

Sylvia Cruz-Albrecht

The Economy of Women: Analysis of Capitalistic Misogyny in Carmen Maria Machado's "Real Women Have Bodies"

In her magic realism story "Real Women Have Bodies," Carmen Maria Machado investigates the role of materialism in objectifying and exploiting women, as seen through the eyes of a young woman who works at a dress shop. Amidst a deteriorating economy and repressively misogynist state, she discovers that women are losing their bodies and disappearing from everyday life. The narrator discovers that these faded women are allowing themselves to be stitched into the seams of the dresses sold at the shop. From the outside, the willingness of the women to become commodified seems puzzling, provoking a tension between autonomy and submission. Machado directly contemplates if the faded women are "holding on for dear life or are they trapped," illuminating a central question in the text: do the dresses allow the faded women to express their individuality and defy the forces that led to their disappearance, or do they keep the women confined by reaffirming societal expectations (Machado 137)? Although the dresses enable women to reclaim physical space, Machado's imagery of commercialism suggests that the dresses only further their status as property from the perspective of the male-dominated society. In a society that attributes value to women based on their appearance, the women themselves internalize this measure of self-worth. While the women gravitate towards the dresses in order to remain rooted in society, this behavior ultimately sacrifices their autonomy by inadvertently feeding into the system that has condemned them, reinforcing a cycle of objectification and oppression that can only be broken if women themselves separate their sense of self-worth from their appearance.

Through the perspective of the narrator, Machado articulates the dehumanizing consequences of an economic system which seeks to capitalize on women. In the opening line, the narrator states that her "place of employment," Glam, reminded her of "the view from inside a casket" (125). This blunt comparison to a burial ground immediately evokes the intense despair and confinement the narrator experiences as a laborer. Her intellectual qualifications are disregarded, forcing her to work in an unfulfilling, underpaid job that effectively renders her invisible to the rest of society. The image of the narrator looking to the outside world from "inside" a coffin suggests that she has been reduced to a cog in the machinery of capitalism, merely a factor of production in the fashion industry. Her coworker, Natalie, directs her frustration at the dresses by hanging them "a little roughly, like they're to blame for the minimum wage or useless degrees or student debt" (125). Indeed, Machado suggests that these possessions, and more broadly society's fixation with these possessions, has created a system that exploits women like Natalie for their monetary worth while denying them of the possibility of social mobility. In desperation, she asks if "the girls who come in here realize they're gonna grow up exactly as fucked as we are?" (130). Simply on the basis of her gender, Natalie has been unable to gain a position that

recognizes her credentials in photography. Her outrage conveys the cyclicity of society, in which generations of ambitious young women come to the store believing that they are consumers, only to later realize that society consumes them, exploiting their bodies for menial labor while ignoring their intellectual capabilities.

The origin of this misogynist capitalism can be traced back to the pervasive physical objectification that women are subjected to, conditioning them to believe that their worth stems from their physical self. The opportunistic hierarchy of society, in which some people pursue profit while others are deemed suppliers and victims, manifests itself on the individual level. For instance, in a conversation with his coworker, Chris asserts that “you want.. hips and enough flesh for you to grab onto” (128, 146). His language imposes a power dynamic in which men are in the position to “want” certain characteristics, and women are expected to provide; this power structure of supply and demand normalizes rape culture by casting men as entitled to women. Chris’s use of the word “flesh” degrades a woman to an object of sexual desire that exists purely for his enjoyment. Because of their position of authority, men define the purpose of women. Machado’s narrative demonstrates the toxic consequence of this constant objectification: from a young age, girls learn to monitor themselves through the lens of how they might be perceived by society. As a result, women become incapable of making genuine choices; every decision, from food to clothing, is shaped by the anticipation of others’ opinions. For a moment, a teenage girl allows herself to indulge in her own liking for a dress before quickly repressing these emotions, stating “I don’t want to get a reputation” (126). In this society, Machado argues, women learn to view themselves from the outside, hyper-aware of how others perceive their bodies; thus, their consciousness is split between their lived experience and their self-inflicted male gaze. Their objectification does not only serve to empower the men in the story but permeates the psychology of the women themselves until they become like “stringless marionettes:” never living, but merely acting out the wishes of the men who assess and control them (130). Once their status as objects is internalized, the faded women are confronted with the decision to reclaim their physicality in the form of dresses, despite the great personal cost. Without their bodies, the women drift like “afterthoughts” and “occasionally look down at their bodies,” revealing their struggle to accept their loss of corporeality; they feel empty and useless, stripped of their sole value in society. Machado illustrates the trauma of fading on a personal level when Petra, the narrator’s girlfriend, begins to lose her body, leading her to diet, exercise, and even stab herself with a dart in a desperate attempt to cling onto her identity (142). Through the decisions of her characters, Machado weighs the figurative scales of societal validation and personal agency. Cast aside from society and stripped of their sense of self, many of the women are willing to exchange their last degree of autonomy -- their minds and souls -- for a means to remain part of the fabric of society. Machado describes how one woman “presses herself into [a dress], and there is no resistance” (134). She, and many others, offer themselves up as commodities in the market, choosing the path of least resistance in the well-oiled machine of capitalism. Her decision to become sewn to a dress is a turning point; it is the last decision that a

woman will make, forever reducing her to an empty, manufactured shell of her former self. Thus, many faded women grudgingly sacrifice their self-determination, giving themselves up as property and their fate in the hands of the capitalist machine that condemned them.

