



And until we do, the war will not be over...: The Mothers at War in Almodóvar's Cinema

Aniket Roy

Abstract

In the contemporary discourse of Spanish Cinema, the works of Pedro Almodovar have been a matter of critical debate and endeavour to make him one of the most celebrated auteurs of the present time. Through the stylistic tendency of using painterly and comic strip-like sets, his works tend to focus largely on the many methods of violence and death. With the formidable links of desire, rape, misogyny and retrograde patriarchal values recurrent, the present work would study the metaphor of wound and death in Almodovar's "Madres Paralelas" (Parallel Mothers) and would like to focus on the hermeneutics of Almodovar's cinema taking into play his latest rendition, to investigate underneath the central themes of violence, and hatred, the very source of the human and elemental events of the land of Spain. I would also like to investigate how the many themes and motifs of his cinema subtly comment on the history of migration both literal and metaphorical, between Spain and Latin America and how his narrative points to a borderless union of Spaniards and Latin Americans, of a future shaped by cross-cultural exchanges between the lands.

Keywords: Pedro Almodovar, *Madres Paralelas*, *Hamlet*, Franco, F.G Lorca



The cinema of Pedro Almodóvar reveals, in many ways, a broad interest in the exorbitant aesthetics of comedy and melodrama. His cinema, often categorized by critics within the shifts of gendered violence, speaks also on the condition of Spain plagued with the ills of its past. Interestingly enough, his works tend to articulate what Barthes said on the notion of violence where he points to the photograph as a site of violenceⁱ not because it shows violent things, but due to the force that it imbues sight with. The auteur employs this force in his various works. However, with the apparent bloodshed and blood-ties at work, the auteur makes use of the women in his cinema as the bearer of the ills of the society. In showing grief for the lost lands and fathers, Almodóvar reads loss, and death, not as an end. On the contrary, he seems to be articulating what Judith Butler says about the potential of mourning as something to reveal our affective bonds with others and to expose how constitutive sociality is to the formulation of the selfⁱⁱ.

In ‘Paternity and Pathogens’, Dean Allbritton writes, ‘the transformation of Franco’s body in illness exercises cultural dominance over Spain’s population by leaving a ghostly imprint’ⁱⁱⁱ. Allbritton stresses that it is crucial to note that Franco’s inflicted wound on the very land of Spain still etches a deep mark on the Spanish culture and civilization where the footprints of the dictator still linger and haunt their struggle for identity. Pedro Almodóvar in the very beginning of *Madres Paralelas (Parallel Mothers)* uses the trope of a skull as a portrait in the style of Hamlet. This apparent mention of a skull is crucial to note in Almodóvar’s artistry. Yorick’s skull in the popular and crucial Gravedigger Scene in *Hamlet*^{iv} significantly points out the apparent vanity of life ‘...the paths of glory lead but to the grave’^v. But the skull of Yorick also reminds Hamlet of his childhood friend and thereby memory takes a greater part in the play echoing the idea that the existence of consciousness is memory. Almodóvar’s reference to Hamlet’s skull at the very beginning of the film immediately highlights the dark and sombre passion of tragedy stylized within a cinematic framework. In the face of widespread suffering caused by the Francoist regime, narrative ethics plays a vital role in addressing the questions of peace, justice, and healing of the wounds inflicted by a violent century. Almodóvar’s cinema reveals the multiple ways in which the metaphors of death actually reveal the lingering ghost of the dictator and how it compels and still haunts the very identity of the Spanish people. Over the years Pedro Almodóvar has gained for himself the status of being a women’s director. In a 1987 interview with Marsha Kinder, Almodóvar comments: “Fathers are not very present in my films . . . This is something I just feel. When I’m writing about

relatives, I just put in mothers, but I try not to put in fathers. I avoid it. I don't know why. I guess I'm very Spanish."^{vi} This idea of being 'very Spanish' in Almodóvar traces its root in the many dramas of F.G. Lorca whose references in Almodóvar's filmography has been a crucial topic for researchers^{vii}. Lorca identified women as the bearer of all passions and earthly realities. Conventional ideas regarding female desire, rape, misogyny, and retrograde patriarchal values that marred traditionalist Spain, and the wounds inflicted on the motherland – linking these has almost become an obsession for Almodóvar. The frequent staging of rape scenes and the like in the auteur's filmography questions the power of patriarchy which subjugates the female either through punishment or forced violence.

