery, Rennie tries to assess the depth of her loss by asking the doctor “how much of me did you cut off?” (p. 25). Later, she tries to recount Lora’s shattered body. Although Rennie is interested in scrutinizing Lora’s traumatized body, she dislikes it as well.

The fingers holding the cigarette are bitten to the quick, stub-tipped, slightly grubby, the raw skin around the nails nibbled as if mice had been at them, and this both surprises Rennie and repels her slightly. (p. 80)

Later in the novel, Lora describes how she was treated by her step-father, which finally made her run away from home for good.

Then he stood up and took hold of my arm and pulled me around, he hadn’t tried the belt routine for a while, he hadn’t put a hand on me for years, so I wasn’t experiencing it ... If there’s anything I can’t stand its bad teeth. Then he put his other hand right on me. He said, your mother won’t be home till six, and he was still smiling. I was really scared, because I know he was still stronger than me. (p.161)

Although Lora has been a traumatized subject, she is not an adorable person. Atwood does not ask the reader to guess the processes of traumatization, but makes him/her participate in the very experience of suffering.

As the story unfolds, Lora turns to a more sympathetic character. Lora’s image changes when she starts telling the story of her life to Rennie. Lora’s traumatization continues all through her life. For instance, she has been violated before, and she is now in prison. She swaps her body to get some information from the person she loves. Then, she realizes that her friend is dead. Upon hearing the news, she reacts by attacking the guard. Rennie describes how brutally she is beaten by the guards in prison:

Morton knees her in the belly, she is knocked the air out of her ... The head, jumping, my God, Morton’s got the gun out and he is hitting her with it, he’ll break her so that she’ll never be able to make another sound. Lora twists on the floor of the corridor, surely she can’t feel it any more but she’s still twisting, like a worm that’s been cut in half, trying to avoid the feet, they have shoes on, there is nothing she can avoid. (p. 258)

Rennie wants to interfere, but she is afraid of punishment. Then guards leave Lora’s body in Rennie’s cell.

When they’re finished, when Lora is no longer moving, they push open the grated door and heave her in. Rennie backs out of the way, into the dry corner. Lora hits the floor and lies there, limp like a bundle of clothing, face down, her arms and legs sprawled out. Her hair’s all over; her skirt is up, her underpants ripped and filthy. Bruises already appearing on the backs of her legs, the heavy flesh of her thighs, massive involvement, or maybe they were there already, maybe there were always there. (p. 261)

Here, Rennie describes Lora’s traumatized body, and invites the readers to feel her suffering. She describes the diffusion of Lora’s bruises as if they are cancerous cells spreading out very fast in the body. Like cancerous cells, Lora’s cuts could have escaped the eyes of the readers. At night, Rennie fears to sleep with Lora’s dead body, but in the morning light she notices her hands’ slight movement. The image of Lora’s hands shining in the light brings the image of the healing hands of Christ. Lora’s hands are the only remaining parts of her body that are untouched with brutality of prison guards. Rennie notices that Lora’s hands are “shining and translucent in the light ... in the air” (p. 163). Afterwards, Rennie describes how badly Lora has been beaten to death. Rennie shares the abject image of traumatized Lora with the reader:

Very carefully ... pulling Lora's head and shoulders onto her lap. She moves the sticky hair away from the face, which isn't a face any more, it's a bruise, blood is still oozing from the cuts, there is one on the forehead and another across the cheek, the mouth looks like a piece of fruit that's been run over by a car, pulp, Rennie wants to throw up, it's no one she recognizes, she has no connection with this, there is nothing she can do, 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, mess, there is nothing she can even wipe this face off with, all the clothes in this room is filthy, septic, expect her hands ... it's the face of Lora after all, there is no such a thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone's, it has a name. (p. 263)

Rennie depicts Lora as a victim. First, she refers to Lora as a person with no name, and then, she refers to her specifically. Rennie's generalization of Lora makes her a universal figure. Lora could be any person in prison who is tortured. Therefore, Atwood tries to get her reader to experience the torture. The brutality, ambiguity, disintegration, and negation in *Bodily Harm* take Atwood's readers to the real world of the victims of trauma and make them experience trauma. She considers her readers as the audience of a theatre who watch the reality created on the stage.

