

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**A Postmodern Reading: Metafiction, Intertextuality, and
Hyperreality in the Nonlinear World of *The Husband Stitch***



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Abstract

The study is based on the short story *The Husband Stitch* by Carmen Maria Machado, analyzing it through the lens of postmodernism. The study will focus on postmodern elements in the short story, like metafiction, nonlinear and fragmented structure, Intertextuality, hyperreality, and magical realism. The study is critical because it highlights how *The Husband Stitch* by Carmen Maria Machado employs innovative postmodern storytelling to give voice to female experiences that are often marginalized or silenced in traditional narratives. By analyzing the story's use of metafiction, intertextuality, and nonlinear narrative, the study reveals how literature can challenge and reshape cultural ideas about gender and power. Understanding these techniques helps readers and scholars recognize the complex ways stories influence social attitudes and can promote feminist perspectives. For the theoretical framework, the study uses Linda Hutcheon's book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. The study involves a close encounter with the text, employing the textual method proposed by Alan McKee.

Keywords: , gender and identity, metafiction,,narrative fragmentation, nonlinear narrative, postmodernism, intertextuality

Introduction

Carmen Maria Machado wrote *The Husband Stitch* published in 2017, in her collection of short stories, *Her Body and Other Parties*. The collection has won many awards, including the Bard Fiction Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the John Leonard Prize, and the Shirley Jackson Award. The story revolves around a girl's journey to becoming a mother. The short story explores themes of love, childbirth and gender roles in society, female autonomy and bodily boundaries and patriarchal control and possession. The story is told through the voice of a nameless female narrator. She wears a mysterious green ribbon and tells her husband not to touch it.

The short story features postmodern elements, including metafiction, intertextuality, nonlinear narrative, and hyperreality. Machado employs techniques to tell the story and engage readers at various levels through the short story. She uses metafiction to inform the readers about the constructed nature of the narrative. She

also employs intertextuality to enrich the reading experience, as it helps readers reflect on how these references are used in short passages and how, over time, they are represented. Similarly, by employing nonlinear narrative and hyperreality, she diverges from the traditional storytelling approach.

Cate Burtner shared his views on the short story *The Husband Stitch*. According to her, the story is about young people “trying to make their way in the world” (Burtner, 2024). She calls the story a tragedy, and it is about “figuring out who exactly one can trust” (Burtner, 2024) in a world which is very “cruel to them for reasons outside their control” (Burtner, 2024). Burtner admires the author for blending genres such as horror and surrealism in the short story. According to her, readers will become fans of Machado after reading the short story. Diario also examines the story from a realist perspective, believing that it “challenges and utilizes the tradition of realism” (Diario, 2023). Machado does that by describing how women do not have control over their bodies.

Postmodernism is a movement that emerged in the 1960s in response to modernism. It rejects any grand narrative, such as Marxism, the Enlightenment, religion, and nationalism. Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as the death of metanarratives. Lyotard's concept of the "death of metanarratives" (Sutton, 2023) implies that we no longer believe in a single, overarching narrative that explains everything. Postmodernity, “Lyotard argues, prefers ‘little narratives’” (Nicol, 2009). This narrative does not offer an “overarching ‘Truth’ but offers a qualified, limited ‘truth’” (Nicol, 2009). In modernism, knowledge was universal, Lyotard agrees, universally applicable; now in postmodernity, it is localized and partial. According to Lyotard, Metanarratives are a way to “suppress and control” (Nicol, 2009) people by imposing a “false sense of ‘totality’ and ‘universality’ on a set of disparate things, actions, and events” (Nicol, 2009). The scientific metanarrative refers to discoveries often presented as grand, heroic stories. This storytelling helps science keep its strong position in society and politics.

