

Deconstructing the Other: Female Subjectivity and Desire in Maud Ventura's *My Husband*

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ABSTRACT

My Husband (2023) by Maud Ventura delves into the life of a protagonist who is both obsessed and devoted, with her identity being entirely enveloped by her marriage. Describing herself as “lucky” to have a husband who gave her three children and a domestic life, her autonomy is restricted to her role as his “wife”. The novel’s potential to be analysed as a feminist critique of subjectivity and desire further demonstrates that marriage as an institution of patriarchy casts women as the other by limiting their autonomy and subjectivity and erasing and silencing their desire. This paper applies Simone De Beauvoir’s “Woman as Other” and Luce Irigaray’s “This Sex Which is Not One” as frameworks to examine how *My Husband* (2023) portrays female subjectivity as relational to men and defined within patriarchal structures, and their desire as erased and defined within those structures.

Keywords: woman as the other; the sex which is not one; desire; subjectivity; female autonomy

Introduction

Maud Ventura’s *My Husband* (2023) is a contemporary novel that critiques the position of women in the institution of marriage, which limits their autonomy and desire, strictly confining them to the patriarchal structures established within a society. The narrator defines herself as a “lucky” woman with a “perfect” husband, and the narrative centres around her obsession and devotion to her marriage with him. Her internalisation of patriarchal norms and her reliance on defining her identity in relation

to him illustrate how she has deprived herself of any sense of subjectivity and autonomy. Ventura's novel, unlike many women-centric narratives, explores the narrator's descent into the pit of patriarchal conventions through her rigorous self-examination and anxiety and obsession surrounding her "perfect marriage", rather than a direct and linear exploration of resistance and defiance of patriarchal norms. The novel dramatises female subjectivity and desire within the institution of marriage, using a confessional diary-like narration to portray the narrator as trapped in her roles as a "wife", rendering her autonomy and identity as relational to him. Her desires are defined within the confines of her "love" for her husband because she has internalised patriarchal norms and has no knowledge of autonomy beyond male-defined love.

The protagonist's obsession and devotion, followed by her self-erasure, enacts Beauvoir's claim of "Woman as the Other", where her subjectivity is defined only in relation to her husband. The novel also explores how the protagonist's suppressed sexuality and silenced desire show Irigaray's critique that female desire is always conceptualised within patriarchal and male-dominated frameworks, which leaves no space for autonomous female desire. The novel demonstrates that marital love, under patriarchal structures, enforces "otherness" and the erasure of female desire.

1. Theoretical Framework

Simone De Beauvoir's central argument in *Woman as the Other* (1949) claims that man is positioned as the universal "Subject" while woman is constructed as "the Other". This othering denies women subjectivity and autonomy, reducing them to secondary beings defined in relation to men. Women are enclosed in domestic, religious, and social structures that limit their independence, and this obedience and silence reinforce their restriction to domesticity, limiting them within the confines of oppressive patriarchal norms. Luce Irigaray, in her text, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1985), challenges the Freudian and Lacanian models of sexuality, which define female desire in terms of lack. She argues that female sexuality is multiple, fluid, and non-hierarchical, exceeding linear or singular containment. Irigaray, borrowing from Cixous, asserts that patriarchal culture and language are organised around the "phallus" as the symbolic centre. This phallocentrism erases women's subjectivity and reduces them to reflections of male desire, rendering female sexuality invisible or distorted. In patriarchal structures, women's sexuality is filtered through male definitions such as "wife" or "mother" or "mistress". This assigned definition produces alienation, fracturing female desire. This paper will examine how Maud Ventura's *My Husband* (2023) reveal the nature of patriarchal structures as they construct the woman as "the Other", where her desire is reduced and distorted to be limited and defined within those structures, showcasing the representation of women's subjectivity and desire in literature as a form of resistance. Using Beauvoir and Irigaray's framework, the paper will explore the protagonist as "the other", the role of patriarchy and norms in limiting her desire, and marriage as an institution that is an active site for the loss of subjectivity of women.

THE PROTAGONIST AS THE OTHER:

Beauvoir claims that the woman is “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he in reference to her”, maintaining that the woman is incidental and the inessential. She further asserts, “He is the subject, he is the Absolute; She is the Other.” (Beauvoir, 22). The protagonist begins by narrating that her husband has already given her everything, and she is the mother of his two children, adding she could not hope for anything more or anything better (Ventura, 6). She also claims that she could imagine the death of her children but not her husband (Ventura, 96). Beauvoir argues that man in any patriarchal society is positioned as the universal “Subject” while woman is constructed as the “Other”. This othering denies women subjectivity and autonomy, reducing them to secondary beings defined in relation to men. The protagonist’s relational identity, which is solely based on her husband’s subjecthood, showcases that she has no autonomy outside the role of his wife or the mother of his children. Her identity is completely defined by her “otherness” and related to him. She has internalised her role as his wife, the role of the “Other”, so strongly that a life out of this relational identity is unimaginable for her.