### **The survival of traumatized bodies**

The subject matter of *Bodily Harm* hovers around the suffering as well as the survival of its characters from traumatic situations. The very first page of the novel introduces Rennie's situation after her surgery. Then, the following pages picture the gloomy life of a person who has undergone such an operation. Atwood directly mentions the word "cancer" on page nineteen. Therefore, from the outset to the end of the novel, the reader is aware that the main character, Rennie, is a cancer survivor.

At the end of the novel, it seems that, Rennie leaves the prison. Here, Atwood opens a door of hope to her reader by mentioning that Rennie has been lucky. These traumas can happen to anyone, and no one is immune to these traumatic situations. Atwood suggests that Rennie is a lucky person who survives two traumas: cancer and prison. Atwood astutely refers to both traumas as "cell". Rennie's departure from the Caribbean Islands and the experience of traumatization is the beginning of a new life that connects her life with her terrible past. To realize how Atwood places her reader in the middle of the traumatic experiences, the researchers adopt Dominick LaCapra's (2001) idea of accessing and addressing traumatic memory. LaCapra's theories of witnessing and healing are evident in *Bodily Harm*. LaCapra states:

In acting out one has a mimetic relation to the past which is regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory or inscription. In psychoanalytic terms, the acted-out past is incorporated rather than introjected, and it returns as the repressed. (p. 45)

Rennie's "acting out" and "working through" the difficult processes is an essential aspect of her survival. She comes to terms with her past, and revives from the lingering memory of trauma she has suffered. LaCapra notes that "working through" does not bring closure, but helps the survivor to accept the life because "one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one ...back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future" (p. 22). Atwood changes the tense of her text from present to future to represent the idea of survival of traumatized Rennie when she is closing her novel:

She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky, suddenly, finally, she is overflowing with luck, it is this luck holding her up. (p. 291)

Atwood believes that Rennie has been lucky because she has come to terms with her traumatized past and wounded self. Cathy Caruth (1995) identifies this survival as a testimony or "awakening" that reconnects the traumatized body and mind to the exterior world (p. 100). Survival of traumatized body is a communication of understanding where "words are passed on as an act that ... passes on the awakening to others" (pp. 106-107). Caruth continues that "for trauma survivor this is an awakening that preoccupies the traumatized past less than the unknown future". (p. 110)

Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* engages the readers in different stages of Rennie's suffering,

from aftermath of mastectomy to torture in prison. As a freelance reporter, Rennie unwillingly gets involved with the political upheavals in the Caribbean Islands. As Rennie tells the story of her pain in a non-linear manner, she portrays the traumatized bodies of people around her. The novel starts with the gloomy description of Rennie's lonely life after her separation. The reader understands that Rennie is suffering from the scar on her body. Margaret Atwood takes the reader to Rennie's past and present. By doing so, Atwood tries to tell the reader that no one is exempt of experiencing trauma. She takes her reader to the scene of suffering, and makes him or her feel what it is like to be a victim. Margaret Atwood describes the scars and bruises on the bodies of her characters in detail. For example, Rennie thinks that her body is betraying her. She thinks that her body is turning inside out. Sometimes, she thinks that blood is dripping from her body. When she goes to bed, Rennie folds her hand under her body to prevent them from falling apart. Rennie does not want to look down because she is afraid to see blood is running away from her disintegrating body.

Rennie also refers to other characters' traumatized bodies. For example, Rennie pays attention to the disgusting flesh around Lora's nails. When in prison, Rennie describes the filthy rooms and bodies to depict the abject state of being traumatized. Rennie also describes trauma without scar. To this end, she retells the Lora's story and she refers to her invasion by prison guards. Rennie is a sheer witness of such animosity, and lets the readers to judge about the characters and events.

## Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* engages the readers in different stages of Rennie's suffering, from the aftermath of mastectomy to the torture scenes in prison. As a freelance reporter, Rennie unwillingly gets involved in the political upheavals in the Caribbean Islands. She tries to involve the reader in her experience of traumatization. As Rennie tells the story of her pain, she depicts the traumatized bodies of people around her. Through the events, the reader understands that Rennie is suffering from a pain in her body. Atwood reveals Rennie's life to the reader as the novel moves forward. Atwood takes the reader to Rennie's past, and present. By doing so, Atwood tries to tell the reader that no one is immune to trauma. She takes her reader to the scene of suffering, and makes him or her feel what it is like to be a victim. She pictures the scars and bruises of her characters in detail. Rennie is obsessed with the traumatization of other characters. For example, Rennie refers to the flesh around Lora's nails. When in prison, Rennie describes the filthy rooms and bodies to report the abject images of trauma. Rennie talks about Lora's bruises, and describes her dirty body and ripped clothes. She is not sure if Lora is dead or alive, but Rennie idolizes her hands, the hands that she hated once seem pure and holy now. Here, Atwood ends her novel with a double picture, a sign of hope can be found in the middle of gruesome situation of suffering. Finally, Rennie leaves the prison and gets over the disease.

