

## The Complex Ties of *Julieta*: Motherhood, Desire and Masculinity

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the portrayal of gender roles in Pedro Almodóvar's film *Julieta*, by focusing on three of its central themes: motherhood, desire, and masculinity. Drawing on feminist, film and gender theories, it examines how patriarchy and social expectations shape the characters' experiences and reinforce gendered stereotypes. The study delves into the central character's internal conflict between selfhood and the social perceptions of motherhood, illuminating the emotional and psychological toll of these expectations. Additionally, the article considers how Almodóvar situates male characters—each representing different expressions of masculinity—on the peripheral domain of the diegesis, thereby intensifying the film's exploration of female subjectivity and agency.

**Keywords:** gender, binaries, masculinities, motherhood, desire.

Pedro Almodovar is one of the celebrated filmmakers of Spanish cinema. Known for its unconventional characterizations and postmodern visual styles, his films have always been at the forefront in dismantling the active-male, passive-female tropes of mainstream film narratives. Paul Julian Smith observes, "Almodovar was once known, especially in Spain by the label "postmodern", a term suggesting a radical skepticism to authoritative forms of politics and culture in his cinema, as in his person" (36). This postmodern sensibility is reflected in many of his films, where women occupy central roles, while male characters often remain passive or at the peripheral. The prominence he gives to female characters stands as a testament to the observation that his films "problematize gender binaries" (Allinson 82). The pattern is apparent from the earliest of his films, and the film *Julieta* which was released in the year 2016 is no exception. The film focuses on the themes of reminiscence, yearning, guilt and trauma, which are presented through the psychological and emotional journey of the protagonist Julieta. While

searching for her estranged daughter Antia, she embarks on a journey of introspection on gender roles and societal expectations. The narrative, set against the backdrop of shifting gender dynamics, explores the impact of societal expectations and identity crises, particularly in a mother-daughter relationship. By examining these elements, the article aims to highlight the ways in which Almodovar showcases how gender roles are inherited, confronted and transformed over time.

The diegesis centers on the experiences of three generations of women which is unfolded through a series of flashbacks. “The tragic narrative which moves back and forth between 1985 and 2015 is clearly and simply communicated: a mother, Julieta (played by Adriana Ugarte and Emma Suarez, the first time Almodovar women), tries to win back the love of her daughter Antia, who abandoned her 12 years earlier” (Reviriego 52). Julieta’s characterization effectively encapsulates the dilemma of adhering to societal norms while seeking personal autonomy. Antia’s struggles highlight the evolving nature of gender dynamics in contemporary society. By probing deep into these characters and their conflicts, Almodovar criticizes the influence of ideologically structured roles upon individuals and vocalizes the need for transformative changes.

The film begins with a close up shot of a pulsing crimson fabric resembling the rhythm of breathing. It is later revealed that the garment belongs to the protagonist, Julieta, who is gathering her belongings as she is preparing to leave her apartment in Madrid to move to Portugal with her boyfriend Lorenzo. The pulsing crimson fabric is a visual metaphor which can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the heaving of her chest, suggesting her deep sorrow and emotional turmoil. It is also suggestive of Julieta’s predicament, caught between desire, grief, duty and love. The scene delicately sets the emotional tone of the film and hints at the complexity of Julieta’s journey. Her act of carefully bubble wrapping and placing the sculpture of a seated naked man in a cardboard box, her vacillation in choosing her books and possessions and her hesitation in throwing away a blue envelope which she retrieves from her writing desk are all examples to that point. Her panic at severing the final tie with her estranged daughter is reflected in the indecision and anxious behavior she exhibits in the scene.