Despite the tangible quality that they provide, the dresses deny the women of their intrinsic, emotional, and intellectual qualities, thereby bolstering the ideology that views them as objects. Once in the form of property, the faded women enable others to mindlessly ignore their humanity, referred to purely by their visual and monetary worth -- as in “two hundred” dollars, “wrapped up in plastic,” and “pale, silky seafoam” (126, 130). Beyond the language of buying and selling, the narrator dwells on the physical attributes of the dresses in a way that mirrors the way in which women are evaluated when in human form. As a representation of feminine beauty standards, the dresses are admired for their aesthetic qualities alone, while women who express themselves as dimensional, thoughtful individuals are viewed as animalistic, as a “tiger stalking” (130). Thus, in the form of dresses, the faded women uphold society’s expectation for them to be emotionless and thoughtless beings, reinforcing the standards of objectification that are placed on women.

As they carry out their roles in the fashion industry, other women become complicit in the cycle of objectification by reducing women to property to be bought and sold. Both the supplier and the seller of these dresses overlook the personhood of the dresses because they are conditioned to view them as means for profit. As she weaves women into cloth, the dressmaker appears strikingly apathetic, especially when contrasted with the narrator’s revulsion. Her hands “flit like bees... dizzy, purposeful, punch-drunk” (132). She works in a stupefying reverie, her hands industriously weaving like independent entities detached from reason or emotion. In particular, the term “punch-drunk” implies that the dressmaker is intoxicated by a commercialist mentality, as if lulled into a state of complacency. While some might argue that she is attempting to aid the women by preserving their existence, the fact that these dresses “sell more than anything my mother has ever made before” seems to overwhelm her moral instincts, suggesting that the demand for material goods and profit enables apathy towards the plight of those society deems inferior (135). Evidently, the dressmaker facilitates their literal commodification in pursuit of her own material wealth. Similarly, the shop owner Gizzy knows that the faded women, and possibly even her daughter, are in the dresses, but “as long as they sought [Glam] out, it was alright” (135). Gizzy may acknowledge her daughter to be a victim of this capitalist system, but the trickle-down effect of an acquisitive industry leads her to perpetrate the cycle of exploitation in order to gain a livable wage. Therefore, Machado suggests that increased business carries a weight that can overcome moral tendencies; people like Petra’s mom and Gizzy are blinded by consumerism such that in the process of acquiring more material wealth, they sacrifice their own humanity and contribute to the objectification of women.

The feelings of powerlessness and confinement hinted at in the opening sentence of the story are consummated when the faded women re-enter society as dresses. In this fabricated form, their voice and say is erased, rendering them omnipresent yet invisible. Machado utilizes a repetition

of silence throughout her story to signal the loss of autonomy that occurs. For example, as her body fades, Petra “falls into a sullen silence” and chews on spinach “wordlessly” (143). When the needle plunges through a girl’s skin, she “does not cry out” (134). These images of silent acceptance permeate the story, signalling the loss of agency that occurs as the women gradually internalize their status as objects and embrace the necessity of becoming dresses. Silence is what characterizes the status quo, and in this story, what enables the systematic oppression of women to continue through learned deference. In the final scene, when the narrator tries to free the faded women from the dress shop, she urges them to “say something!” but they only stare back, and shortly a “deep voice” asserts control (147-148). When woven into cloth, the women are incapable of expressing themselves, and prove to be utterly vulnerable before the male authorities. They are trapped in society’s definition of an ideal woman, reaffirming the expectation for them to be seen and not heard. Thus, the loss of autonomy that occurs extends far beyond the individual level; the women not only lose their own ability to make decisions, but also further the cycle of objectification by complying with the patriarchy’s expectations for them. An opposing interpretation might posit that the dresses offer freedom to the faded women, enabling them to infiltrate the society that has condemned them. By escaping the strict, homogenous standards of society in the form of dresses, the women take on a stronger sense of uniqueness and individuality, as evidenced by detailed, even personified, descriptions of the dresses (126). However, while this argument may very well align with the intent of some of the faded women, it fails to account for the context in which their actions take place: a misogynistic, materialism-centric world. Although the narrator senses their presence within the “folds of the satin,” the rest of society can continue to ignore the personhood of women, viewing them instead as objects that exist for the others’ pleasure (137). Additionally, it is true that the women exercise a degree of agency in their choice to be sewn to the dresses, but this decision does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, this decision is bred by a multitude of social factors that alter the psyche of women, conditioning them to believe that their worth is inextricably tied to their physical body. Thus, the worldview of society twists the agency of women into a self-deprecating force. That is to say, once the faded women decide to re-enter society in dresses, they reinforce this cruel ideology by inviting others to view them as objects. Propelled by society’s capitalist underpinnings, the oppressive cycle will continue as long as women accept their role in society to be an object. In the end, perhaps it is Petra who senses this circular nature of society and realizes that it is through upsetting the system and forcing men to deal with women -- “getting into electrical systems... and ATMs and voting machines. Protesting... I like that” -- rather than efforts to restore normality, that change might occur (144).

In Machado’s story, the autonomy of women is hijacked by the commercialist workings of society, which successfully condition women to perceive themselves as bodies rather than as people, leading to a self-sustaining cycle of objectification. Once they bow to societal pressures to become dresses, the faded women become helpless contributors to the ruthless cycle of supply and demand that continually exploits and objectifies them for their bodies. Through this

ingenious interplay between autonomy and compliance, the short story “Real Women Have Bodies” suggests that decisions made on the individual level can be manipulated by society at large, while hinting that the power to break this vicious cycle might rest within singular, defiant individuals.

Works Cited

Machado, Carmen Maria. “Real Women Have Bodies.” *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories*. Graywolf Press, 2017, pp. 125-148.