



Female Subjectivity in Carmen Maria Machado's *The Husband Stitch*

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ABSTRACT

In a society with a patriarchal system, females are subordinate to males and have limited access and freedom. Females are pressured and controlled, so they are limited in their movement that leads them to try to show female subjectivity. Carmen Maria Machado narrates the unnamed female protagonist who challenges the oppression from her own husband, and only son and performs the female subjectivity in her first short story *Her Husband Stitch* in her first debut book, *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017). The anthology book was awarded the Shirley Jackson Award in 2017. This study is based on post-structural feminism theory in particular the concept of language and subjectivity by Weedon (1987). The method in this study is the descriptive method. Dialogue between characters and the author's narration are data from a short story that will analyze in this study. The result shows that the unnamed female protagonist challenges verbal and physical abuse by her husband and son. Eventually, she could perform verbal and physical refusal to show her female subjectivity.

Keywords: Carmen Maria Machado, Female Subjectivity, Oppression, Post-Structural Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

This study tries to present female subjectivity, and it is contributing factors in *The Husband Stitch* short story in *Her Body and Other Parties* anthology book. The story is chosen because her short story talks about the oppression against the unnamed female protagonist in a patriarchal society, and it stimulates her to obtain what is so-called subjectivity. Additionally, the reason the writer uses the anthology book as a source of data as the story narrates the oppression against the female protagonist and how the female subjectivity is an exhibit to show her verbal and physical refusal.

Her Body and Other Parties anthology book was awarded the Shirley Jackson and Nebula Awards for Best Debuted Book in the United States of America in 2017. The anthology book consisted of 198 pages and was published in 2017. Carmen Maria Machado is an American born in Pennsylvania on February 3rd, 1986. Her Austria and Cuba parents are immigrants to the United States of America. She spent most of her years

in Pennsylvania, United States of America. The short story narrates an unnamed female protagonist who meets an unnamed male character and becomes her husband in the future. She experiences a happy and miserable life as a female and a wife. Unlike males, females in America have to follow traditional rules.

The Husband Stitch story depicts how the female is treated in the patriarchal society. The social norm is a female should not have a secret from her husband. In other words, a male should know everything about her wife. The value of a female depends on her attitude toward her husband. It means that female attitudes influence her husband's responses to her life.

This kind of female oppression does not give full space for females to speak up about their condition. According to Triadnyani (2018), oppression might also refer to conditions or feelings of disrespect by the other. It means that the unnamed female protagonist has limited access to her life because her husband and son disrespect her by doing verbal and physical abuse. She is greatly repressed by society and given a small space to resist. Female oppression makes females not have power, and female consciousness are a cause of female subjectivity which means allowing themselves to have full access to control what they think and should do. Carmen Maria Machado's writing was the only way to cut off from the confinement. Here, Machado's writing is a path of resisting the domination of males by narrating the unnamed female protagonist in the anthology book.

A theoretical framework that is used is post-structural feminism. Thus, this study uses the concept of language and subjectivity. To question females as the subject of feminism may prove to support the possibility of feminism as representational family rules, which is female subjectivity will be created. Furthermore, female subjectivity makes females as the subject in the family aspects.

Poststructuralist theory tells the common factor of subjectivity in analyzing a social organization, social meanings, power, and individual consciousness is language. Language is the construction of an individual's subjectivity and the expression of the subjectivity of the individual. According to Weedon (1987), a language is a place of female political struggle. Subjectivity is conscious and unconscious minds and emotions, which have a relationship between the individual and the social. This means that subjectivity is conscious and unconscious minds which use language as a tool (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). According to post-structuralism, subjectivity is an individual who thinks or speaks, which is usually negotiated, constituted, and reconstituted in discourse every time (Soza, 2014, p. 13).

Then, a response of power from below which could challenge, negotiate, and undermine power, or such a practice performed on behalf of or in solidarity is resistance (Baaz, 2016, p 6). It means that resistance is an equal response from an unbalanced power. People who are oppressed will likely perform the act of resistance, for they think and feel that the particular condition or power is not fair to them. It is presented by the unnamed protagonist female who gets oppression by her husband. From here, the resistance will be recognized as a counter to end the oppression.

