

Real Women Are Too Real: Female Character Constructions in Carmen Maria Machado's "Real Women Have Bodies"

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Abstract

Horror contains all the necessary ingredients for an enticing read: its startling, oftentimes unprecedented elements and imagery manage to produce suspense within a fixed framework that ensures separation between a fictional tormented protagonist and real-life readers. Carmen Maria Machado focuses on yet another strength of the genre, namely its power to give voice to the unspeakable. She reclaims the monstrous female and redefines her as the potent 'Other.' Through the lens of Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, this paper illustrates how body horror in Machado's short story "Real Women Have Bodies" can be elevated to a functional literary instrument that exposes a readership's biases towards female realities. Machado's female characters defy categorization in terms of heteropatriarchal laws and willingly choose existence in a liminal space where ambiguity reigns. By executing their roles as abjects, Machado's female cast perpetually challenges readers to perceive and re-evaluate their seemingly one-dimensional characters in all their contradictory facets. Ultimately, abject female characters act as signposts, pointing at underlying gaps and fractures in male-oriented societies.

Keywords

Abjection – Body Horror – Female Subjectivity – Feminism – Julia Kristeva

Introduction

Horror fiction allows for a curious introspection into the duality of human nature: while every subgenre of horror aims at inciting 'negative' emotions such as shock, fear, or disgust, it continues to have an odd magnetic appeal for its readership (cf. Rapoport 619). Horror excites curiosity and desire, takes the readers' attention hostage and forces them to endure the same torment that the literary characters experience by proxy. When a fictional human body is massacred in graphic detail, one cannot help but show an emotional response. Thus, it is hardly surprising that women, whose bodies have historically been used as political canvasses for male projection, would continue to play a central role in the body horror subgenre (cf. 632). To dismiss the "monstrous female" or the feminine as incessantly fragile, submissive or passive, however, would be a gross fallacy (622). It is certainly true that the archetype of male-subject-oppressor and female-object-victim is more likely to meet public expectations (cf. Stopenski 2). Body horror, on the other hand, deliberately constructs women as the 'Other' (cf. Rapoport 622). Superficially, women are defined as the 'lesser'



pendant to male characters. Only at second glance it becomes evident that the Other carries a menacing radiance precisely because of its deviant, unpredictable essence. The Other defies categorization into generic schemata. According to Melanie Rapoport, body horror fiction acts on the premise of “supernaturalizing women’s bodies in order to naturalize them” (619). The argument goes that the supernatural elements help to achieve “such visceral discomfort” that previous stigmas and taboos will eventually lose their power (622). The reality of menstruation suddenly appears ‘ordinary’ in comparison to carnage and aliens bursting from corpses or human beings, for that matter, are tenfold more terrifying than parturition.

Nevertheless, all theories include grey areas. Stopenski rightly points out that body horror “creates a dichotomous space of both feminism and anti-feminism, agency and oppression” (1). Carmen Maria Machado, too, is very much aware of this antagonistic quality. In her short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*, she explores women’s lives, bodies, identities, and possibilities in alternate universes that are dangerously akin to the ‘real’ world. As the title already suggests, Machado deliberately experiments with ambiguity to represent female subjectivity. Female sexual identity can coincidentally be both “a source of joy” or a transactional commodity in her world (Więckowska 83). Her fifth short story “Real Women Have Bodies” has received relatively little attention within academic literary discourse although it poignantly illustrates how to exploit the horror genre to depict issues concerning universalistic aspirations of modern feminism as well as the ongoing subtle exercise of power by heteronormative and patriarchal systems. “Real Women Have Bodies” narrates the life of an unnamed protagonist in her mid-twenties who struggles to find her place in the world amidst a mysterious epidemic that causes women to dematerialize into nothingness. Stuck in a dead-end job, she dares to explore her sexual identity with her co-worker Petra, who eventually falls victim to the fading. Reading between the lines, one is struck by the evident male ridicule of the disappearing women and even more so by the apparent female disinterest in losing their colleagues, relatives, and friends. “[S]ee-through and glowing faintly, like afterthoughts,” the ghostly women are far from being dead; however, their transcendental state impedes viable communication (Machado 134).