As the narrative progresses, Julieta runs into Antía’s childhood friend, Beatriz, on the street, from whom she learns that her daughter Antía has three children and that Beatriz had met

her near Lake Como earlier that year. This encounter marks an important event, as it makes her decide to abandon her plan of leaving Madrid with her boyfriend. Driven by her maternal desire to finally meet her estranged daughter, Antía, Julieta chooses to rent an apartment in the same building where she raised her daughter knowing that this is the only address through which Antía can reach her. These scenes highlight a mother's intense desperation, fervent longing and fragile hope as she awaits for her estranged daughter to reach out. The social expectation pertaining to the traditional gender roles assigned especially to women, where they are portrayed as the caregivers is reiterated over here. Her act of forsaking her relationship, forgoing the trip and renting an apartment in the same building where they once resided, illustrate how women navigate personal choices and prioritize familial relationships within the confines of social perceptions.

In the sequence that follows, the audience sees her retrieving the mysterious blue envelope that she had thrown out in the first sequence. In the new apartment, she reveals its contents, and we see pieces of a shredded photo scatter across the table. The photograph is of Julieta with Antía, symbolizing the mother-daughter relationship that has clearly been torn apart. She spreads out the fragments like a jigsaw puzzle and pieces them back together, mirroring her desire to repair her relationship with her daughter. Her distress and desperation are apparent as she writes down the few precious details shared by Beatriz about Antía, savouring them like drops of water to a parched man. The flashback rolls in as she writes in a diary, tracing the different decades of her life—her experiences as a woman, daughter, and mother—and uncovering the reason for her separation from Antía.

The flashback scenes effectively capture the complexities Julieta faces in her relationships, particularly with Antía's father, Xoan. They present a vibrant and intellectually confident younger Julieta, a teacher of classical literature, and trace her encounter with Xoan and the relationship that blossoms soon after the death of his wife. The maid in Xoan's house, Marian, warns Julieta against pursuing her career emphasizing that a woman's true vocation lies within her family otherwise Xoan will inevitably continue his infidelity, just as he did when she had gone to visit her parents with Antía. The maid's admonition underscores the societal belief that a woman's primary responsibility is to maintain the household and nurture relationships and that their worth is contingent upon this ability; reinforcing the notion that personal ambition is

secondary to family stability. The heated argument between Julieta and Xoan, over his infidelity, perpetuates lingering conflicts, prompting him to go fishing despite a looming storm, resulting in his death due to the boat capsizing. Following Xoan's tragic demise, the emotional turmoil greatly impacts both Julieta and Antía. Julieta is weighed down by the guilt as she feels responsible for Xoan's death and becomes unable to tell her daughter. This inner turmoil is portrayed by the transformation from the younger dynamic Julieta to the older much haunted catatonic version of herself. The tension between Julieta and Antía escalates, as Julieta chooses not to reveal the truth, leading to Antía's estrangement. It is later revealed to Julieta by Ava that it was Marian, the maid in Xoan's house, who informs Antía the events that transpired prior to Xoan's demise. After attending a spiritual retreat at Pyrenees, Antía completely abandons her mother, ultimately complicating their relationship. Seeking personal enlightenment and healing, she moves to an undisclosed location, thereby leaving her past behind.

Julieta bereaves the estrangement initially for the first three years by clinging onto a practice of celebrating her daughter's birthday in her absence each year. She waits with a cake, only to throw it away, hoping against all odds for atleast a postcard. This act underscores the severe emotional trauma that the estrangement made on Julieta. Society's idealization of maternal love as being pure, selfless and unwavering is reflected in Julieta's actions as she continues to nurture the broken connection with her daughter in the hope of regaining it. However, as the silence stretches on, her grief turns into anger, and that makes a significant shift in her life. It illustrates the intense emotional conflicts women have to face when societal expectations clash with their personal well-being. In a desperate attempt, she tries to free herself from the societal expectations and decides to remove all traces of the past by moving away to a new apartment in Madrid, a place untouched by memories of her daughter. Yet, the fact that she still clings onto the torn pieces of her daughter's pictures signifies the strong maternal connection which truly never fades and symbolizes the enduring nature of maternal identity.