Beauvoir states that otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus, she asserts that there is no group that ever “sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other against itself” (Beauvoir, 22). The protagonist states that her husband is “not influenced by her comings and goings,” and “her gravitational force is never efficiently powerful to make him deviate from his course” (Ventura, 150). Her husband’s alienation of her identity is reflective of how “man as a subject” reciprocates an inferior recognition for the woman, making her “the other”. Denial of reciprocal recognition for women and insistence on man’s own subjecthood relegate the woman to “otherness”. The protagonist confesses that when her husband is absent, the house resounds less, comes out muted, and domestic life loses variation and intensity. She also mentions how her children, while “smiling, seem active and busy,” but in reality, they are just “killing time.” She expresses how they are all “waiting for a man.” (Ventura, 14). The protagonist has wilfully internalised “otherness” while her husband enjoys being the “subject”. Her internalisation and acceptance of her relational and secondary identity technically prevents her husband from giving her the same recognition. This internalisation of otherness that is facilitated and enforced through patriarchal norms puts “man as the subject” at an advantage.

Beauvoir claims that man can think of himself without woman, and humanity is male where man defines woman not in herself but relative to him. “She is not regarded as an autonomous being” (Beauvoir, 23). The protagonist ponders that her husband always says “I” despite her making active suggestions and contributing to their finances. She complains, “Why doesn’t he say I was part of the story, too?” In patriarchal structures that uphold the “otherness” of women, women experience alienation when their voices or desires are erased or subordinated, which reinforces their restriction to their roles as only being defined by their relational identity with men. The protagonist, who can at times differentiate her identity from that of her husband, experiences this alienation, further reinforcing her internalisation and confinement to her role as his wife and her secondary identity.

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (Beauvoir, 28). Beauvoir rejects essentialist views of femininity and asserts that the body does not dictate destiny but is a “situation” shaped by culture

and history. She claims that gender is not innate but a socially constructed phenomenon through norms, education and cultural conditioning. The protagonist confesses how she became one of “those women” who learned to match her appearance to the “bourgeois house” of her and her husband. (Ventura, 44). The protagonist’s enclosure and confinement in domesticity and social structures are defined by her gender identity, which is viewed as relational to her husband. Her identity and her autonomy are limited to her confined domesticated roles, indicating her otherness as a result of social conditioning. The protagonist says, “Is it a power play, a way for him to assert dominance over me?” when her husband insists on sleeping with the blinds closed despite her protests of her dislike for the darkness (Ventura, 71). This very mundane restriction put by her husband causes her to experience alienation as a condition of oppression, where her voice and desires are subordinated. The enclosure and confinement, rather than just being a physical limitation, restrict her freedom through very mundane acts. She accepts this subordination because of her enclosure and the socially conditioned

“otherness” imposed upon her.

PATRIARCHY AND DESIRE:

Irigaray argues that female sexuality has always been conceptualised based on masculine parameters. Women’s autoeroticism is left out, even though it is the most “basic and irreducible form of pleasure” (Irigaray, 28). The protagonist describes never being able to rid herself of a “comforting smell” and that for years her husband has called her “sweetheart” while she had wanted to be described as the “femme fatale”. The protagonist’s husband refers to her and regards her through his own definitions of his “wife” or the “mother” of his children, which keeps her desire confined in a submissive and patriarchal realm. This mediation of female desire, which is entirely described through male parameters, produces alienation, fracturing it. The protagonist narrates that her husband would do “everything that she wanted him to” and “understood that desire was born out of frustration”. She continues how she would “dream of herself in the wedding dress” during the act.

“I’m sure he sees me as his wife and the future mother of his children.” She also adds how passion can grow from “domestic stability” (Ventura, 66). The distortion of female desire is further marked by internalisation of patriarchal norms and how marriage is an imposition that overpowers her desire and dominates the protagonist’s thoughts. It indicates how her sexuality is further limited and described within patriarchal structures and male parameters.

Irigaray claims that one must assume the feminine role “deliberately” and already “to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation.” (Irigaray, 21). The protagonist confesses her distress over her husband and her “playing roles”; she expresses how she plays “the mother” and he plays

“the father” and that she “misses her husband” Irigaray suggests how roles imposed by patriarchal structures cause women to adapt to a practice where they mimic patriarchal roles imposed upon them to expose their constructedness. The narrator’s tone of distress with the roles imposed upon her suggests the alienation and fracturing of her individual desire. This distress exposes both the stringent nature of patriarchal structures that facilitate phallogentric order and distort and erase female desire.

CONCLUSION

The novel reveals how the institution of marriage shapes female identity and subjectivity by erasing desire through roles imposed by patriarchal structures within society. The protagonist’s confessional tone showcases her constructed sense of "otherness" and her relational identity with her husband. Additionally, the text critiques the suppression and distortion of female desire within the masculine and patriarchal frameworks of sexuality. The protagonist reflects the experiences of women who are confined to their roles, stripped of their subjectivity and independent desire. Ventura’s *My Husband* (2023) advocates for the dismantling of patriarchal structures enforced by marriage, emphasizing the need for acknowledgement of female subjectivity and the reclamation of independent female desire beyond male-defined boundaries.

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Competing Interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

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