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The Wounded Body: Gendered Violence and Corporeal Trauma in Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch"

Dr. Seema C.
Associate Professor of English
SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Autonomous), Mumbai

Ms. Pooja S
PhD Research Scholar, SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Autonomous), Mumbai
Assistant Professor of English, Mithibai College of Arts (Empowered Autonomous), Mumbai
poojasajan2000@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Carmen Maria Machado's feminist horror short story titled "The Husband Stitch" explores the idea of bodily autonomy and consent within the medical, sexual, and domestic structures, in the form of a folk tale narrative. Drawing upon the intersection of trauma studies, feminist theories and narratology, this paper will examine the representation of gendered violence and corporeal trauma inflicted upon the unnamed protagonist in the text. Through the framework of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Laura Brown, and Bessel van der Kolk coupled with Julia Kristeva's abjection, Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine and the embedded narrative strategies, this analysis will demonstrate how the story exposes the feminine body as a site of sexual desire and patriarchal violence, ultimately leading to the annihilation of the Self. It will also reveal the normalisation of systemic gender-based physical and psychological trauma within the institutions of medicine and marriage in society. The body becomes a space where male desire is projected, and hence its abjection and monstrous femininity are to be controlled through traumatic inscription. The folk narrative framework employed further highlights the intergenerational transmission of this gendered trauma. Machado's text forces the readers to recognise the everyday trauma inflicted upon women under the guise of care and intimacy.

Keywords: Trauma, body, medicine, marriage, abject, monstrous-feminine, gender, violence.

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"God should have made girls lethal when he made monsters of men" (34). This line from Elisabeth Hewer's poetry collection *Wishing for Birds* is the epigraph of American writer Carmen Maria Machado's 2017 short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*. "The Husband Stitch" in this collection is a feminist horror story that examines the normalisation of gendered violence that occurs when medicine, marriage, and society collude.

The protagonist of the narrative is an unnamed woman born with a green ribbon around her neck, which is forbidden to be untied. The story chronicles her journey from girlhood, through marriage and motherhood, up to her eventual death. Her story is interwoven with cautionary folktales and ghost stories of other women.

From centring on singular historically catastrophic moments such as the Holocaust, the field of trauma studies has broadened its reach to include diverse dimensions such as postcolonial and feminist critique. The inclusion of structurally produced and cumulative harm experienced by bodies located at the intersectional nexus of race, gender, caste and sexuality has been one of the welcome outcomes of this shift. This expansion has incorporated a diversity of texts, ranging from documenting the overwhelming ruptures within world literature to capturing the erosion of the self. This paper situates Machado's short story within such a context of world literature. The short story's translatability derives from its depiction of the female body as a site to be owned and managed. This is the central argument which speaks across cultural contexts vastly different from the American setting of the story.

The theoretical framework of the paper includes Caruth's conceptualisation of the belated awareness of trauma, Brown's theorisation of insidious trauma, and Van der Kolk's idea of the somatic imprint of trauma upon the body and brain. This triangulation is further connected with the psychoanalytic-feminist theories of Kristeva's abjection and Creed's monstrous-feminine. Alongside the thematic analysis, the text's structural elements are examined through Genette's narratological categories, which aid in the exploration of the

literary methods Machado employs to unify the theoretical concerns and thematic tensions into a literary creation. Therefore, the theoretical framework chosen for this paper emphasises how patriarchy inscribes and projects male anxieties upon the female body. This dynamic in Machado's narrative exposes female subjugation disguised as intimacy and care.

An instance that highlights the patriarchal and paternal suppression of truth is the narrator's childhood trauma of seeing toe stumps mixed with the potatoes at the grocery store. This is dismissed by her father, and she is forced to consent to his version of the truth. "They had been there. I had seen them with my own eyes. But beneath the sunbeam of my father's logic, I felt my doubt unfurl...As a grown woman, I would have said to my father that there are true things in this world observed only by a single set of eyes. As a girl, I consented to his account of the story…" (Carmen 8). Throughout the story, consent is what is denied to the narrator at every juncture. This denial operates through ideological and relational violence. Here, her consent appears through the forced abandonment of her own perception. The narrator does not choose to disbelieve herself but is ideologically arm-wrestled into doing so by the authority of the father. The source of trauma is not the sight of the toes, albeit disturbing, but the forced overwriting of her perception by paternal authority.