Jean Baudrillard wrote *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), which explores how postmodern worlds lack a clear distinction between what is real and what is not. Baudrillard believes that culture has changed and turned into a “Matrix-style scenario where there is no originality left and what seems real is just a simulation” (Shmoop

Editorial Team, 2008). According to him what seems real is just a simulation” (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). The images around us become so real that “we have lost touch with reality” (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). This state is what he calls hyperreality. Baudrillard ideas are links with the idea of postmodernist lack of originality. In the postmodern world “there is nothing original left so say and no story that has not been told” (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

The study aims to analyze *The Husband Stitch*, by Carmen Maria Machado, through the lens of postmodernism, focusing on the nonlinear narrative, hyperreality metafiction, and intertextuality. The study is limited to only one short story by Carmen Maria Machado, *The Husband Stitch*, published in her short story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*. It is limited to only five elements of postmodernism: the nonlinear narrative, hyperrealism, magical realism, metafiction, and intertextuality.

Research Objectives and Questions

The objective of the studies is to examine the role of fragmented nonlinear narrative structure in *The Husband Stitch*, to explore how the blending of hyperrealism and magical realism in *The Husband Stitch* challenges the boundaries between the real and the imaginary and to analyze how metafiction and intertextuality in *The Husband Stitch* critique traditional storytelling. The research question for this study is: How is the nonlinear narrative employed in the short story *The Husband Stitch*? How does the blending of hyperrealism and magical realism in the story blur the lines between what is real and what is imagined? and how does metafiction and intertextuality in *The Husband Stitch* challenge traditional storytelling?

Literature Review

This section will examine the existing literature on the short story *The Husband Stitch* and the available literature on the theory of postmodernism. In the first part, the researcher will review literature related to the short story, and the second part will deal with literature related to postmodernism.

The Husband Stitch employs storytelling and urban legends not as mere entertainment, but as powerful tools of feminist resistance and knowledge-sharing among women (Hood, 2020). The study argues that Machado reclaims these traditionally dismissed forms to highlight the lived experiences of women, especially the oppression they face within institutions like marriage and motherhood. By

subverting familiar legends and integrating them into her narrative, Machado exposes how a society that values only scientific, rational knowledge often disregards women's truths. The article aligns her work with Latina and Chicana feminist writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros, showing how legends once used to enforce submission are reimagined as cautionary tales that warn against patriarchy. Ultimately, the article emphasizes that women's stories, gossip, and folklore carry epistemological value and should be taken seriously as forms of survival, resistance, and truth.

Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction*, writes that the key characteristic of postmodern fiction is a shift in the “dominant” (McHale, 2003) from epistemological concerns in modernist fiction (i.e., questions about knowledge and interpretation) to ontological concerns in postmodernism questions about what worlds exist, what is real, and how reality is constructed (McHale, 2003). The postmodernist thinkers question the very nature of knowledge. They also reject the single narratives that define a way of life.

AI and its impact on people of the modern age, using Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, a state in which individuals cannot distinguish between the real world and the virtual world, is a study conducted by Iftikhar et al. This study has been conducted on the film *2047: Virtual Revolution* to explore the connection between technology and the creation of hyperreality, which ultimately leads to a paranoid state in people's lives (Iftikhar et al., 2024). Nash is the protagonist of the film, who is habituated to playing video games known as “verses”. When he meets Camylle (his online friend) in reality, he is unable to recognize her and asks Camylle Have we met before? In response to this, Camylle said that they met in a video game. In addition to this, all the people who are habitual of playing video games in the film are known as “connected,” and they live happily in a virtual life where they have avatars of their choice, own homes, and buy things. They refuse to live in reality. The virtual world seems more real to them. In this way, both scenes reflect the fact that people have lost the ability to distinguish between reality and virtuality due to the pervasive presence of highly advanced technology in the postmodern world. This is known as a hyperreal situation, as stated by Baudrillard. Furthermore, the government supports corporations that design video games (in the context of the film, it is Syntenic) because keeping the population busy playing video games will eventually divert their attention from

speaking out against the government's decisions. The average lifespan of a person who plays video games is almost 40 years, which will save the government from providing them with retirement funds, healthcare services, and other benefits for so long. In this way, modern-day governments are playing a crucial role in increasing the intensity of the paranoid situation of society by funding the corporations that misuse technology to keep people under constant surveillance.