I argue that Machado reclaims and subverts archaic tropes from the body horror genre in favor of directing the readers’ attention to female realities and womanhood. By implementing Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection at various levels in her short story, taboos about women’s body politics, sexualities, and identities are questioned and partially abnegated. Paradoxically, female characters losing their voices, physically as well as metaphorically, here give rise to spaces for open discussion about previously silenced, censored, or excluded topics about women. Methodologically, I will combine insights from the body horror genre as well as Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical concept of abjection to explain their categories, potentials, and limits for (anti)feminist writing. The main part will be split into two analytical strands: firstly, a thorough examination of mother-daughter relationships, followed by an analysis of different corporeal states that the female characters undergo. Ultimately, I aim to delineate how Machado’s successful use of defamiliarization techniques leads to the construction of complex, subjective female identities.

Body Horror Politics and Julia Kristeva’s Concept of ‘Abjection’

The subgenre of body horror is considered to be “one of the loosest and most ill-defined terms in gothic and literary horror studies” (Rapoport 620). Generally, as the name already suggests, any literary text that features explicit portrayals of abnormal, distorted, attacked, or heavily violated bodily states falls under the category of body horror (cf. Cruz 161). *The Mammoth Book of Body Horror*

proposes a taxonomy according to which “transformation, mutation and contagion” of the human body produces fear within the reader (Rapoport 620). Across all theories, corporal transformations go hand in hand with changes in bodily functions (cf. Cruz 161). Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz is adamant that the gradual obliteration of the human body triggers terror; the final outcome, death, appears less uncanny than the actual process of destruction or decomposition (cf. 161). During this dematerialization process, the body is often “distanced and defamiliarized into an inhuman condition” (Edwards and Graulund 58). Conversely, inhumanity creates discomfort for it confounds existent knowledge repositories and thought patterns (cf. Stopenski 2). The monstrous body repels accurate classification, which, in turn, disturbs the individual who constantly seeks to categorize their world. Apart from “alterations, corruptions, erosions or de/evolutions from within,” David Cronenberg introduces yet another facet of body horror (Edwards and Graulund 56). While body transformations of individuals occur on a micro-level, abstract macrosystems such as “commoditization, technoscience or hegemony” can indirectly influence corporeality, too (57). Female body horror in particular plays on Cronenberg’s latter notion of horror. Instead of generating fear through an unexpected, monstrous novum, it reveals deep-rooted anxieties through showing the mundane in a slightly alienating light (cf. Crane 3). Female discrimination, devaluation, and erasure, for instance, are well-known concerns. In the main part of this article, an analysis of Machado’s short story “Real Women Have Bodies” will demonstrate how the amplified representation of those same issues works as the main source of fear. After all, there is a divide between scholars to which extent female body horror can work to empower women. Stopenski purports that body horror promotes “Otheredness,” which leaves the female body “objectified and spectacularized,” only further reinforcing and endorsing biases towards deviant women (3). In contrast to Stopenski’s definition that renders female bodies and characters as passive victims, Cruz is convinced that “females tend to represent the destructive sexual other, whereas males stand by watching” (165). While ‘Otheredness’ consigns a woman’s monstrous body to a state of silent suffering and condemnation, then, ‘Otherness’ becomes a productive means of protest, as it is willfully chosen rather than being enforced by others. For the purpose of this article, I will consciously oscillate between both perspectives because I believe that they are not necessarily contradictory, but complementary.