Resistance is the key to subjectivity in this study. There are several previous studies closely related to the topic. A study (Lopez: 2020) aimed to find out the effect of obstetric violence on a female's body that make her an object not a subject. Another study (Hood: 2020) described the unnamed protagonist's female resistance to her life that the females have the same ability to survive and against in their lives.

All the previous studies are related to this study in terms of the unnamed protagonist female who represents post-structural feminism theory, such as the

subjectivity of the unnamed protagonist female, the contributing factors of subjectivity, and the resistance to struggle for oppression and repression by the husband which applying for traditional roles in the family rules.

This study also looks at the female in a patriarchal society. According to Tyson (2015), a patriarchal society is a culture that gives advantages to males by promoting traditional gender roles. It means that males have more power than females to oppress females by traditional gender roles because they have privileges. The background socio-economic as well as the culture and tradition present in the story will assist this study in assessing and analyzing the female subjectivity as experienced by an unnamed protagonist female.

The condition of the illustration above suggests that the condition in the story was or perhaps still is a male-centred society. The differential treatment of males and females has been present over time, and it looks like females are often being overlooked. This clearly gives the fact that males influence and dominate females in their lives.

METHOD

Post-structural feminism and subjectivity are part of the theory that analyzes *The Husband Stitch* short story in the research method. The source is the short story entitled *The Husband Stitch* story in *Her Body and Other Parties* book by Carmen Maria Machado and published in 2017 by Gray Wolf Press. The data are in the form of phrases, sentences, and dialogues. Close reading, repeating, and analyzing to gain the data needed in the form of sentences or statements in the book.

This study has several analytical steps. First, close reading and repeating *The Husband Stitch* short story. Second, analyzing data to find the topic and problem. They are to reveal the image of female subjectivity that happened to an unnamed protagonist female character and to show the contributing factors of female subjectivity, then the resistance of an unnamed female protagonist. Third, uses post-structural feminism is the theoretical framework and the concept of subjectivity by Chris Weedon to depict female subjectivity. Last is writing the findings on the discussion and also the conclusion.

FINDING

The Result of the Need Analysis

There are 3 results of this research, firstly is the depiction of female subjectivity. The example of female subjectivity is found in *The Husband Stitch* short story by the writer are 6 examples. Secondly, the contributing factors of female subjectivity. There are 2 examples of the contributing factors of female subejctivity. Lastly, the resistance as the result of female subjectivity. The example of resistance as the result of female subjectivity are 4 examples.

The Result of Advisor Validation 1

The research of *Female Subjectivity in Carmen Maria Machado's The Husband Stitch* was given to the writer advisor on 21st August 2022 and returned to the writer on 30th October 2022. The validation result of the research has range from score 1 as poor and 10 as very good. The result of *Female Subjectivity in Carmen Maria Machado's The Husband Stitch* is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Validation Result from Advisor 1

| No | Criteria | Score |
|----|----------|-------|
|----|----------|-------|

| | | |
|---|---|----|
| 1 | The data of the research | 9 |
| 2 | The theory that related to the topic research | 10 |
| 3 | The problem which found by the writer | 9 |
| 4 | The method of the research | 8 |
| 5 | Answering the problem which found by the writer | 8 |
| 6 | The conclusion of the research | 9 |

DISCUSSION

A. Depiction of Female Subjectivity.

The first analysis is about female subjectivity. Here the depiction of female subjectivity includes the action and the dialogue done by the unnamed female protagonist.