Fragmentation is the way of writing in postmodern literature. Shahid & Khurram (2021) analyzed the short stories of Don Delillo using the postmodern concepts of fragmentation. The researchers examine the characters in *The Itch* and explain their condition as a state of deathlessness. It feels like the character has no depth. The story's structure is not linear, either, making this short story a postmodern piece of short fiction. The second short story is *Coming. Sun. Mon. Tues.* On the surface, the short story appears to have no fragments, but Delillo employs sudden shifts and breaks in the narrative, departing from the traditional linear storytelling approach.

A study by Muhammad Ibrahim Khokhar, *The Other Death* by Jorge Luis Borges, examines the postmodern elements in the short story. The story deals with magical realism by presenting a character “as a ghost” (Khokhar, 2024). He returns to his land as a ghost, which is impossible in real life, and this situation is explained through the lens of magical realism. The study also looks at the metafiction elements in the story *The Other Death*, and the narrator admits “he is not certain that he had always written the truth” (Khokhar, 2024). The story also employs intertextuality by referencing texts such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and many others. In this way, the study examines postmodern elements in the short story *The Other Death* by Jorge Luis Borges.

Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph's digital novel *Inanimate Alice* is analyzed by Shoaib et al., (2024) through the lens of postmodern theory, focusing on how digital literature challenges traditional storytelling. Drawing on Alan Mackee's textual analysis, the study highlights the novel's disruption of linear narrative, the breakdown of affixed narrative, and the blending of fiction and reality. Key postmodern theorists, including Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard, provide the theoretical foundation. Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality and simulacra help explore the

digital environment Alice is part of in the digital novel. At the same time, Lyotard's idea of narrative fragmentation goes with the novel's non-linear structure. This review positions *Inanimate Alice* as a digital text which shifts from textual to digital storytelling, reflecting the fragmented, media-driven reality of the postmodern world.

Theoretical Framework

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (Hutcheon, 1988) provides a critical foundation for looking at postmodern fiction. One of the key features she discusses is the nonlinear and fragmented narrative structure of storytelling, a common feature in postmodern texts. In contrast to traditional narratives that depend on sequential progression and closure, postmodern fiction often resists narrative order and coherence. Hutcheon is of the view that "the refusal to integrate fragments (in novels like *The White Hotel*) is a refusal of the closure and telos which narrative usually demands" (Hutcheon, 1988). This refusal disrupts traditional expectations and mirrors the complexity and dislocation of current experience, making the reader confront the artificiality of narrative progression.

Postmodern fiction is not merely disjointed for aesthetic effect, but deliberately assembles "mixed, plural, and contradictory" (Hutcheon, 1988) discourses to challenge the idea of a unified truth. Fragmentation is exhibited through changing viewpoints, opposing voices, and disrupted storylines, which hinder readers from settling into a single interpretive position. This technique requires active engagement, encouraging the reader to construct meaning in a way that reflects the complexity of modern life.

Another central concept in Hutcheon's theorization is metafiction, particularly what she terms "historiographic metafiction." She defines this as fiction that is "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lays claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 1988). Metafiction in postmodern literature not only exposes the artificiality of narrative but also interrogates the relationship between fiction and reality. These texts often include direct commentary on their construction, reminding readers that all narratives, fictional or historical, are mediated and constructed. Metafiction thus becomes a tool for ideological critique, dismantling assumptions about objectivity, authorship, and narrative authority.

Finally, Hutcheon describes intertextuality as "the very condition of textuality"

(Hutcheon, 1988). Postmodern fiction is inherently intertextual, drawing on other texts, genres, and cultural references to create meaning. Quoting Barthes and Eco, she asserts that “books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” (Hutcheon, 1988). This strategy undermines the notion of originality, emphasizing instead the recycling and recontextualization of existing discourses. Intertextuality also allows postmodern fiction to parody and revise traditional literary forms, creating a space for irony and critical distance.

Another pivotal trope of postmodernism is the concept of hyperreality. Baudrillard first introduced this notion. He defines hyperreality as a state that merges the boundaries between reality and virtuality. It blends human intelligence with artificial intelligence. For example, a map of any state represents a visual representation of the land. Still, when the land is destroyed for any reason, neither the map nor the physical landscape remains, but only hyperreality. Moreover, hyperreality deprives human beings of emotional attachment towards anything. For example, people are attracted to BMWs or iPhones because they symbolize wealth and a lavish lifestyle. Not everyone emotionally attaches to these items (Mambrol, 2019).