Julia Kristeva’s essay *Powers of Horror* provides a helpful post-structuralist concept to deconstruct the mechanisms behind body horror. Her theory derives from the psychoanalytical notion of the separation between a child and the pre-Oedipal mother (cf. Ross 149). Thus, horror and aversion constitute a ‘necessary’ reaction to escape the mother’s firm grasp on one’s identity (cf. Ross 149). Only then will the child leave behind its state of a desired object and eventually become a subject, enabled to integrate itself into the ‘symbolic order’ – represented by the father – while the mother remains an abject figure (cf. Creed 68). Likewise, this view can be made feasible for literary studies. Just as the child fears the abject or “the state of being cast off,” an audience will feel similarly about a monstrous ‘Other’ that is destined to linger on the fringes of society as an outcast (Stopenski 2). Horror, Kristeva argues, stems from the abject’s implied ambiguity (cf. 9). While the subject and the object delineate precise borders of identity, the abject is the place “where meaning collapses,” pointing to the system’s limits as well as its potential incompleteness as a whole (Kristeva 2). Furthermore, just as the mother continues to exist alongside her subject-child, the abject poses a continuing threat to the “unity of the subject” (Ross 149). The abject’s mere existence is a perpetual reminder of the fragility of the allegedly stable symbolic order as well as its categories, rules, and laws (cf. Creed 74). Hence, the corpse is a prototypical example of abjection (cf. Kristeva 3). It reveals the materiality of the human body and diffuses life, health, and corporeal barriers with

death, decay, and leaking bodily fluids (cf. Ross 149). Finally, inside and outside become indistinguishable. Both “unapproachable and intimate,” the abject hardly triggers a psychic response because of its lack of cleanliness (Kristeva 6). Rather, it is the abject’s subliminal power to disrupt stability and clarity that unnerves an audience, for it has to face its own impermanence. In “Real Women Have Bodies,” horror elements and abjection run in parallel. Despite their primary aim to unsettle readers, their potential for critical social commentary will become apparent in examining the female characters within the short story.

Queer, Sexually Active Women in “Real Woman Have Bodies”

In the very first sentence, the unnamed narrator in “Real Women Have Bodies” positions herself as an abject figure: “I used to think my place of employment, Glam, looked like the view from inside a casket” (Machado 125). She equates the cooperate world with death but simultaneously constructs herself as an un-dead corpse inhabiting this very casket. Working at a dress shop, the paragon of a female gendered space, quite literally eliminates the possibilities of achieving her dreams and aspirations (cf. Nakhal 17). Being an abject, she has no self-agency nor power to change her situation. Gizzy, her superior who manages the store, enunciates her thoughts on the gloomy workplace atmosphere by adding the sarcastic comment that “[t]he black [of the walls] [...] reminds us that we are mortal and youth is fleeting,” which echoes Kristeva’s idea of abjection (Machado 125). The whole working environment creates a presence of signified death, in which the narrator is forced to uphold a ‘professional’ persona in exchange for ‘actual’ personhood. Moreover, the shop manager’s philosophy discloses sexist social norms ingrained in the business: female customers whose ‘favorite’ leisure activity is shopping for clothes, to indulge in their materialistic and consumption-oriented desires, are, of course, also obsessed with their superficial appearance. Consequently, youth, the main selling point to attract male suitors, becomes a valuable good that must be protected, even against the odds of natural aging. Although the narrator initially appears to follow femininity conventions, the neat heteronormative gender dichotomy is soon disrupted by Petra’s introduction.

Whereas Chris and Casey, two strongly opinionated staff members from the neighboring photo studio, feel confident in doting on and asserting their verbal dominance over female customers at Glam, they “leave Petra alone [because] she always wears a baseball cap over her short brown hair and tightly laced combat boots” (Machado 127). Petra’s style of clothing challenges traditional feminine gender expectations. Her lack of femininity repudiates categorization as an object of desire for the male gaze. From a patriarchal viewpoint, she radiates a monstrous aura because she evades fixed gender roles. However, Machado’s generic painting of a butch lesbian is by no means discriminatory. If anything, it cleverly exploits societal stereotypes about lesbians by raising certain expectations and ultimately flouting them. Etymologically, the name “Petra” derives from the Greek word “petros” which translates to “stone” or “rock” (cf. Campbell 304). Her solid name, coupled with a dominant personality and openly displayed queer identity, leads the readership to believe that she will act as the ‘strong male counterpart’ to the unnamed narrator. In the end, Petra will actually turn out to be the vulnerable party. Her attempts at ‘curing’ her advancing disappearance are coincidentally reminiscent of advice from social media channels that purportedly support ‘healthy’ diets and a positive body image. At some point, Petra becomes obsessive about her incorporeality to the extent of developing an eating disorder due to her extreme diet:

She reads rumors on the Internet about how you can slow fading. One message board talks about a high-iron diet, so she steams enough spinach to feed a large family and chews on it wordlessly [...] Petra has taken to treating every meal as her last, so she peels the skins off the pieces of chicken and chews on them with her eyes closed, and then on the meat itself, and then she sucks hard on every bone before throwing it off into the trees. (Machado 143)

'Eating less' is considered to be 'appropriate' behavior for women to conform to a certain beauty standard in patriarchal terms and Petra's obsession with her dietary and exercise schedule move her closer to 'traditional' gender norms than the readers initially would have expected from her. This plot twist encourages readers to reflect upon their own biased notions as well as socially acquired patterns of thinking about queerness.

In contrast, the unnamed narrator strays increasingly further from heteropatriarchy throughout the narrative. During intercourse with Petra, she quite literally reaches her peak of defiance as she "come[s] fast and hard, like a bottle breaking against a brick wall. Like I've been waiting for permission" (Machado 133). Sex between women breaches multiple taboos apparent in phallogocentric ideology. On the one hand, it evokes the myth of the "vagina dentata," a woman whose unrestrained sexuality renders her as "devouring, enigmatic, dissembling, and castrating for men" (Ross 151). Additionally, homosexual intercourse loses its reproductive function. Pregnancy becomes a virtually impossible event which allows both parties to focus on female satisfaction, instead of being forced to remain in a passive state of endurance and to cater to male needs (cf. Rapoport 626). Hence, men become superfluous for procreation. Castration, then, refers to choice deprivation, not physical annihilation. A lesbian couple excludes men from having sex with either of the two women. If insemination and childbearing can no longer be controlled by a male partner, patriarchy will have to face the serious danger of losing its potential progeny, and, thus, its overall existence. Lastly, sexual difference defies confinement to the pregnant, maternal body that merely serves as an incubator. Even though Petra and the narrator successfully escape from male objectification, they have to isolate themselves from society entirely to pursue their same-sex relationship. The narrator alternates between the motel, the condiment factory, the outdoors, and nightlife venues and thus remains abjected from public life. Apart from queer women, mothers inhabit an equally liminal space in the short story.

Absent, Scheming Mothers

Kristeva's theory of abjection defines mothers as inherently abject. They are opposites to the patriarchal symbolic order and represent a constant threat to the subject. Petra's mother elicits an odd sense of uncomfortableness when first introduced to the narrator: "a large woman in a peach nightgown is using a sewing machine behind the counter. She looks like a melting ice cream, cone – loose. Long hair spills off her head and disappears behind her back" (Machado 131). She wears a domestic, but 'scandalous' piece of clothing in the lobby of the motel which signals self-confidence and overtly displaying her femininity. The color peach, her long hair, and her handiwork create an alluring image of a dutiful, placid housewife. Furthermore, her enactment is evocative of weaving and spinning mythical women, such as Penelope, Philomela, Arachne or the Moirai, who functioned as representatives of "classical feminine virtues such as modesty, chastity, and obedience" in Greek society (Shoichet 23). Stitching, weaving, and spinning all belong to the sphere of textile production. It is no coincidence that the word "texere" means both "to weave" and "to

