

# Women's Dissonance and Redemption in the Absence of Men — Talking About "Julieta" Directed by Almodovar

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## ABSTRACT

Director Almodovar's artworks have overturned the marginal role of women as the "seen other" in the traditionally constructed gender field of cinema, freeing women from the categories designated by patriarchal society and allowing them to assume the discourse of the film space as subjects. The sadness and loneliness conveyed throughout the film "Julieta" is the panic of women who lose their words in the face of the "absence" of men. The reconciliation of women's relationships at the end of the story indicates that women's awakening always points to self-reconciliation and the establishment of the subject, rather than the feminine consciousness given by patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** *Absence of masculinity, Dislocation of identity, Castration theory, Emotional alienation, Female subject.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"The narrative structure of traditional cinema portrays the male character as active and powerful: he is the center of the plot and the attention of the audience. The female character, on the other hand, is passive and powerless: she is nothing more than an object of male desire."<sup>1</sup> And Almodovar's films focus on the living conditions of female characters with different identities in society, uncovering the surface of Spanish society, delving into all corners of civilized society, and using a cold and objective lens to show the lives of those women at the bottom of society — transgender, cisgender, drug addicts, single mothers, prostitutes, etc. Civilization and barbarism collide sharply and merge in Almodovar's films. He overturns the marginal role of women as the "other" who is "seen" in the traditionally constructed gender field of film, liberates women from the categories designated by a patriarchal society, and allows women to assume the center of discourse in the film space as subjects. In contrast, the male subject in the gender field is placed in a space of "absence", establishing a fixed

structure that is different from the binary gender opposition established by men. "Absence" not only refers to the disappearance of men in the physical sense, but also places men in the subtext of the film.

The analysis in this article from "Julieta" expresses the story that the heroine Julieta and her husband Xoan meet years ago on a train to Madrid, and after the death of Xoan's sick wife, they get married and have a daughter, Antia. One summer, a fight breaks out between them after Xoan cheats on her. Xoan, who is angry and go fishing, dies in a storm. And Antia, who is finishing her summer camp, receives notice of her father's death, not knowing why he goes to sea. Until the age of eighteen, Antia leaves Julieta behind and disappears into Madrid. Only at the end of the film does Julieta realize that the maid has told Antia the truth when Xoan just dies, causing Antia to repress her hatred for her mother and her father's lover for years, and to leave home when she becomes an adult.

## 2. THE PRESENCE AND ABSENCE OF MEN

"The 'woman' in recent male literature is a private space that constitutes the inner world of

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1. Tao Xi, Li Wenqian. Western feminist film theory [J]. Film Literature.(12):4.

men. Men seek the space of 'women' to escape from the public world, but when they meet real women there, they find them to be incomprehensible and unpleasant to real women, so they try to escape again. This kind of escape behavior is defined by two understandings — 'escaping from home' or 'escaping to home', depending on the time and place. To understand the concept of 'escaping from home', and after escaping, they find that the new situation does not have the characteristic that cannot achieve the standard that was used to satisfy their dreams, and they repeat the mistake of 'escaping'.<sup>2</sup> At the time of her meeting with Xoan, Julieta was a secondary school literature teacher, at the age of her charm, spontaneous and romantic, and perfectly suited to Xoan's fantasy of the ideal lover. After marrying and giving birth to a child, Julieta returns to the image of a "mother", taking care of her daughter while running the family, which breaks the "fantasy myth" that Xoan has constructed for women as a man. On the other hand, Xoan's cheating partner, Ava, is unmarried for life and maintains her independence and romantic temperament as a female artist, which is a "romantic other" that is steadily in line with Xoan's "woman of his dreams". Xoan neither wants to dismantle the family structure in social relationships, nor does he want to spend the rest of his life with the "woman of his dreams", Ava. Because he understands that the "ideal lover" exists only in sexual fantasies. Marriage and life will put shackles on the so-called "pure relationship", and even lose its charm. What he is constantly looking for is only the sexual fantasy pinned in the virtual illusion.