Hyperreality further leads to a loss of meaning because signs do not refer to their referent but to other signs. One of the best examples of loss of meaning in hyperreality is the process of advertising items. Signs and slogans characterize advertisements without a link to the products sold (Hyperreality, n.d.). Metafiction is a key aspect of postmodernism that utilizes hyperreality, as it is written in such a way that it continuously draws the reader's attention to the artificial and constructed nature of the text (metafiction).

Research Method

The study uses a qualitative method to analyze the selected short story. The qualitative method is a research approach used to explain people's experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. It differs from quantitative methods, focusing on numerical data and statistical analysis. The qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences (Bhandari). The qualitative methods are used to explain why and how human behavior. It is also used to justify decision-making, and social interaction occurs. It can be used to analyze a TV show exploring themes, symbols, and

narratives of a film or a novel. It is also used in media studies. It helps to enable how a group of people interprets a message.

The researcher uses Alan McKee's textual analysis method to study the selected short story. Textual analysis, grounded in interpretive methodologies, constitutes a qualitative analytical approach that interrogates the placed ideological and cultural presuppositions inherent within a text. A systematic data collection process, textual analysis helps an in-depth understanding of the cognitive frameworks and identity formations within and across diverse "cultures and subcultures" (McKee, 2003). Alan McKee defines textual analysis as: "A way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world" (McKee, 2003). It means how people worldwide make sense of the things around them, particularly through various cultural texts such as films, books, advertisements, or media. In this way, the study employs Alan McKee's method on the selected text to make meaning out of it and examine how different techniques are used in the story to make it a postmodern text. It helps readers explore how these texts create meaning beyond the surface. Since this study involves a close reading of the text, McKee's method is the most appropriate, whereby the researcher will bring various textual proofs to support the argument. It is also essential because it goes beyond a fixed textual meaning and values the reader's analysis of the text. Therefore, it is a suitable method for studying the short story *The Husband Stitch* by Carmen Maria Machado.

Critical Analysis

Metafiction is a postmodern literary technique that draws the reader's attention to the artificiality of the story. The tale often breaks the illusion of reality in metafiction by reminding readers that what they are going through is a constructed narrative, not real life. In *The Husband Stitch*, Machado draws the reader's attention to the artificiality or constructed narrative of the story by directly addressing the readers. She opens the story by addressing the reader directly. The narrator states, "If you read this story aloud, please use the following voices: me, as a child, high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same. The boy who will grow into a man, and be my spouse: robust with serendipity" (Machado, 2017)."Machado uses this technique throughout the story. In the story, it feels like she is dividing the chapters, and before each chapter, she employs methods of postmodernism. In the story, it feels like she is giving stage

directions like a director. For example, "(If you are reading this story aloud, provide listeners with a paring knife and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index finger and thumb. Afterwards, thank them (Machado, 2017). In this way, she invites the reader to become part of the story. By acknowledging its status as a work of fiction, the short story draws attention to its artificiality.

Machado also employs intertextuality in the short story "*The Husband Stitch*." Intertextuality refers to the idea that literature is interconnected with other texts and cultural contexts. It is an idea that pieces of literature are connected through different ways, such as references, allusions, quotes, and influences. In the short story, the narrator brings up many short stories from other cultures, for example, "There is a story I love about a pioneer husband and wife killed by wolves. Neighbors found their bodies torn open and strewn around their tiny cabin, but they never located their infant daughter, alive or dead. People claimed they saw the girl running with a wolf pack, loping over the terrain as wild and feral as any of her companions...."(Machado, 2017). Another important instance of intertextuality in *The Husband Stitch* is the green ribbon. In a traditional folktale, the ribbon represents a loss of control or innocence. When it is untied, the girl dies. *The Husband Stitch* is a modern retelling of the classic folk tale of the girl who wears a green ribbon around her neck. In this way, she incorporates various folktales into the story, utilizing the postmodern technique of intertextuality.