compose” and frequently occur as collocations with “plot” and “deception” (Ferber 230). Besides, textile itself can operate as a universal language across time and thus immortalize its creator. In this vein, the portrayal of Petra’s mother transpires to be a deceiving one. While she appears ‘harmless’ in pursuing her work apathetically, the narrator learns that she is processing fading women into dresses in a cold-blooded manner. Petra tries to smoothen the circumstances by adding that the women ‘go under the needle’ voluntarily, but she also concedes that “those dresses do so well – they sell more than anything my mother has ever made before. It’s like people want them like that, even if they don’t realize it” (Machado 135). It becomes apparent that the dress-girls’ wish to be incorporated into the needlework reflects a more general desire of society to exercise control over deviant women. Petra’s mother is but an accomplice in this ‘fashionable’ cycle of oppression. Driven by materialistic thinking, she governs the fate of a nebulous amount of women’s lives, sacrificing them for personal gain. In accordance with Kristeva, Petra’s mother poses a serious existential threat as she wields the power to bereave her daughter of her identity, as well. She is shown to be entranced in her work, barely responding to Petra’s attempts at conversation. Along with her stiff, repetitive answers, she grows to resemble an automaton – yet another cog in the massive wheel of patriarchy (cf. Machado 132). Albeit her limiting social environment, Petra’s mother manages to disaffiliate herself from total male domination. Through the act of stitching, she “weaves her own narrative rather than merely being a thread in someone else’s” (Shoichet 32). After all, she remains an ambiguous figure, since her commodified human-dress compositions create a firm space where the fading women can continue to live on, while also being permanently bound to the very system that denies their existence.

Gizzy is yet another conflicting mother figure. She supervises Glam and appears to be a feminist role model at first glance. Owning a successful dress business notwithstanding, her co-worker Natalie dismantles her anxieties and ‘true’ intentions: “Gizzy runs this store because she’s pining after her lost youth” (Machado 125). What could first be taken as enviousness, is later on partly confirmed by the narrator who observes that “her face is strangely youthful and unlined [...]. She paints her mouth matte peach every day, so evenly and cleanly [...]. I think her eyeliner is tattooed on her lids” (125). Although Gizzy is the same age as the narrator’s mother, she manages to withstand ageist beauty norms. But, the obsession with beauty standards and the struggle to accept her own aging body, make Gizzy quite the opposite of an emancipated woman. In fact, it underscores how deeply engrossed Gizzy/she actually is in patriarchal ideology. Between the life stages of youthfulness and old age, her body undergoes multiple different alterations, constantly reminding her of her unavoidable physical degeneration and potential death. She repeatedly attempts to re-establish her status as a subject or at least a desirable object for the male gaze. In a patriarchal culture, a “woman’s value is entirely bound up with her sexual attractiveness,” so if she fails to conform to beauty standards, she will virtually fade from the heterosexual courtship matrix (Robbins 304). Under these circumstances, every other younger woman becomes a benchmark, and, thus, a potential adversary. When the narrator confronts Gizzy about her missing daughter, she “turns her face away and finishes writing” (Machado 138). Admittedly, her avoidant behavior could act as a barrier to mask the sorrow of losing her daughter to an inexplicable illness that could affect her, too. However, considering how Gizzy consciously collaborates with Petra’s mother who exchanges women’s identities for financial profit, it is reasonable to assume that she likewise partakes in the cycle of female exploitation. If Petra’s mother aids commodification, Gizzy ensures a successful transaction. At length, the narrator realizes what type of business Gizzy actually runs: “I’ve seen the way she runs her hands over the dresses, the way her fingers linger on people’s skin. Her daughter is gone like the others, and there isn’t anything she can do about it” (126). Gizzy’s

menacing aura is a result of her ignorance towards “borders, positions, [or] rules” (Kristeva 4). Human skin represents the ultimate boundary that separates the inside from the outside. Her prolonged human touch disregards politeness etiquette and threatens to invade the bodies of her customers. She embodies the abject figure that provokes abjection within others. Similar to Petra’s mother, Gizzy is afraid of leaving the symbolic order behind because it provides her with financial security – even at the cost of her own daughter’s life. The mother figures in “Real Women Have Bodies” vividly demonstrate the complexity of patriarchal systems. If it were just male members of society that oppressed women via unfounded privileges, women could ‘just collectively resist’ this injustice. However, Petra’s mother and Gizzy show how the vicious cycle of victimization and oppression can be upheld through internalized sexism. Women affected by collaborators of the patriarchy, in turn, use a multitude of strategies to regain self-agency.