Rennie's healing and re-integration of her body and mind at the end of the novel demonstrate Scarry's (1985) idea of revival of the traumatized body. Scarry states that the victim of trauma finally awakens and "rediscovers speech and regains his powers of self-objectification" (p. 172). Rennie's plan to write about the trauma she has experienced refers to the innovative narrative technique of Margaret Atwood. Atwood invites the readers to witness the trauma.

Margaret Atwood invites her readers to dig the text. In other words, the reader of Atwood's work needs to grapple with the surface meanings to uncover the hidden meanings. The active reader of Margaret Atwood uncovers the pieces, and discovers how pieces are used to create the whole picture. Margaret Atwood's work aims at helping the reader to see the world as it is. In other words, Margaret Atwood is aware of the fact that the world needs to be changed. In her work, Atwood glorifies those who witness and pay attention to these facts.

Atwood's characters experience the trauma, but they recover both psychologically and physically. Atwood demonstrates the complicated relations between traumatic historical events, politics, colonization, memories, and the use of imagination to make trauma authentic for the readers. Atwood breaks the silence of degradation of humans to guide her readers through a maze of incomprehensible acts of horrors. Literature gives Atwood this opportunity to reflect the gaps that exist within traumatizing institutions. Readers are supposed to actively take part and reflect upon the stories of traumatization.

All in all, in this novel the “ragged wound ... speak its language” (Slattery, 2000, p. 7). Margaret Atwood demonstrates that literature has the power to write about traumatizing institutions for the sake of those who were silenced, forgotten, wounded, and marginalized. She puts forward her idea that literary art does not exist in isolation, but it exist to challenge the dominant discourse.

## References

- Atwood, M. (1982). *Bodily harm*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Caruth, C. (1995). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1997). Traumatic awakenings. In H. de Vries and S. Webber (Eds.), *Violence, identity, and self-determination*. (pp. 208-222). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Culbertson, R. (1995). Embodied memory, transcendence, and telling: Recounting trauma, re-establishing the self. *New Literary History*, 26(1), 169-195.
- Felman, Sh., & Dori L. (1991). *Testimony: Crisis of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. New York: Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1922). *Beyond the pleasure principle*. (C. Hubback, Trans.). London: International Psychoanalytical Press.
- Freud, S. (1976). *The interpretation of dreams*. London: Penguin.
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Perseus Books Group.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986). *The Kristeva reader*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1987). The pain of sorrow in the modern world: The works of Marguerite Duras. *PMLA*, 102(2), 138-52.
- Kristeva, J. (1993). *Nations without nationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1997). Approaching abjection. In K. Oliver (Ed.), *The portable Kristeva*. (pp.229-247). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levenson, C. (1990). Magical forms in poetry. In E. Ingersoll. (Ed.), *Margaret Atwood: conversations* (pp.20-27). New York: Ontario Review Press.
- Mycak, S. (1993). Divided and dismembered: The de-centered subject in Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 20(3), 469-478.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Scarry, E. (1985). *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Slattery, D. (2000). *The wounded body: Remembering the markings of flesh*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Traverso, A. & Broderrick, M. (2011). *Interrogating trauma: Collective suffering in global Arts and media*. London: Routledge.
- Woolf, V. (2002). *On Being III*. Massachusetts: Paris Press.

## Authors:

**Jalal Sokhanvar** is Professor of English. He was a member of SHAHID Beheshti University (retired in 2010), and he is currently a member of Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch. He earned his M.A. from Senate House-U. of London and his Ph.D. from Lille in France. He is the author of *Literary Terms and Devices*, *A Compendious History of English Literature*, and *Drama Interpretations: A Structural Approach to Modern Drama*. His reviews of new poetry and literary criticism appear in scholarly magazines, and he is editor-in-chief of *Critical Language and Literary Studies*.

**Neda Sahranavard** holds a Ph.D. degree in English Literature from Islamic Azad University, Tehran Central Branch.