Richardsonian denarration is a narrator's negation or erasure of elements of the story that were previously established as a given. Machado employs this where the narrator retroactively marks the erasure of her own account. The protagonist's childhood trauma of seeing "toes, pale and bloody stumps" (Carmen 8) is dismissed through overwriting by the "sunbeam of [her] father's logic", forcing her to agree to his version of reality. Genette notes that such shifts in narrative authority often suppress the lived reality and the "felt truth" (178) of the subject. The phrase "beneath the sunbeam of my father's logic" reveals the phenomenological aspect of the traumatic experience. Between the narrator and the father's accounts, the version which prevails is determined not by epistemic credibility but by social

power. The “sunbeam” of the father’s logic does not refer to its power of illuminating the truth, but rather to the fact that it has the full force of the paternal and patriarchal institution behind it.

This routine ordinariness is precisely what constitutes the insidiousness of the harm. The narrator is being trained to distrust her own senses, thus preparing her for a life where her perceptions and testimonies will be systematically discredited. For children, the caregiver is the authority, and being ignored or forced to disown one’s perspective and perception leads to a “distrust of their own senses” (Van der Kolk 143), which, according to Brown, becomes a form of intellectual and psychic colonisation that renders the victim’s reality invisible. This rewiring is how she will process her experiences throughout her life.

Another episode, which portrays the somatic manifestation of the narrator’s childhood trauma, involves the telling of her “worst secret” regarding a teacher who forced her to “hold him there” (9) while hidden in a closet. This disclosure is rendered as a textual aside which mimics and enacts the way traumatic memory intrudes upon the present. The somatic consequence of this abuse is her physical compulsion to scrub her hands until they bleed, which she later develops as an attempt to eject the abject feeling of violation. The compulsion to scrub the hands until they bleed is not irrational. The hands that are scrubbed are the hands that were forced to touch. The body attempts to try to contain the trauma and history of her violation in a single repeated gesture as it takes up the violence enforced upon it.

Van der Kolk describes such reactions as classic self-harming behaviour used by trauma survivors to “replace overwhelming emotions with definable sensations” such as “rendering ourselves insensible with drugs or alcohol, or taking a knife to the skin” (76). These are sensory displacements and somatic strategies for managing the overwhelming imprint of trauma.

“I feel monstrous, but my husband seems renewed with desire, as if my novel shape has refreshed our list of perversities.” (Carmen 14). The naturally occurring bodily changes during

her pregnancy are perceived by the narrator as grotesque and monstrous. This aligns with Brown's discussion regarding how social pathologies like patriarchy and capitalism function. Their interpretation of biological realities, such as pregnancy, creates gendered power imbalances and devaluation of the female body. Systematic forms of oppression such as these give birth to legacies of insidious and intergenerational trauma. The narrator's internal focalization and self-surveillance transform her own body into a site of horror.

The statement which the doctor makes after the narrator is subjected to surgical repair after her labour is "'You're all sewn up, don't you worry…Nice and tight, everyone's happy.'" (Carmen 17). The addition of an extra stitch by the doctor in her vagina is purely for the husband's sexual pleasure. This exploitation of the patient when they are incapacitated and unable to resist is an instance of institutional betrayal and medical trauma. The episode illustrates the collusion between the medical fraternity and patriarchal ideologies in reducing the female reproductive body as an object to be repaired for male gratification.

The phrase "everyone's happy" (17) is a linguistic enactment of the erasure of the narrator's own subjectivity. The happiness described here is primarily the husband's, which ironically and systematically excludes the narrator. In fact, her pain and discomfort or even consent, are not factors to be taken into serious consideration.

The perfect mask, which conceals the institutional betrayal under the impression of clinical care, is the pleasant reassurance of the doctor, "don't you worry" (17). Such manipulative and misleading usage of language makes the violence incredibly difficult to name and contest as the violation is delivered under the language of care and concern.

The narrator's medical trauma of being "sewn up... nice and tight" (17) occurs during a period of "anesthesia awareness" (Van der Kolk 201). Here, the eponymous stitch is a physical as well as psychological trauma being inscribed on her while she is "covered in something

heavy and dark, like oil" (Carmen 17) after a difficult delivery. She is in a phenomenological state of fluctuating awareness. This liminal consciousness is a prerequisite, as it renders her vulnerable and unable to protest. It causes a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth 4), which reflects the pervious nature of trauma. Here, the boundary between the victim's consciousness and the violating Other is blurred and eventually collapses. The medical violence is inflicted by the men, which includes both the doctor and the husband, while she is reduced to a "small moan" (Carmen 17).

The winking of the doctor at the husband while suggesting that the baby be delivered surgically during the labour reinforces a "brutish, insensitive phallic culture" (qtd in Creed 215). It prioritises masculine and medical authority over maternal and feminine autonomy. The wink is a communicative gesture that excludes the narrator. It is also the unspoken patriarchal agreement between male agents regarding the control of the female body. This reflects the social conditions and power dynamics that can create "breeding grounds for trauma" (Van der Kolk 350), thereby exposing the precarious relationship between individual subjectivities and dominant ideologies.