Machado also uses the technique of nonlinear narrative. A nonlinear narrative does not follow a straight, chronological sequence of events but instead jumps between times, places, or perspectives. The story does not follow a linear timeline. There are breaks in the story when the narrator brings different folktales within the story. For example, "When I select my wedding gown, I am reminded of the story of the young woman who wished to dance with her lover, but could not afford a dress. She purchased a lovely white frock from a secondhand shop and then later fell ill and passed from this earth. A doctor who examined her in her final days discovered that she had died from exposure to embalming fluid...."(Machado, 2017). The recurring reference to the green ribbon (the woman's secret) plays a pivotal role in this nonlinear storytelling. The story does not just tell the event of the husband untying the ribbon in one go. Instead, it is revisited repeatedly throughout the story, offering more

information each time, yet always keeping part of the hidden truth. In this way, there is a sudden shift in the story that makes it a nonlinear narrative. This nonlinearity adds to the story's overall meaning and emotional impact.

In postmodern theory, simulacra are representations or symbols that no longer reflect reality. Instead, they take on their own life and are treated as more real than the reality they were supposed to represent. This leads to what Baudrillard calls hyperreality—a condition where symbols, images, or representations replace or become more important than reality itself. In simple terms, the copy becomes more powerful or believable than the original. Reality and representation are blurred. Sometimes, the symbol becomes more real than the real thing.

In *The Husband Stitch*, the green ribbon is not just a piece of cloth; it becomes a potent symbol of the woman's identity, privacy, and boundaries. From the start, she tells her husband, "It's just my ribbon" and "You shouldn't touch it," I say. "You can't touch it" (Machado, 2017). This indicates that the ribbon represents something personal. But instead of respecting her wishes and freedom, the husband becomes obsessed. He believes that if he can untie the ribbon, he will fully understand and own her. He will be able to control her. The woman gives him everything as she says, "I've given you everything you have ever asked for," I say. "Am I not allowed this one thing?" (Machado, 2017). The husband keeps asking and telling her that "I want to know" (Machado, 2017). He even tells her that a wife should not hide anything from her husband. In the end, when the husband unties the ribbon, "As my lopped head tips backwards off my neck and rolls off the bed," (Machado, 2017). The narrator's head falls off, and the story takes a dark turn. The ribbon was not just symbolic; it meant much more than that, as it was holding her together and her whole existence. As soon as the husband removes it, her head falls to the ground, and she tells the readers. "I feel as lonely as I have ever been" (Machado, 2017). Although his husband has taken everything from his wife, it is still not enough as he tries to remove the ribbon throughout the story. Ultimately, she allowed him to remove it, and when it is taken away, so is her life. In this way, symbols replace reality in the short story. The reader becomes much more interested in the ribbon than the real characters in the story. In this way, Machado employs the postmodern concept of hyperreality in the short story *The Husband Stitch*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Husband Stitch* by Carmen Maria Machado effectively uses postmodern elements to challenge traditional narratives about gender, power, and storytelling. The story employs metafiction by breaking the fourth wall, with the narrator directly addressing the reader and using theatrical stage directions, drawing attention to the act of storytelling itself. Its nonlinear and fragmented structure blends personal memories, folklore, and myth, reflecting the layered and often disjointed nature of female experience. Intertextuality is woven throughout the narrative, particularly in its reimagining of the urban legend “The Girl with the Green Ribbon,” which gains new feminist meaning within the protagonist’s life. Additionally, the story engages with hyperreality by merging the surreal with the everyday, creating a world where myth feels emotionally accurate and disturbingly plausible. The subtle use of magical realism, where fantastic elements are accepted as usual, further blurs the boundary between reality and imagination. These postmodern techniques work together to not only tell a haunting story but also to critique the cultural scripts that silence and control women.

Significance

The study is significant because it provides a new perspective on the postmodern text. The study helps the readers understand how different postmodernism techniques are used in the selected short story. If a reader cannot understand intertextuality, they cannot fully comprehend the text's meaning. Similarly, understanding metafiction and its application in the short story is crucial and fundamental to engaging with the postmodern text. Similarly, understanding hyperreality is vital to comprehending postmodern texts. This study will provide evidence on how these postmodern techniques are used in the short story.

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Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

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