What's that?" he asks. "Oh, this?" I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. "It's just my ribbon." I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length and bring them to rest on the right bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away. "You shouldn't touch it," I say. "You can't touch it." (Machado, 2017, p. 2)

At first sight, the unnamed male character sees the unnamed female protagonist's ribbon. He is wondering about the ribbon and is curious to touch it. Nevertheless, she reacts to his touch on her ribbon. She suggests him not touch her ribbon. In the relationship, the unnamed female protagonist has defended herself by speaking to her future husband. She explains that her green and glossy length ribbon can not be touched by her future husband. It rounded her neck as her selfhood and personality. It means that she keeps secrets because the relationship is not officially engaged. Then, she does the true action of her relationship.

The relationship rules should be limited someone's actions to others. It makes the relationship in good way. The effect of that will be long lasting relationship for the couple. Here is the depiction of the unnamed protagonist character and her boyfriend.

Tell me about your ribbon, he says. "There's nothing to tell. It's my ribbon." "May I touch it?" "No". "I want to touch it," he says. His fingers twitch a little, and I close my legs and sit up straighter. "No". Something in the lake muscles and writhes out of water, and then lands with splash. He turns at the sound. "A fish," he says. "Sometime," I tell him, I will tell you the stories about this lake and her creatures". He smiles at me, and rubs his jaw. A little of my blood smears across his skin, but he doesn't notice, and I don't say anything. "I would like that very much," he says. "Take me home," I tell him and like a gentleman, he does". (Machado, 2017, p. 3)

It shows that the unnamed female protagonist always follows her faith to not give access to her ribbon to her future husband. She says, "No" to her boyfriend. It clearly indicates that she has strong verbal action against the desire of her boyfriend. Meanwhile, the ribbon represents her personality which is proven by her answer to her boyfriend. It means she has a purpose for her life by defending herself. Furthermore, she is kind of a stubborn person by telling stories about the lake and the creatures to divert their conversation and does an action in which she says, "Take me home" in the end.

The relationship of the couple will be different if they are engaged or official. It indicates that the relationship will be more serious than before because the level is increasing.

The level of the relationship determines the actions and minds of the couple. Here, the unnamed female protagonist is officially engaged to her boyfriend.

He touches the bow delicately, as if he is massaging my sex. "Please, "I say? "Please don't." He does not seem to hear. "Please", I say again, my voice louder, but cracking in the middle. He could have it done then, untied the bow, if he'd chosen to. But he releases me and rolls on his back as if nothing has happened. My wrists ache, and I rub them. "I need a glass of water," I say, I get up and go to the bathroom. I run the tap and then frantically check my ribbon, tears caught in my lashes. The bow is still tight. (Machado, 2017, p. 9)

In the family rules, the husband should know everything about her wife. It means that the wife should not keep a secret in the relationship. Based on that evidence, the wife doesn't want to give information which doing verbal action. After that, she going to the bathroom to check her ribbon when they are doing a sexual activity, so it makes a big question for her husband because they are officially married. It indicates that she is doing strong actions to reject her husband's desire by says, "Please, I say?", "Please don't."

Her husband continuously wants to know about the secret of an unnamed female protagonist. He seems so curious about her wife's ribbon. Then, it is proven by the dialogue between the characters.

He runs his hands through my hair, stroking my head, groaning, and pressing into me. And I don't realize that his hand is sliding down the back of my neck until he is trying to loop his fingers through the ribbon. I gasp and pull away quickly, falling back and frantically checking my bow. He is still sitting there, slick with my split. "Come back here," he says. "No," I say. "You will touch my ribbon." He stabs up and tucks himself into his pants, zipping them up. A wife," he says, "should have no secrets from her husband." "I don't have any secrets," I tell him. "The ribbon." "The ribbon is not a secret; it's just mine." "Were you born with it? Why your throat? Why is it green?" I do not answer "I want to know." "You think you want to know," I say, "but you don't." "Why do you want to hide it from me?" "I'm not hiding it. It just isn't yours." He gets down very close to me, and I pull back from the smell of bourbon. I hear a creak, and we both look up to see our son's feet vanishing up the staircase. (Machado, 2017, p. 15)

From that conversation, it indicates that her husband is pushing an unnamed female protagonist to speak up about her ribbon by doing a physical action by trying to untie the ribbon. Meanwhile, the unnamed female protagonist refuses her husband's action by says, "No", *you will touch my ribbon*". It shows that she keeps her identity from her husband, which means she has strong power to oppose it by negotiating with him. Then, she has a conversation with her husband about the ribbon even though her husband pushes her to reveal it, and suddenly they stop the conversation when they see their son comes to them.