Self-Mutilating Dress-Women

Gender performance and social norms feature prominently in the short story. At the center of the premise lies the inexplicable disappearance of all kinds of women regardless of their sociodemographic features (cf. Campbell 312). As there is no definitive answer for the cause of fading, it implies that all female individuals are susceptible to the same risk. Simultaneously, all female characters are constantly exposed to the judging eye of society. This becomes apparent when a teenage customer tries on prom dresses at Glam, choosing a slightly more ‘risqué’ model and then suddenly announcing that she does not “want to get a reputation” (Machado 126). Fashion, outer appearance, and beauty standards play a crucial role in the lives of the female characters. They are keenly aware of resulting social sanctions should they decide to disrupt the heteronormative order. Therefore, they abide to modest, feminine clothing choices in order to remain a part of society.

The ghostly dress-women serve as a grotesque exaggeration of this very problem. In the back room of the motel, the unnamed narrator encounters the nearly incorporeal women for the first time. Their excessive preoccupation with their own bodies already suggests dissatisfaction, low self-esteem as well as signs of body dysmorphia. Although the dehumanization project of Petra’s mother includes stitching the girls’ skin into the fabric of the prom dresses, the affected women remain eerily silent throughout the ordeal (cf. Machado 134). Their hybridization with prom dresses falls into the ‘typical’ category of transformation, but what heightens the body horror is the fact that the female body is not at the mercy of attacks, violations and pain by external forces. Instead, the dress-women voluntarily choose to inflict self-mutilation upon themselves. Definitions of body horror use a passive voice to underline the passiveness of metamorphosis. In this case, however, body alteration is an act of free will. Again, special emphasis is put on skin. The conflation of skin and textile, woman and dress, subject and object, gives rise to the abject. By merging the two together, neatly defined borders are transgressed. The skin that was meant to “contain and protect the homely site of identity” detaches from its host. Readers are left bewildered as to whether the consciousness of the women is transferred to the object or rather liberated, inhabiting a sacrosanct space beyond the reaches of human imagination (Edwards and Graulund 59).

Indeed, the dress-women’s actions can be described as ambiguous at best. One could argue that as consumers, they ultimately decide to become consumed goods, and, thus, a literal part of the capitalist machinery. According to Campbell, prom dresses are “the epitome, arguably, of superficiality, hypersexualization and heteronormativity” (306). Consequently, self-mutilation helps to approximate oneself to the impossible societal ideal of ‘true’ femininity. They are physically

unable to disentangle themselves and are irreversibly trapped in the oppressive system that forced them to forfeit their autonomy. Apart from that, one has to keep in mind that “they would just fold themselves into the needlework, like it was what they wanted” (Machado 135). Weaving oneself into clothes could represent an extreme act of martyrdom that aims to incite shock to convey a message effectively. Fearing both reintegration into the patriarchal symbolic order as well as total obliteration found in the physical death of the body, they redefine their roles on their own terms. The dress-women abnegate erasure and willingly immortalize themselves in the very torture garment that played a vital role in their previous lives as female members of a patriarchal society. Forever displaced and displayed, they protect other women by repelling the male gaze. Moreover, they implement a feminine mode of discourse, one that exploits silence, bodily subordination as well as one-dimensionality to re-fashion the surrounding man-made reality. Their oscillation between omnipresence and invisibility, empowerment, and disempowerment, can be easily misunderstood. Campbell contends that “the prom dress [...] unlike the magical fairy-tale dresses, cannot transform a life,” however, it can certainly change the attitude of other women as is exemplified by the unnamed narrator (306).