The reasoning behind the administration of the husband stitch is to restore the body to its former level of sexual utility for the husband's satisfaction. This logic constructs the maternal body as Creed's monstrous-feminine. The reproductive body that has endured pregnancy and undergone labour is a body that is now defective and has to be rectified through surgical intervention. The medical procedure thus also becomes a disciplinary act which inscribes the patriarchal symbolic order upon the female body.

The story's main symbol is the green ribbon and its accompanying prohibition against being untied. The ribbon marks the boundary between the narrator's consciousness and her corporality. It serves as an imaginary border separating the Self from that which threatens the Self. It functions as a literal and symbolic border for the narrator's identity. She insists that her

husband “cannot touch” (Carmen 7) it, effectively marking a boundary for her autonomy and essentially defending her own Self and her Being. The prohibition is not deception or secretiveness but a declaration of the ontological boundary of her identity. In the most literal sense, it keeps her Self intact, and to untie it is to destroy her.

The opening instruction of the text, “ALL OTHER WOMEN: interchangeable with my own” (Carmen 3), establishes a chorus of collective gendered experience. This aligns with Genette's iterative narrative, where a single story stands for “n times” (114) occurrences, suggesting that the fate of brides who “never fare well” (Carmen 11) in these stories is a regular phenomenon. The folkloric knowledge here is experiential for the narrator. She has been brought up in a world where male desire is directed towards the possession and penetration of the mysterious female interiority. Despite these cautions, the most intimate violence is going to be performed in the name of love and curiosity, by the person whom she trusts the most. This is the most devastating form of insidious trauma, when it is indistinguishable from intimacy. Machado positions her protagonist within a sisterhood of women whose bodies have been the sites of hostile, aggressive and violent male curiosity. This is made explicit in the opening instruction of the text; the narrator’s story is at once singular and universal as well as personal and collective.

Another example of iterative domesticity is the constant questioning of the husband regarding the ribbon, “A wife…should have no secrets from her husband.” (20) This is a repeated and routinised performance rather than a singular moment of confrontation. His traditional conservatism and orthodoxy are visible in his insistence on a wife not having anything hidden. It is also an attempt to force the narrator into a traditional role of complete surrender and submission. Richardson notes that when characters “lip-sync…social scripts” (113), it represents the “internalised discourse of an oppressive authority” (36). The husband's claim arises not out of curiosity for the unknown but from his entitlement to know. Thus, his

continuous insistence is not due to personal desire but is an expression of authority arising from his subscription to the social script of marriage, which requires complete transparency and possession of the wife.

The narrator begins her story by claiming agency: “I know I want him before he does. This isn’t how things are done, but this is how I am going to do them.” (3). Her desires and acceptance of her “ferocious want” (Carmen 14) are a drive to master her own life. In a monstrous-feminine reading of the text, such a display of active sexuality and eroticism is viewed as a threat to masculinity, thus leading the symbolic order to characterise it as evil and vicious. Her desire for (deviant) pleasure is evidenced through her curious fascination with wanting to know the wicked thing that might deem a girl crazy: “I once heard a story about a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family, and they had her hauled off to a sanatorium. I don’t know what deviant pleasure she asked for, though I desperately wish I did. What magical thing could you want so badly they take you away from the known world for wanting it?” (Carmen 4). Her wish to know this request represents an attempt to step outside the known world of patriarchal rules and into the unknown world of the forbidden.

The conflict between being a docile body versus being a subversive deviant is represented through the narrator’s struggles between being a “good girl, from a good family” (30) and her desires. Creed argues that patriarchal ideology constructs these binaries to justify the control of women. In the process, feminine sexuality becomes the abject when it threatens to undermine male power, and as she argues, women’s “denigration arises from male fears and fantasies, and a desire to exercise complete control over women’s bodies and lives.” (xv)

Abjection is that which “disturbs identity, system, order…does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). This condition is an undefined state of being that poses a threat, and is described by paradoxes: neither a subject nor an object, both material and symbolic, it

fascinates as well as repulses. The husband's final breach of this border results in the ultimate disintegration of the narrator's physical form: "My weight shifts, and with it, gravity seizes me. My husband's face falls away, and then I see the ceiling, and the wall behind me. As my lopped head tips backward of my neck and rolls over the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been." (Carmen 31).

There is also relational betrayal underlying the husband's eventual choice to untie the ribbon. "'Do you want to untie the ribbon?' I ask him. 'After these many years, is that what you want of me?' His face flashes gaily, and then greedily, and he runs his hand up my bare breast and to my bow. 'Yes,' he says. 'Yes.'" (Carmen 30). The narrator's eventual death is portrayed with great restraint, and the adjectives used for the husband's expression enact the transition from the performance of innocent curiosity to the revelation of possessive desire. The "gay" face is the face that pretends the request is harmless and only a lover's playful whim; the "greedy" face is the face that reveals the actuality of the request as a demand for total possession.