On the other side, their son is curious about the ribbon. He likes his father to know about his mom's secret. It is proven by the dialogue below.

He asks me about the ribbon, point-blank. I tell him that we are different, and sometimes you should not ask questions. I assure him that he will understand when he is grown. I distract him with stories that have no ribbons: angles who desire to be human and ghosts who don't realize they are dead and children who turn to ash. He

stops smelling like a child-milky-sweetness replaced with something sharp and burning like a hair sizzling on the stove. (Machado, 2017. P. 20)

From that, her child wants to know about the ribbon. Meanwhile, her mother refused to tell him about the ribbon telling stories. Then, he understands what her mother means about that by showing his expression like a child-milky-sweetness.

Moreover, her husband seems to be curious about her wife's secret. He always pushes her wife to untie the ribbon. It means that the husband pushes her wife to follow his command in any kind of situation. Then, the husband always wants to know her wife's ribbon, as proven in the dialogue below.

“Do you want to untie the ribbon?” I ask him. “After this many years, is that want 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.” I do not have to touch to know that he grows at the thought. I close my eyes. I remember the boy at the party, the one who kissed me and broke me open by that lakeside, who did with me what I wanted. Who gave me a son and help him grow into a man himself. “Then,” I say, “do what you want.” With trembling fingers, he takes one of the ends. The bow undoes, slowly, the long-bound ends crimped with habit. My husband groans, but I do not think he realizes it. He loops his finger through the final twist and pulls. The ribbon falls away. It flows down and curls on the bed, or son I imagine, because I cannot look down to follow it’s descent. (Machado, 2017, p. 20-21)

From that conversation, the husband pushes her by doing a physical abuse, and then the ribbon is untied, which means that the ribbon is not secret, but it is a part of the unnamed female protagonist, which means her selfhood and personality. The ribbon is just a ribbon but has other meanings that should not be known by the husband. Furthermore, an unnamed female protagonist remembers the memories that were created together and ends up with an unexpected incident. Then, her husband looks so surprised by the accident.

B. Contributing Factors to Female Subjectivity

There must be factors triggering the females to arouse their subjectivity. In the anthology book, it is mainly because of female oppression. According to Wati (2017), stated that there are five types of oppression; exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Then, two types of female oppression can be seen in the book. It is oppression and powerlessness.

In the oppression aspect, the unnamed female protagonist is pushed to untie her ribbon by her husband. It means that she gets verbal and physical abuse. It is proven by the dialogue below.

The bow undoes, slowly, the long-bound ends crimped with habit. My husband groans, but I do not think he realizes it. He loops his finger through the final twist and pulls. The ribbon falls away. It flows down and curls on the bed, or son I imagine, because I cannot look down to follow it’s descent. (Machado, 2017, p. 20-21)

From that, the ribbon is untied because of her husband's physical abuse. It indicates that the ribbon is not secret. Then, her husband does an action due to the accident by looping his finger. Moreover, the ribbon falls away, meaning that she has low power against the

oppression of her husband to keep her selfhood and personality because she can't look down to follow the ribbon descent.

On the other side, powerlessness makes females an object of males. It means females are always under males because males have more power to do anything. It is proven by the dialogue below.

I look to my husband, who kisses my forehead and asks the doctor what's happening. "I'm not satisfied this will be a natural birth," the doctor says. "We may have to deliver the baby surgically." "No, please," I say. "I don't want that, please." "If there's no movement soon, we're going to do it," the doctor says. (Machado, 2017, p. 11)

From that, an unnamed female protagonist is powerless to fight. She accepts the surgical birth to save herself and her son. It means a female is an object of a male, and she gets physical abuse from the doctor through surgical treatment. The physical abuse makes her body a little bit changed to save herself and her baby.