The Not-Yet-Incorporeal Women

The most striking examples of abject women are perhaps those who wander within the liminal zone of the un-dead. Body horror and Kristeva’s theory of abjection converge in the depiction of translucent female bodies. The first video-documented case of a fading woman coincides with the readers’ initial introduction to the phenomenon when a landlord tries to evict an unresponsive female tenant by breaking into her apartment: “She was naked, and trying to conceal it. You could see her breasts through her arm, the wall through her torso. She was crying” (Machado 128). This recording of a disappearing woman, which eventually goes viral, creates discomfort on two levels. On the one hand, readers witness a man brutally invading the space of a woman in her most vulnerable state. Even then, she unconsciously tries to conform to societal norms of female modesty, by covering up her malfunctioning body. Ironically, her unexplainable condition not only signifies erasure and looming death, but also renders her physically unable to meet societal expectations. By the same token, her transparent body evokes more horror than an actual corpse as it contradicts the natural laws of human existence. Even the narrator comments that acquaintances of fading women were frequently expecting to find their loved one’s deceased, but “what they actually found was worse” (127). A corpse can be assigned to the realm of death, but her in-between state violates the symbolic order. She is, essentially, a human with an inhuman condition that eludes scientific definition and patriarchal, ‘rational’ reasoning (cf. Cruz 166). Neither an object of desire, nor a subject that could act autonomously, the ghostly abject lies beyond the reach of male hegemony. She can no longer experience violent oppression and she can no longer participate in a male-governed world; however, she can continue to haunt her oppressors and remind them that their contrived system rests on a crumbling foundation.

Although the vanishing act evidently provides some sort of liberation, almost the entire cast of characters seeks stability as opposed to fogginess. In one instance, Chris oversteps the narrator’s personal boundaries to press “his thumb into [her] collarbone, quickly,” with utmost urgency, as if to check whether his world already started to implode (Machado 129). Being solid carries a double-meaning because it emphasizes the good, substantial quality of an object and concurrently distinguishes acceptable from deviant women. Bodies, however, that cannot be grasped burst the borders of meaning, produce ambiguity, and delineate the limits of male power.

Thus, the public perceives fading as a threat and harbinger of death, which most other female characters internalize. Petra and the narrator repeatedly discuss what ‘actually’ happens to the women who have faded completely, but ‘dying’ and ‘death’ remain the most commonly used explanations (cf. Machado 140, 142, 144). Accordingly, disappearance is equated to lack of control for all parties involved (cf. Więckowska 86). Petra tries to reclaim her self-agency by plunging “the dart from the target [...] deep onto the back of her hand, just below the knuckles” (Machado 142). What is striking is the fact that Petra’s act of self-mutilation is reminiscent of the dress-women’s dehumanization project. Female defiance, whether aimed at escaping from or staying within the patriarchal system, ultimately links to pain. Moreover, the placement of the dart and the subsequent wounding shows remarkable similarities with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. If one carries this thought through, she, as well as the other fading women, sacrifices herself for the sins committed by the patriarchy, to eventually redeem humanity.

During intercourse, the narrator describes Petra in her most abject state: “Each episode shows a different view of her – a skeleton, ropy muscles, the dark shapes of her organs, nothing” (Machado 143). Her repeated metamorphoses allow for the intrusion of ‘the Real’ into the symbolic order. Not only does she deviate from a heterosexual, binary matrix by being a queer woman, but her physically unstable existence renders her ‘unattractive’ and thus no longer an object of lust. In patriarchal terms, it should be impossible to gain insights into her ‘real’ body. Her translucent bodily layers openly display the materiality and fragility of a human body, hence serving as a memento of mortality. Furthermore, Petra’s visceral body illustrates the basic biological interior of humans that, in contrast to outer appearance, applies to (almost) everyone. Consequently, the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ are abrogated and categorization along the lines of social markers becomes irrelevant. Materiality, bodily functions, and diversity “have the potential to subvert patriarchal gender codes related to corporeality” (Edwards and Graulund 32). Although abjection, according to Kristeva, should initiate a negative reaction, the protagonist refrains from remarking on Petra’s morbid transformations. Instead, she is willing to ignore superficiality, to explore her different states, and to accept her partner’s multilayered, complex identity. The body horror that triggers shock and disgust within readers at first is readily counteracted by the protagonist’s reaction, which makes the visceral body suddenly appear less abnormal. At last, Petra’s changes are mere ‘natural’ representations of the human body.

