

The Unheard Mourning: Gendered Pain and Childbirth Trauma in *Pieces of a Woman*

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Abstract

The paper critically analyses Kornél Mundruczó's *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) using the feminist framework of a profound theorist, Judith Butler. Specifically, it implies Butler's early work on gender performativity (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) and her subsequent research on grievability (*Precarious Life*, 2004). The focus of the paper lies with the female protagonist, Martha, who struggles to cope with the terrorising trauma of her daughter's stillbirth. The movie becomes a platform to question the politics of bereavement, bodily integrity, and social visibility. The concepts of Butler throw light on how Martha's suffering becomes socially unintelligible when it does not abide by normative femininity and grieving scripts. The research is articulated through three subtopics of analysis: (1) Refusing the Script of Gendered Grief: The Unheard Performance, (2) Silenced Bodies: Erasure of the Lived Trauma, and (3) The Political Dimensions of Unacknowledged Loss: Grievability and Societal Recognition. Through these thematic framings, *Pieces of a Woman* is seen to be an influential commentary on institutional, familial, and cultural policing of grief. Martha's denial to undergo public grieving shatters the cultural image of the mourning mother, thereby making her loss ungrievable in the eyes of the public. Through an elucidation of how her silence both resists and is punished by societal norms, this paper highlights the feminist resistances in the film of systems that do not acknowledge women's unconventional articulations of pain and loss.

Keywords: Grievability, institutional control, societal expectations, nonconformity, childbirth trauma, gender norms

Introduction

Childbirth trauma is presented as a distraught concept in cultural narratives, often framed through a sympathetic, sentimental, or heroic lens. While medical discourse cautiously jots down maternal and neonatal experiences, it mostly overlooks the complex, lived happenings of birthing individuals. In cinema, portrayals of childbirth are constructed into events of either victorious delivery or disastrous emergency, leaving behind the voice for the intimate, crumbling realities between these poles. The movie *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) by Kornél Mundruczó resists the mentioned conventions. The film carries the credit of a 24-minute single take scene of the protagonist, Martha's home delivery, with the help of a midwife, Eva. It pulls the viewers into the terror of labour. It shifts to the stillbirth of her daughter, Yvette, indicating a failure in delivery. Rather than focusing on a medical investigation or a courtroom verdict, the plot traces Martha's experiences through grief and estrangement.

What makes *Pieces of a Woman* a unique narrative is its refusal to display grief through known visual and emotional prompts. Martha does not outwardly express her sorrow in ways that seem legible to her partner Sean, her mother Elizabeth, or any of her kith and kin. She does not approach the legal proceedings against Eva. Her composure disrupts societal expectations of motherly mourning, centering

her as both a protagonist and a mystery. This paper explores how Martha's experience can be seen through the layout of Judith Butler's feminist theories. It discloses how gender norms, bodily politics, and the social conditions of grievability intersect to weave the recognition or erasure of women's pain. The paper also reveals the film as a meticulous critique of the societal compulsion to undergo grief in specific, gendered ways and the painful consequences faced by those who refuse to abide.

Literature Review

Scholarly research on stillbirth and its psychological impacts is more exhaustive in range, bringing to light that parental bereavement is made more complex by cultural silence and stigma. Joanne Cacciatore's research works (2006, 2013) are broadly studied for comprehending how social discomfort with stillbirth leads to stigmatised grieving, increasing the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for bereaved parents. This research is evident in the invisibility of trauma in *Pieces of a Woman*. This pain is most commonly promoted by the dominant visual productions that feminist film scholars have critiqued for decades.

In film theory, feminist critics have deconstructed the on-screen representation of female embodiment, mourning, and resistance. Laura Mulvey's essay on the concept of the male gaze (1975) has become the reference point for the representation of women in film. In addition to that, Jackie Stacey (2007) examines visual storytelling and how it resolves femininity, and Barry Keith Grant (2007) explores narrative patterns and genre conventions, placing female protagonists in opposition to normative expectations (e.g., resistance to public mourning expectations), which eventually stimulates audience critique.