Xoan's accidental death in the film directly leads to the "absence" of male identity in the film. Seemingly displacing the female characters built around the male identity immediately into the subject position. But in fact, Xoan's male subject position does not end with his physical death, but rather shifts from explicit discursive control of specific male forms to a more solid and invisible control dependent on patriarchal society. So the three female protagonists are still looking at their own lives with Xoan's "gaze" as the center. This is symbolized by the sculptural faucet made by Ava at the beginning of the film — a male with huge genitalia — and named "The Source", which explicitly identifies the women in the film with the cult of fertility, i.e. they believe that the source of

happiness comes from the presence of the male protagonist and the source of guilt and pain also comes from his absence. The film contains reflections on the process of events from a vicarious male perspective and an identification with the female subject's responsibility for driving the transformation of the character's relationships and the outcome of events. Although the alienation phenomenon contrary to traditional relational ethics was produced in this process, it also reveals that women's self-awareness is not immediately established, but is constantly dissociated from the control of patriarchal society and the desires of women themselves. Ultimately, the result is oriented towards the regaining of women's right to speak.

### **3. ALIENATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY**

#### ***3.1 Father-Daughter Assimilation — Identification with Emasculation***

"Humanity's basic survival condition after the production of the human body is the transformation of the world mediated by the tools of labor. This mechanism determines the dominant position of the father's time in the external world, and the anthropological nature of father time transcends the cultural differences between China and the West. Patriarchy is by no means accidental. Family private ownership expands into family and nation-state private ownership, and private ownership conflicts require extensive deformations and coordinated packages of father's time modes of action."<sup>3</sup> Patriarchy is not an accident. It is a fundamental right to power in traditional ethical relationships. The father usually assumes the dominance of the family relationship, and other relationships are secondary and revolved around him. Antia in the film is close to her father, Xoan, and is very obedient to his words. She sees this control of patriarchal oppression as a source of stable security. Director Almodovar deliberately arranges the accidental death of her father, Xoan, because according to the traditional ethical system, the role of the father cannot be missing in the family, so the role of the father needs a substitute, and when nowhere to be found, this role is assumed by Antia herself, so that Antia does her best to take

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2. Ueno Chizuko. *Misogyny* [M]. Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2015.12

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3. Yushilin. "Mother Time" and "Father Time": The Philosophical Anthropological Origins of Ethics[J]. *Shanghai Culture*, 2019(2):11.

care of her grieving and depressed mother after the death of her father, and wants to take over the responsibility of the family for her father. "According to Lacan's theory, the mirror stage is the stage of development and growth of the young child in which the subject is influenced by the external "other" and, in some cases even replaced by the "other", or can be said to be castrated. This stage plays a decisive force in the development of the subject's life."<sup>4</sup> This means that Antia does not take care of her mother on behalf of her daughter, but replaces the role of her father's castrator. Longing for her deceased father's rights while her body's sexual organs become a hindrance, Antia then struggles to grow up with identification but not acceptance of her body. She knows the truth about her father's seafaring, but she does not make moral accusations about his cheating behavior. Instead, she projects the pain of losing her father as hatred, hating her mother and Ava, but based on the traditional mother-daughter bond of blood (by this time, her mother cannot accept her father's passing and has had a mental breakdown and is in a state of aphasia), contradictory emotions leave Antia in the pain of having no one to talk to, and her long-suppressed emotions make her hide these thoughts until she becomes an adult and chooses to run away from her family of origin, disappearing from Julieta's life. And this escape is exactly the same as Xoan's derailment back then. Antia accepts the incompleteness of her emasculation by the "other" in a patriarchal society and sees the father figure as the mirror image he is trying to assimilate, caught up in her hatred for her mother and guilt for her father who is unable to face himself. The daughter is supposed to have assimilated with her mother and attached herself to her mother, but with this dislocation of identity, she chooses to assimilate with her father twice, escaping the reality of her relationship in an attempt to redeem sins that do not exist.

### ***3.2 The Reconstruction of Mother-Daughter Relationships: the Alienation Space in the Absence of Men***

When the audience enters the space of mother and daughter from the assimilation of father and daughter, they will find a very interesting phenomenon. Father-son, father-daughter, and