In the films of Almodóvar, there is a special characteristic often used for men and masculinity as they are insistently linked to illness, pathology, and death^{viii}. This is evidenced by the long list of fathers, lovers, and brothers who are killed and incapacitated or who exceed the bounds of normative masculinity in a transgressive way. Distorting masculine gender norms and linking these to mortality and vulnerability have been a dominant trope in the auteur's works. The absence of a paternal figure and the refiguring of the male through sickness and the nexus of death give way to an understanding of his cinema at large. Kinder notes that Almodóvar's comments regarding this absence of a father figure in his films may allude to the possibility of how explicitly he ignores the existence of Spain's former dictator in his films: "I guess you treat fathers like Franco, as if they never existed..."^{ix} The present study would like to read this apparent absence of a father figure in his films as a significant loss or lack which actually confirms 'the pervasiveness of masculine domination'^x. What seems crucial to our study is that in *Madres Paralelas*, the absence of multiple fathers points to a discourse of loss, and it is this loss that triggers the shades of violence in the guise of masculinity.

The film follows the trail of the two mothers Janis Martinez and Ana Manso Ferreras, played by Penelope Cruz and Milena Smit respectively. They meet each other at a hospital, both pregnant. Accidentally, their babies get exchanged while at observation in the hospital ward. Janis, a fashion photographer, is involved with the archaeologist Arturo, the father of her child. Janis bears with her an awareness of her great-grandfather's involvement in the Spanish Civil War, where the falangists^{xi} carried out an atrocious act of burying alive a group of villagers including her great-grandfather. Janis, the great-granddaughter of the family contemplates the possibility of engraving the pit where the villagers were buried, wherein she meets Arturo who

takes upon the responsibility of carrying out the said task. Arturo was a part of a private foundation in Navarre, the ‘Brotherhood for the Recovery of Historical Memory’, which deals with the study of the roots of the Navarre culture^{xii}. Their friendship and subsequent relationship lead to Janis’ pregnancy. On being informed so, Arturo reveals the problematic situation of his wife’s chemotherapy and the difficulty in adopting a baby. In a heated conversation, Janis reveals that she’ll bear the responsibility of the child, for she too was raised by a single mother and a grandmother. Janis suffers from her a sense of void with an absent, mythologized father she never met, and most importantly, a great-grandfather executed by the Franco regime who, to this day, remains in an unspecified grave. The burden of an anguished past leaves a discernible shadow of lack which shapes and marks individual identities. The death of the dictator bears with it an apparent continuation of life for the many families of Janis’ village, including her own, as the lingering ghost of the dictator’s presence is still felt through the many acts of violence committed during the war.

The body of the dictator resisted death. His long agonizing, during which Franco’s body clung to life only through its connection to breathing machines and the like, is exactly what creates this silence. Not his death, not his life, but the transformation of this body (loaded with tremendous symbolic and affective meanings for the body of the nation) into a ghostly trace, a there but already gone, that continually imposes, in its ghostliness, the particular structures of fantasy that still dominate the cultural imaginary of the country.^{xiii}

Menor’s comment on the haunting ghost of Franco’s body formulates the presence of a silent, agonizing display of the past violence that produces a great deal of trauma and fragmentation in the identities of citizens. As Allbritton says, it must also be stressed that the dictator’s lingering presence helps analyse the existence of the systematic violence at work within a backdrop of peace and the collective formulations of a world that appears to function smoothly.

The character of Ana, Janis’ roommate in the hospital, points to her pregnancy as an accident and is gradually seen as feeling guilty about it. In a close conversation with Janis, she reveals the incident which led to her pregnancy. In the village of Granada, Ana’s intimate moments with her partner was recorded by two of her friends. The two, in exchange for the recording, threatened and coerced Ana to sleep with them. This blackmailing and the ‘indirect’ rape engraved in her body the troubling discourse of motherhood and her obvious guilt for bringing the baby into the world. While Janis asks Ana about the actions taken against the men who committed such an act, she speaks about her father’s inwardness and cold denial to involve the



law for the protection of family prestige. Paternity is severely mocked at in this sequence. She also pointed out that she didn't want to speak on or recount this traumatic experience before the police officers. With her trauma and fear, Ana was sent to Teresa, her mother.

It must be noted that the character of Teresa is a crucial element in the film. She got married to get away from her parents and a year later her child Ana was born. But her dream was neither to be a mother nor a wife, but to be an actress. However, her ambitions and education didn't comply with the regulations of the Moreno family. She filed for divorce from Ana's father, and she was given it through the Holy Rota^{xiv}. Still, she had to bear grave humiliation: 'Basically you had to admit you were a whore to get an annulment. I accepted every humiliation just to be free and to devote myself to acting'^{xv}. Teresa's husband took over Ana's custody and later remarried at Granada. Meanwhile, Teresa suffered in her career due to her child's absence and was subsequently left out of the industry. After Ana's pregnancy, she returned to Teresa, but in a state of trauma caused by age-old misogynist power relations.