Citing Butler's paradigms, the above essay places the concepts of grievability and performativity to comprehend how *Pieces of a Woman* refigures maternal mourning. The subversion of social and institutional norms of mourning in the film represents the politics of silence and visibility of stillbirth bereavement.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method that combines a close visual analysis of the film *Pieces of a Woman* along with the textual reading of suitable feminist theoretical frameworks. Butler's Theory is implied in the conversations of the film's narrative, performances and its cinematography. The film's key scenes, such as the opening home birth sequence, the conflict over the spelling error on the grave marker, the courtroom verdict, and the last apple-picking scene, are analysed for thematic and symbolic implications. Keen attention is paid to the sound design, the camera's focus on Martha's isolated body, and the recurring visual metaphors of life and death throughout the film. *Pieces of a Woman* is chosen as a research study because of its detailed handling of grief, bodily autonomy, and institutional control, making it an applicable text for this research.

Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler's theoretical frameworks provide a strong foundation for comprehension of the performative essence of gender and the varied grievability of some lives and losses. According to her concepts of gender performativity, depicted in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), and ideas on grievability, explained in her book *Precarious Life* (2004), the research paper argues that Martha's story is both a resistance to and a punishment for resisting the dominant societal norms. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that gender is not an integrated element of science but a "stylised repetition of acts" that can be managed and controlled by society. Martha's grief is a gender performance: to be seen as a grieving mother. Society expects her to cry in public, grieve her loss in an anticipated kind of vulnerability. Her decision to withstand

the conventional practices makes her incomprehensible to people near her, intimating us of Butler's ideology that performances outside of normative conventions are bound to social neglect.

The concept of grievability analyses how the social and political implications are at play in such nonconformity. According to Butler, specific lives are seen as more "grievable" than others, based on their alignment with dominant cultural concepts of value and legitimacy. A life within an accepted social narrative is considered grievable; similarly, a loss that adheres to the orthodox path of grieving is a legitimate loss. In the case of Martha, her muted depiction of grief is not seen as an accepted standard of cultural mourning procedures, and her refusal to exhibit her sorrow in public denies others the melodrama they expect to watch, pushing her grief to a state of political silencing. By implying these two concepts, the paper depicts an interconnection between Martha's personal experiences and the broader question of how society regulates, recognises, and values the appearance of loss.

Analysis

Refusing the Script of Gendered Grief: The Unheard Performance

Martha's mourning in *Pieces of a Woman* is primarily imagined in conditions of gender performativity. After her daughter, Yvette's stillbirth, Martha represses public displays of grieving, self-consciously. She does not scream, cry loudly, cling to others, or blabber about her loss, consequently. Her refrain is truly not insensitive. It is her self-conscious refusal to follow the socially structured norms of grieving. This move intensely disturbs the people present around her. Her partner, Sean, perceives her silence as a harsh, distant reaction to their mutual sorrow. It leads to his accusations of how she emotionally abandoned their relationship. At the same time, he is the one who later cheats on her and leaves for Seattle when the situation becomes too hard to handle. Elizabeth, her mother, does not understand or accept Martha's refusal to feel publicly as a valid coping mechanism. She demands that Martha follow the conventional performativity of a bereaved mother. These expressions mirror Butler's assertion that defiance of gendered norms forms social unintelligibility, and the subject's identity shifts to unintelligible to spectators.

The cinematography of the film reassures this disparity. In dinner table scenes, Martha is shown in isolated, static shots, while other characters are depicted vocally in overamplified emotional dynamics. The camera's focus on her motionless body amidst her family's expression of emotional upset underlines her refusal to act as a part of the performative spectacle demanded by others. Her immobile stature becomes an isolated way of resistance, denying the commodification as well as readability of her grief on people's terms. By denying this, Martha nulls the societal belief that public display of pain equates to genuine sorrow.

Silenced Bodies: The Erasure of Lived Trauma

The effacement of Martha's traumatic experience is a strike-away result of her refusal to put through a gendered performance of grieving, her body representing how she is "silenced" by others. In a culture that relies on a specific and outward performance of mourning, a muted body like Martha's is considered unintelligible. This is epitomised in how her bodily experiences are focused under institutional control and symbolic erasure. The midwife's demand that she be taken to the hospital immediately and the subsequent legal proceedings turn her body into a unit to be corrected rather than as a person undergoing a traumatic lived experience.