mother-son relationships are usually social and complementary in nature because these relationships are directed and attributed to males, and male identity is naturally and actively constructed in social formations, while female identity is not natural to either herself or the mother. The identity of a woman needs to be constantly inquired by patriarchal ideology and the emphasis on castrated identity can finally establish the status of the second sex subordinate to men, so the relationship between mother and daughter in social texts is more complex and diverse. Towards the end of the film, Julieta, who has been searching for her daughter for years, finally receives a letter from her daughter, in which Antia talks about how, after leaving home, she also had her own family and had children, but it was only after her son died in an accident a few years ago that Antia understood her mother's pain of not being able to find herself for years. This represents her perspective on her mother and herself, from the "other" who wanted to replace her late father to the "self" who assimilated with her mother. The reconciliation of the mother-daughter relationship, alienated by the father's "absence," completes the search for the meaning of the female self. "The establishment of self-identity is a complex process. The establishment of the self begins with the establishment of a positioning that one believes to be correct so that one can constantly revise oneself in this positioning to meet the criteria of positioning and find the possibility of self-identity. In this process of acquiring self-identity, the self may have several iterations or revisions."<sup>5</sup> The female roles in Almodovar's films are not presented as the feminists who are born to fight against the patriarchy; they usually are shaped into subordinates in the films, and through the advancement of the story, women are forced to push themselves into the position of subjects of discourse. In other words, it is the confrontation with the patriarchal system and the continuous grinding of events that finally explore the space of women's discourse and value system. It also reflects director Almodovar's admiration and reverence for mothers, as he says — understanding one's mother is the beginning of comprehending women.

### ***3.3 The Coexistence of Wife and Daughter with Man's Lover — Almodovar's Unique Explanation of Feminine Love***

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4. Luo Ling. The Mutation of the Self after Being Castrated by the Other: An Analysis of "A Rose for Emily" from Lacan's Mirror Theory[J]. Fujian Forum (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2010, (201): 229.

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5. Shi Pu. On the Lesbian Narrative in Sarah Waters' Victorian Trilogy[D]. Guangdong: Jinan University, 2013:18.

As the "other" who intervenes in Xoan's family, the director weakens the identity of Ava as a "third party" and increases the rationality of her relationship with the characters. This is because all the characters in the film try to escape the traditional ethical relationship and try to establish a new social relationship without moral constraints, which is reflected in the subtext of the film as a kind of emotional atonement and emotional transference. The first is the relationship between Antia and Ava. Ava's independent and spontaneous character attracts Antia so much that she transfers her dependence on her mother to Ava when she is young, and Ava is more like Antia's mother in the spiritual sense. She has the personality of a mother, but also has a different physical sense of a mother, and it is easier and more enjoyable to communicate with her. After Antia learns the cause of her father's death, which leads to her being badly in need of a cushion and support for her long pain at that time, and this repressed emotion is transferred into hatred for her mother and Ava, as well as self-judgment. This judgment is the result of emotional alienation, but this way of seeing oneself as an adversary or antagonist can cushion the pain of losing one's father rather than hating one's mother and Ava and alienating oneself to the "other." "The women in Almodovar's vision have a more courageous expression of self-improvement beyond the traditional because these women are braver to bear the unbearable weight of life, repeatedly facing the relentless pain and wound in the deep endless pain, endless darkness, endless torture. Thus, Almodovar's feminism has become feminism in a compassionate way to push forward in the abstract sense."<sup>6</sup>

The second is the relationship between Julieta and Ava. It seems that Xoan and Antia have not been affected by it, and they have maintained a close friendship for many years. This "intimate relationship" is established only because they are endowed with two similar roles — lover and mother. They meet and befriend each other because of Xoan, and they are also his lovers. Moreover, they reflect together because of Antia's abhorrence. The two have common ground in emotional and identity building. The disintegration of the relationship between the two lovers is an "alibi" for the male role, a demonstration of the diversity and complexity of the relationship between women, and a unique interpretation of female love by director

Almodovar. The daughter's letter to Julieta at the end of the film is like a choice between the "self" and the "other" — first of all, escaping from the relationship is no substitute for pain. The second is that the fluidity of identity at different stages can separate the self from the "other", thus creating a different sense of subjectivity, so there is no need to trap the self in the cage of the inherent social order, and the awakening of women always points to the reconciliation of the self and the establishment of the subject, rather than the feminine consciousness given by patriarchal society.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The original desire of the female characters in the film is driven when imagining the presence of men, but the action in the middle of the event guides the bondage of the gender order, and the impact of the double reality of the absence of male discourse and the reconstruction of gender relations leads the female characters to experience great pain and struggle when facing the choice. Although Almodovar's "Julieta" is about the relationship between women, family, and self, it does not possess the same extraordinary spiritual power as the women in "All About My Mother." The mother in "Julieta" is nothing like the mothers in the usual Almodovar films; she is very vulnerable, and the director expresses more about the loss of women's voice. Almodovar tries to break the traditional way of imagining women as men in women's films, and expresses feminist philosophies in the image of the 'other'. There is no gender that exists as a mere status of being watched, and people are always reflecting and searching in constant experience, and finally approaching the most real self under the shape and influence of the 'other'.<sup>7</sup>

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