However, the politics of violence that Almodóvar generates or rather speaks of in the film is shown through the intergenerational divides at work. One of the most important incidents rendering this divide comes in an expectant episode at Janis' home after Janis and Ana share dinner. They sit, listening to the music of Janis Joplin, having a drink, gazing at a picture on Janis' wall. We see a grainy black and white photograph of a carefree woman outdoors, amid a crowd, laughing, a cocktail in hand, with an infant child swaddled in a sling over her shoulder. "Who's that hippy in the photo?" asks Ana. Janis Joplin wails in the background as the women chat. "That's my mother," replies Janis. The baby, we come to find out, is Janis herself. As Joplin's incomparable croon fills the diegetic airwaves during this instant, Janis shares that her mother died of an overdose at 27 (like Joplin), and that she was named after the late rock n' roller. "Who's Janis Joplin?" replies Ana confusedly^{xvi}.

This question is the key to the politics in the frame. Simple as it may seem, this detail sets to represent a much larger set of incongruencies between the two single mothers. Ana has no idea about the singer-songwriter and is also missing awareness about the critical bits of cultural history. Janis, as pointed out by Anthony Hawley, "however, heralds from a period closer to the Gen X/Millennial cusp, which straddles her worldview across the 20th and 21st centuries. But while Janis possesses an awareness of multiple eras as one from that generation might, she also carries with her the weight of unresolved questions from previous decades".^{xvii} Thereafter,



in a heated conversation in the same room, Janis tells Ana about the responsibility one has to bear for the past.

It's time for you to open your eyes about the country you live in! It seems no one in your family explained the truth about the country to you. There are more than a hundred thousand missing, they're buried around in ditches and beside cemeteries. Their grandchildren and great-grandchildren would love to be able to exhume their remains to give them a proper burial, as they promised their mothers and grandmothers. And until we do, the war will not be over.^{xviii}

Ana's lack of awareness of her culture brings us to the cusp of the violence working within the backdrop of a nation at peace. Interestingly enough, Janis' character has some contradictory features – folksy and cosmopolitan, Spanish and international^{xix}. Her identity is thus reinforced as an 'interstitial figure in the cultural transition towards modernity, yet deeply imbued with the traditional values of the village'^{xx}. It is Ana who tries to get away from her past while Janis attempts to fulfil the responsibility she has taken up to unite the family even if it is in death. Her whole act becomes an act for a search of the father or the fathers just like Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre* who embarks on a similar journey for the search of Esteban's^{xxi} father, "I was running away from his father then, now I'm going in search of him."^{xxii}

However, throughout the film, there has also been a gentle framework of transnational aesthetics working, with the exchange of the two babies of Janis and Ana, Anita and Cecilia respectively. It must be noted that Janis herself symbolizes the cultural trope of a traditional Hispanic identity due of her reference to her Venezuelan father. What might be crucial to observe would be to understand *Madres Paralelas* continuing a cycle that includes *Todo sobre mi madre/ All About My Mother* (1999), *Hable con ella/ Talk to Her* (2002), *La mala educación/ Bad Education* (2004) and *Volver* (2006), the films which involve themes and motifs that, fold back on the history of migration, both literal and metaphoric, between Spain and Latin America. Cecilia (the biological child of Ana and the mistaken child of Janis), bears an 'ethnic' quality. Her eyes and features obviously reveal that she has no resemblance to Janis and the father Arturo. Janis vehemently tries to impose the fact that the baby has features similar to Janis' father, a Venezuelan whom she has never met. It is Arturo who raises questions about the child's potential paternity and thus Janis finds out in a test that the baby is not hers. She finally comes to realise that the babies have been exchanged but remains silent over the issue and tries to run away by changing her number altogether, to live in peace with the child. However, a few months later she meets Ana and comes to know of the death of the biological



daughter of Janis, Anita. This whole sequence bears a crucial point in disseminating the transnational aesthetic of Almodóvar's cinema. Anita's death happened due to brain dysfunction. Her brain did not send signals for breathing. When Ana zooms over a photograph of Cecilia, she notes her smile and the similar facial features of a brown-skinned guy (we figure it is the person she loves, and the child is born out of their sexual consummation). In these sequences Almodóvar points out the severe absence of the spirit of Spain in Anita which resulted in her death as she had difficulty adjusting to life outside of the womb^{xxiii} as well as a future^{xxiv} shaped by cross-cultural changes across borders.