C. Resistance as the Result of Female Subjectivity

Resistance happens when the person wants to reject something or someone that she or he is being oppressed or influenced by a person or condition. In the anthology book, resistance occurs as the result of family rules and female oppression by doing verbal and physical refusal. An unnamed female protagonist should follow her husband's desire. Due to great pressure, she will likely find a way to liberate herself from it. The character chooses the path called verbal and physical resistance.

There are two rules: he cannot finish inside of me, and he cannot touch my green ribbon. (Machado, 2017, p. 4)

From the statement, the unnamed female protagonist is doing verbal resistance. She says to her boyfriend do not break the rules. It means her psychical and mental are disturbed if the rules break.

The other resistance is below. The resistance is caused by outside interference. Then, the unnamed female protagonist does something for herself. It means she defends herself from unexpected interference.

Do I carry a boy inside of me, the image of his father? Or a girl, a daughter who would soften the sons that followed? I have no siblings, but I know that the eldest girls sweeten their brothers and are protected by them from the dangers of the world—an arrangement that buoys my heart. "My body changes in ways I do not expect—my breasts are large and hot, my stomach lined with pale marks, the inverse of tiger's. I feel monstrous, but my husband seems renewed with desire, as if my novel shape has refreshed our list of perversities. And my body responds: in the line at the supermarket, receiving communion in church, I am marked by a new and provocation. (Machado, 2017, p. 10).

From that, the body of an unnamed female protagonist is influenced by her baby. She is mourning about the gender of her baby. Then, she feels the other entity in herself, which means she does not expect it, but her husband takes action. Moreover, the unnamed female protagonist's body gives some responses due to her pregnancy by verbal refusal.

The unnamed female protagonist is doing something to defend herself. It means she is doing a resistance from another interference. The interference is her husband, son, and environmental condition.

“I’m not satisfied this will be a natural birth,” the doctor says, “We may have to deliver the baby surgically.” “No, please,” I say. “I don’t want that, please.” (Machado, 2017, p. 11).

From that conversation, the unnamed female protagonist is forced by the condition to do the surgical birth, which means the extra stitch will be entered into her body. Then, the effect of that is the change of psychically part of her body. It indicates the unnamed female protagonist doing verbal resistance.

The disagreement of the unnamed female protagonist is a kind of defending herself from the oppression by her husband or condition. It means that the unnamed female protagonist has the power to keep the resistance. Resistance is a good way to make females equal to males.

We try to have another child, but I suspect that Little One did so much ruinous damage inside of me that my body couldn't house another. "You were a poor tenant, Little One, "I say to him, rubbing shampoo into his fine brown hair, and I shall revoke your deposit. "He splashes around in the sink, cackling with happiness. (Machado, 2017, p. 18).

From that, the unnamed female protagonist doesn't want to have more children because, in her opinion is not beneficial for her physically. It means she keeps her body not changed with other entities. Furthermore, she does physical resistance to keep her body from damage and does the action by rubbing shampoo on her son.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, the first conclusion is the depiction of female subjectivity. In short story entitled *The Husband Stitch in Her Body and Other Parties* anthology book, female subjectivity is depicted as a series of female actions regarding her husband and situations. See depicts female subjectivity by describing how the unnamed female protagonist is allowed to think, speak, and act for herself. In the centre of limited freedom, the unnamed female protagonist needs to obtain a sense of selfhood and personality. The last examines the contributing factors to female subjectivity. In the anthology book, female subjectivity is triggered by female oppression and repression.

Female oppression is a real issue in the story where the patriarchal system is present in the family rules. As a result of oppression, the unnamed female protagonist rebellion through resistance action by verbal and physical refusal. The resistance is depicted as female resistance action and telling stories about her life and giving her voice. Based on the research, it is suggested to another writer to a reminder that how female subjectivity is given impacts psychological and physical aspects.

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