His desire to "know all" (9) of her, including the secret of the ribbon, is a greedy and possessive impulse to eliminate her autonomy. This reflects the sadistic male gaze as discussed by Creed, where patriarchy works to rid itself of its fear of women by objectifying and eventually destroying their mystery. His desire is not for mutual pleasure but for total knowledge and total possession of her. He represents an invasive omniscient power that seeks to possess the totality of the female subject's internal world. Brown explains, albeit within the paradigm of colonisation, that the dominator believes they have discovered the other, while they are actually exploiting them for their own resources or satisfaction. By untying the ribbon, the husband prioritises his curiosity over her survival. His desire is not for mutuality but for omniscience: he wants to know "all" of her. This omniscient possession is, in Creed's account,

the patriarchal response to the anxiety produced by feminine mystery: the unknown interior of the female subject is experienced as a threat, and the response is to eliminate it.

After years of defiant refusal, she eventually surrenders and tells her husband to “use [her] body as he sees fit” (11). Van der Kolk terms such examples as “resigned compliance”, when “people are forced to submit to overwhelming power...” (220). He describes it as a state when the person who has been subjected to continuous and overwhelming power ceases to resist, not because they have consented, but because the cost of continued resistance has exceeded their capacity to sustain it. The narrator’s consent to the untying is not an exercise of agency; it is the final expression of a self that has been eroded to the point at which the distinction between consent and submission has collapsed. This circles back to the perverse consent discussed at the beginning of the paper regarding the father’s logic. She asks the question, “Is that what you want of me?” (Carmen 30), in a way that makes visible what has always been “wanted” of her: her body, her compliance, her testimony, and now the last remnant of her Self.

In this narrative, decapitation functions as a symbolic act, and as Freud writes, “Beheading is well known to us as a symbolic substitute for castrating” (qtd in Creed 130). The husband enacts a literal disintegration of the narrator through his act of untying the ribbon. His pursuit of the greedy male desire to possess the woman in totality results in her ultimate death. The conclusion, wherein the narrator’s “lopped head tips backward of my neck and rolls over the bed” (Carmen 31), is a literalization of Caruth’s falling body. It illustrates the shock of trauma and the difficulty of narrating experiences that resist comprehension. Simultaneously, it signifies a traumatic reality that can only end in and through the physical destruction of the female subject. Interestingly, the narrator’s psychic narration survives her physical decapitation. This narration is an example of a recurring argument regarding the nature of a traumatic testimony, that the survivor’s story is one which should not have survived.

The final picture of the narrator's decapitation is a visual and visceral image which aids Machado's choice of the genre of horror fiction to portray the dissolution of the embodied self. In the ultimate physical expression of dissociation, she finally ceases to exist. Her decapitation literalises this dissociation when her head literally separates from her body. Van der Kolk defines this as the "essence of trauma" (Van der Kolk 66), that is, a state where the self is detached from the body and stops being a person.

This loss of individual identity highlights the necessity of the erasure of the self as a prerequisite for survival and reflects Caruth's claim that, "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). Thus, the female experience is a history of transgenerational suffering. The burden and legacy of this suffering continue when it is shown that the daughter also inherits her mother's green ribbon. Along with the ribbon, she is passed down the gendered vulnerability which exposes her to the same social structures that annihilated her mother and all the other women who came before her.

This paper has argued that the horror in the story is inscribed through the language of gendered abjection that travels from its American specificity across geographies and cultures. The green ribbon, husband stitch, compulsive hand-washing, and final decapitation are not isolated horror tropes or traumatic symptoms but structurally and thematically linked signifiers of female erasure. The paper has employed an integrated reading of Caruth's epistemological structure of trauma, Brown's social and intergenerational dimensions of trauma, Van der Kolk's bodily inscribed trauma, Kristeva and Creed's cultural logic of abjection and feminine-monstrosity, respectively, along with Genette's narrative structure to explore gendered and corporeal trauma.

The readers of the story will inadvertently recognise the uncomfortable truth, which perhaps they already know, have seen and might also have experienced themselves, that the

everyday trauma inflicted upon women under the guise of care, intimacy, and tradition is not a private or personal misfortune but held up by institutions and structures that organise social life. Whether it be the father's logic, the doctor's dismissive winking, or the husband's untying of her ribbon, all of these instances represent a failure to listen "to the voice and to the speech delivered by the other's wound" (Caruth 8). It is left up to us to realise that the story functions not merely as horror but as a radical critique of institutional and cultural complicity in the violation of women's bodies, while also exposing the fragility of the symbolic order.

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