The daughter, Yvette's body, is subjected to an even more intense abstraction. Denied personhood, she is shown in the narrative primarily as a collection of medical data and legal documents. The argument over the grave marker, where Sean misspells Yvette's name, is a heart-wrenching metaphor for her erasure. His justification on how he passively accepts her loss and how such an error is not a great mistake to him indicates the note in which the child's existence has been reduced to a blunder in his mind. Martha's

continuous insistence on the correct spelling is a remarkable act of resistance against such reduction, a symbolic communication of maternal love that holds on to her daughter's humanity.

In the courtroom, Martha's body is directly subjected to public criticism. Her calmness is perceived as emotional detachment. Her body becomes a spectacle during the terrifying trial, where her actions are judged by social expectations of what and how a "grieving mother" is supposed to be. This leads to her trauma being ignored as a legitimate form of suffering, a rejection closely bound to her performative resistance.

The Political Dimensions of Unacknowledged Loss: Grievability and Societal Recognition

Focusing on the findings of *Precarious Life*, this section elaborates on how Martha's grieving is denied social acceptance. According to Butler, certain lives become non-grievable because they fail to fit into dominant cultural narratives of value. Yvette's life, marked by its brevity and lack of documentation apart from the official record, makes her a part of the "non-event" in public eyes. Similarly, Martha's grief is also questioned in a way that her grieving does not fit into the expected performative trait. Her refusal to act in the melodramatic spectacle of mourning denies others the perception they crave, thus making her grieving politically unattainable.

The above-mentioned state is particularly seen through Martha's decision to fight for Eva in a courtroom. This action disrupts the hostile approach expected by the court and her family, who desire a public adversary and justice. By refusing to assign fault, she denies the court a narrative conclusion that would make her intelligibly grieving to any external observers. Her restraint kindles frustration in those who equate public grieving with authenticity, thus assuring Butler's concept that public acknowledgement is frequently synonymous with performativity.

The final scene of picking an apple further repositions this encounter. The apple, first introduced by Eva during Martha's labour, reappears as a solid continuity symbol of renewal. Its recurring appearance throughout the film, from the earliest moments of existence, where Martha decides to grow those seeds, to the final scenes in the courtroom, where she expresses that the child smelled like an apple, shows how shared grieving works out. It constructs a new, private narrative of grieving for Martha. The depiction of an apple tree and a young girl in the film's climax means that Martha's grieving has found an alternative space for expression, secluded from societal approval. This condenses Butler's identification of sites of recognition not founded on conventional scripts, and it affirms that grieving can indeed be invisible and yet valid.

Conclusion

Pieces of a Woman offers a rich and complex scrutiny of pain, gender, and grievability. Through Butler's theoretical lens regarding performativity and grievability, the film makes clear how societal norms instil structure not just in the performance of mourning but also in the legitimacy of the loss itself. Martha's deviance from normative performances of motherly loss is a powerful resistance against gender performativity. The same resistance then makes her loss ungrievable within the societal lens, effectively muting her body and trauma. The film depicts that when a loss is not structured within a normative plot, it is made invisible and unworthy of public grievance. Martha's path evades resolution through conformity; she neither reunites with those who cannot understand her loss nor abides by the emotional performances expected of her by society. Instead, she creates a private, self-validated space for her loss, resulting in a profoundly emotional moment of continuity and sustained determination that situates beyond the field of institutional judgment or public approval.

This film, read through the Butlerian framework, is a powerful feminist narrative that gestures towards rethinking and reforming what counts as authentic, grievable loss and what not. For the medical humanities, this paper makes explicit the significance of understanding grief as a socially convoluted

phenomenon that needs an unbiased social structure to be felt. Ultimately, the supreme power of the film lies within its humble proclamation that the most real and deepest bereavements can be found in quiet places, unhindered by social demands, primarily when gendered performances deconstruct.

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