The Janis Joplin episode entails with it another crucial element in the understanding of the film, namely figuring out the Hispanic identity working at large in Almodóvar's films. "It was summer, and life was not easy", says Janis equating it almost to the summer winds in *Volver*^{xxv}. It would be interesting to note the musical interludes at play in both these films. "Social memory" is here understood as the "trans-generational transmissions of experience" connected to cultural artefacts that take the form of personally adapted versions of the past^{xxvi}. The song by Janis Joplin and its use from radio to the discourse of cinema may be read as a mass-mediated cultural product continuously adapted to the individual's recollections of the past in ways that are not intrinsic to the actual song. Janis remembers her mother through the songs of Joplin which is somewhat a negotiation between the individual and collective experience of social events, and this performance demonstrates Almodóvar's effort to reinforce through auditory culture 'a powerful memory-making fiction about the shared and reciprocal cultural ethos of diverse Hispanic communities'^{xxvii}.

The past configures and reshapes itself through the multiple agencies of life and death as Janis on her visit to the village shares deep moments of kinship with Arturo in the room where both her grandmother and mother were born, and her childhood was spent. The possible sexual consummation leads to another pregnancy, and a hope of liberation from the nexus of illness and death that claims Janis' first child Anita. The final sequence follows the engraving of the pit by the team led by Arturo and we, the viewers, are finally shown the skeletal condition of a culture still struggling with the violence that operated behind the veil of peace and tranquillity. Thus, we may describe the ending of the film as a confirmation of a cultural narrative of modern Hispanic society that has undergone the trauma of separation and dislocation and the euphoria of re-encounter, formulated and re-shaped through the mothers and daughters at the forefront.

Notes

- ⁱ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2020).
- ⁱⁱ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Dean Allbritton, "Paternity and Pathogens", in *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, ed. Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325360.ch10>. 227.
- ^{iv} William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- ^v Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. Poetry Foundation, accessed September 21, 2022. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44299/elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard>
- ^{vi} Marsha Kinder and Pedro Almodóvar, "Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality: A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar," *Film Quarterly*, 41, no. 1 (1987) 43, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.1987.41.1.04a00050>.
- ^{vii} There's an intertextual element at work in the film *Madres Paralelas*, where the character Teresa gains the chance to play the role of Dona Rositta, the lead character of Lorca's play.
- ^{viii} Allbritton, 225.
- ^{ix} Kinder and Pedro Almodovar, 43.
- ^x Allbritton, 228.
- ^{xi} They are the members of the Spanish Falange Movement. For more information on Falangism, read "Falangism- Wikipedia"
- ^{xii} Navarre is a former kingdom of SW Europe: established in the 9th century by the Basques; the parts south of the Pyrenees joined Spain in 1515 and the Northern parts passed to France in 1589. Capital: Pamplona
- ^{xiii} C. Moreiras Menor, *Cultura Herida: Literatura y cine en la España democrática*. (Madrid: Ediciones Libertarias, 2002), 56.
- ^{xiv} The supreme ecclesiastical and secular court of the Roman Catholic Church. The *Rota* is a tribunal of the papal curia exercising jurisdiction especially in matrimonial cases appealed from diocesan courts.
- ^{xv} *Madres Paralelas*, directed by Pedro Almodóvar, (2021; El Deseo: Sony Pictures Entertainment Iberia), DVD
- ^{xvi} Almodóvar, 2021.
- ^{xvii} Anthony Hawley, "Alchemical Melodrama: Pedro Almodóvar's 'Parallel Mothers,'" MUBI, 2022, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/alchemical-melodrama-pedro-almodovar-s-parallel-mothers>.
- ^{xviii} Almodóvar, 2021.
- ^{xix} A reference to a t-shirt of hers that bears with it a message: 'We should all be feminists'
- ^{xx} Marvin D'Lugo, "Almodóvar and Latin America," in *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, ed. Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon, 2013, 421, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325360.ch19>.
- ^{xxi} Manuela's son in *Todo sobre mi madre*, whose birthday wish was to know about his father.
- ^{xxii} *Todo sobre mi madre*, directed by Pedro Almodóvar, (1999; El Deseo: Warner Sogefilms), DVD
- ^{xxiii} Anita's death was in sleep. In the film, doctors pointed out that her death is to be categorized as cot death where the brain forgot to give the message of breathing to the body parts. This idea somehow symbolizes the city-country binary. The city often acts as a site of modernity, a site of occupying machines and stuff while the village acts as a site of liberation. Therefore, the new pregnancy of Janis points to a better future.
- ^{xxiv} Ana's child, Cecelia as well as the potential child of Janis due to her new pregnancy.
- ^{xxv} Almodóvar, 2021.
- ^{xxvi} H. Welzer, "Communicative Memory." In *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. A. Erll and A. Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008) 286-7.
- ^{xxvii} D'Lugo, 415.



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