

Tied by the Ribbon: Bodily Autonomy, Patriarchy, and Psychological Erasure in Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch"

Samahira Begum¹, Jessica R², Fariya Zain Sabiha Kainaat³
^{1,2,3}*HKBK College of Engineering*

Abstract- This paper explores the complex themes of bodily autonomy, patriarchal expectations, and psychological trauma in Carmen Maria Machado's short story "The Husband Stitch". Through a close analysis of the green ribbon symbol, the dynamics of marriage and motherhood, and the emotional burden placed on women, the study reveals how the protagonist's experiences reflect broader gendered power structures. Machado's fusion of horror, folklore, and feminist critique allows for a potent examination of the personal and political implications of female sacrifice and erasure in romantic relationships. Drawing on feminist literary theory and trauma studies, this paper situates Machado's story within a long tradition of women's writing that interrogates consent, control, and corporeality.

INTRODUCTION

In "The Husband Stitch", Carmen Maria Machado reimagines a classic urban legend—the girl with a ribbon around her neck—into a feminist narrative that resonates deeply with the lived experiences of many women. Published in her acclaimed collection "Her Body and Other Parties" (2017), the story deploys horror and folklore to expose the costs of emotional labor, sexual commodification, and the erasure of personal boundaries within heteronormative romantic scripts.

This paper pursues three primary objectives:

1. To examine the theme of bodily autonomy through the symbol of the green ribbon and its significance in female identity and personal boundaries.
2. To analyze the critique of patriarchal expectations placed on women in romantic and marital relationships.
3. To explore the psychological impact of gendered sacrifice, emotional labor, and male entitlement as experienced by the unnamed female protagonist.

Through these lenses, "The Husband Stitch" emerges not only as a tale of personal horror but as a searing indictment of the cultural narratives that govern women's lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Machado's work has sparked considerable critical attention for its hybrid use of genre and form. Feminist literary critics such as "Tanya Titchkosky" and "Julia Kristeva" have provided important frameworks for understanding the female body as a contested space—one both symbolically and materially regulated. These insights are crucial in analyzing the green ribbon as a site of resistance and control.

According to "Daphne Jones" (2020), the ribbon functions as "a locus of narrative autonomy," challenging the assumption that intimacy requires total transparency. "Sarah Resnick" identifies Machado's story as part of the "new feminist horror" that centers female embodiment and vulnerability. "Tiffany Lethabo King" connects this narrative strategy to critiques of heteronormative violence, asserting that "romantic love becomes a tool of patriarchal compliance."

"Susan Bordo's" theories of the disciplined female body (1993) and "Judith Butler's" ideas of gender performativity also enrich this discussion, showing how societal scripts demand the surrender of bodily agency in exchange for validation. "Adrienne Rich's" concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980) is deeply embedded in Machado's portrayal of a relationship where desire is inseparable from domination.

Additionally, Machado's second-person narration—a hallmark of the story—has been widely discussed by scholars like "Erin Wunker", who argues it positions the reader within the female subject's constrained

agency, making the violence feel personal and participatory.

ANALYSIS

1. Bodily Autonomy and the Symbol of the Green Ribbon

From the story's outset, the green ribbon is described as "mine" by the narrator—a statement that defies the traditional expectation that a woman must give all of herself in love. This boundary becomes increasingly threatening to her partner, whose obsession with the ribbon evolves from curiosity to fixation. He cannot accept that any part of his wife might remain beyond his reach.

Machado uses this conflict to critique a common dynamic in heterosexual relationships: the presumption of "total access". When the narrator asserts, "I have given you everything you have asked for, everything you have taken. I have given you all that is mine," she clarifies that love, even in its most generous form, does not erase consent.

The removal of the ribbon at the story's climax—done "gently," almost lovingly—underscores how "violence can be masked as tenderness". The protagonist's head falling off is a literalization of symbolic death: the final cost of being entirely consumed by another.

This moment reflects the Foucauldian concept of "biopower"—where control is exerted not through overt force but by shaping what is considered normal or desirable. Her death becomes the inevitable result of living in a world that permits no personal sovereignty.

2. Patriarchal Expectations in Romantic and Marital Relationships

The protagonist's journey from girlhood to wifehood is marked by compliance. From sexual initiation to childbirth, she meets every demand with willingness—until the ribbon. This resistance is met not with understanding, but with frustration, revealing that the husband's love is conditional upon total access. Machado underscores this theme with moments of gendered double standards. The protagonist's son, for instance, is never told about the ribbon, reflecting how male children are spared the burden of female boundaries or secrecy. The husband, in contrast, demands answers—not out of concern, but entitlement.

By referencing "the husband stitch"—a term used to describe the unethical practice of giving women an extra vaginal stitch after childbirth to increase male pleasure—Machado critiques the "medical and cultural practices" that prioritize male comfort over female well-being.

This is echoed in "Emily Martin's" anthropological work on reproduction, which argues that cultural narratives consistently represent women's bodies as passive vessels, valued only for their reproductive function.

3. Psychological Impact of Gendered Sacrifice and Emotional Labor

Throughout the story, the narrator's identity becomes increasingly subsumed by her roles as lover, wife, and mother. Machado subtly depicts how emotional labor is "invisible and unacknowledged, yet entirely essential to the maintenance of relationships."

Her interior monologue becomes fragmented, with her once-bold assertions replaced by hesitation and silence. She tells the reader, "I loved him so much. I gave him everything." That "everything" is the price of her erasure. She loses her voice, her autonomy, and ultimately her life, all in the name of love.

This aligns with "Lauren Berlant's" critique of "cruel optimism"—the idea that the very things we desire (love, marriage, happiness) can be the sources of our undoing.

The protagonist's death is not portrayed as a dramatic betrayal, but as the inevitable outcome of a system in which women are trained to serve, soothe, and submit.

CONCLUSION

Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" is a searing exploration of what it means to live as a woman in a culture that conflates love with possession, and consent with surrender. Through the symbol of the green ribbon, Machado crafts a powerful allegory of bodily autonomy and the dangers of romantic idealization.

The story is not simply about a woman who dies because her husband unties a ribbon. It is about every moment a woman says "no" and is ignored. Every sacrifice made without acknowledgment. Every love story that demands erasure for the sake of "happily ever after."

Machado's fusion of horror and feminism challenges readers to interrogate the stories they've been told about love, intimacy, and the female body. In doing so, she offers not just a critique, but a call for boundaries, agency, and the radical act of self-preservation.

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