Abjection loses its negative impact by means of literary mediation. Petra’s body does function as a medium, ergo, an object, to criticize society’s obsession with female bodies, however, it simultaneously normalizes divergent performances of gender and body norms (cf. Ross 154). Therefore, abjects help to demystify idealized social constructs. On top of this, they aid to increase the complexity in regard to debates surrounding female body politics. “Real Women Have Bodies” dares to ask the subtle question of what would happen if women were to lose control of their bodies – and dares to provide the even more outrageous answer: “The flickering body as a pattern and randomness is one that cannot be completely programmed” (Ross 154). Absence, lack, and failure coexist with an ever-changing identity. It is no coincidence that no culprit is held accountable for the women’s fading. ‘Dis-appearance,’ being apart from the judging public eye as well as one’s superficial container, is presented as an opportunity to transcend corporeality. Invisibility, then, whether silently played out in a garment or stridently lived out through infiltrating “electrical systems [...] ATMs and voting machines,” becomes a viable solution to avoid possession by others, to experiment with one’s own life, and to regain self-agency eventually (Machado 144).

Conclusion

Machado's short story "Real Women Have Bodies" harbors a range of female characters that are carefully constructed as abject. Paired with the subgenre of body horror, they continuously transgress portrayals of 'conventionally' feminine women. Abjection acts as a ubiquitous motif to "heighten the natural everyday horrors women face" (Rapoport 223). However, the women's position between the two poles of subject vs. object creates an area of constant conflict that remains unresolved until the end. This tension is necessary to direct the reader's attention to more global issues such as internalized sexism, queerphobia, and women's emancipation from a patriarchal society. Although representing a piece of feminist literature, it critically dissects the growing dissonance within its own movement. Female pluralities cannot be fused into merely one signifier. The fight for equality of the sexes, women's rights, and interests goes astray as soon as individual needs and goals are rejected in favor of universal ideologies. Just as the unnamed narrator believes that she commits a heroic deed by 'freeing' her 'unenlightened sisters,' the dress-women follow their own political agenda. Even though the narrator starts to mimic patriarchal violence, the dress-women endure the forceful disentanglement and stay united in the back room to show their resistance. Despite the mothers' cruel acts and complicity with patriarchy, they simultaneously secure other women's continued existence. Feminism, in Machado's story, thus has many faces. She thrusts aside 'traditional' schools of feminist thought to elucidate the single fates of individuals. Women are painted as versatile to deliberately obstruct categorization. She challenges her audience to interpenetrate, to judge, and to re-evaluate the female characters time and again to highlight the readers' own fear of ambiguity, blurred bounds, abjection. In the end, Machado never provides any answers. Instead, she scatters an array of questions without question marks and repeatedly destabilizes her readers' sense of security. Interweaving the fates of various women into the fabric of narrative eventually becomes a productive means to illuminate the complexity of women's identities without robbing them of their agency.

Author Biography

Elisabeth Kashulskaya (she/her) is a root(h)less cosmopolitan eager to make a positive impact on future generations. She is currently pursuing a Master's Teacher Training Course for Grammar Schools (English & German) in hopes of passing on her passion for languages, social justice, and people of all stripes in inclusive and inspiring learning environments. Her research interests are merely limited to all imaginable, not-quite-imaginable as well as unimaginable concepts; it should be noted, however, that this list is by no means exhaustive. During leisure time, she enjoys engaging in battles of wits, innovating her mind, or exploring alternative realities.

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