Gripped by pain, Julieta's health continues to deteriorate. We see a tormented and frail Julieta sitting in the near empty apartment, writing in her diary and reminiscing about the past moments with her daughter. At the cusp of an emotional breakdown, forlorn and despondent, she wanders through the city and gets struck by a car. Lorenzo who witnesses this accident, rushes her to the hospital and while she recovers there, he collects some of her belongings, including an

unread letter. In it, Antía says that it is only after the death of her own son she realises the void she created, when she left without a word. The letter also has a return address, which Lorenzo interprets as an invitation to visit. The film ends with them driving to Switzerland to meet Antía, where Julieta states that she won't ask her for an explanation because she only wishes to be with her daughter. The climax sequence not only brings to the forefront the complexity of familial relationships but also raises some questions regarding the implications of maternal identities. Throughout the narrative, Julieta's identity is constructed around her roles as a mother and a nurturer and the abandonment she experiences from Antía serves as an example for the emotional toll that these roles can impact upon women. On the other hand, Antía's decision to leave her family behind can be viewed as a challenge towards the societal notions which propagate the patriarchal norms that bind women to family through the stereotypes of female familial duty. Even though, Antía's realization of her mother's pain and their eventual reconciliation brings a closure to the narrative, the film leaves some space for the audience to interpret the nature of this reunion. Julieta's words, "I am not going to ask her an explanation. I just want to be with her" (*Julieta* 01:31:45) are highlighted as an acceptance of Antía's personal choices, illustrating that maternal roles are not about dominance but acceptance and understanding. In this way, the film presents a nuanced depiction of the varying roles of women across different stages of life.

A close examination of Julieta's relationships, particularly with her mother and daughter reveals that they are entwined, reflecting the recurring cycles of emotional turmoil and helplessness. In both cases, silence dominates. In the beginning Julieta learns to adjust with her mother's fading memory and later with the void caused by Antía's estrangement. Infidelity from male characters worsens the situation in both relationships thereby exacerbating the emotional distance. In all scenarios, it is the woman who is left to bear the emotional burden caused by the men, thereby enhancing the unstable dynamics of the familial relationships. The relationship between Julieta and Xoan's friend, Ava portrays an unconventional form of camaraderie. Although Ava has a history of infidelity with Xoan, they move beyond this betrayal and remain close confidantes bonding over their shared grief and history. Their relationship transcends the expected fallout and represents a raw, real and resilient relationship.

In the context of sexual identities, the characterizations of Antía and Beatriz stand apart, as they are powerful representations which mark a departure from the conventional portrayals of female identities. Their relationship is portrayed as having the subtle ambiguous undertones of romantic shades. It stands in stark contrast to the heteronormative expectations presented throughout the film. But, after participating in the spiritual retreat Antia rejects Beatriz and this act can be interpreted as an influence of the traditional norms which pressurizes individuals to conform to the established norms of gender dichotomy. The spiritual retreat which she attends serves as a catalyst for Antia to suppress her non-conformist relationship, potentially out of the fear of causing unintelligibility. As Judith Butler has pointed out, “Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire” (23). Antia’s decision thus can be viewed as a deliberate attempt to adhere to the spectrum of gender intelligibility. It is also the fear of social stigma associated with such non-conformist relationships that often compel individuals to conform to the dominant patterns of heteronormativity. Through this depiction, the film subtly criticizes the dominant expectations pertaining to sexual identities.

It is through male characters that the movie further highlights the politics of gender roles and dynamics. Although they are supporting characters and have limited screen time, they are able to reiterate the domineering nature of patriarchy over the emotional lives of women. Each male character-Xoan, Samuel and Lorenzo- brings different aspects of masculinity, thereby showcasing their gender roles. Xoan, who is Julieta’s husband and Antia’s father is a prime example of hegemonic masculinity. MacKinnon writes, “Hegemonic masculinity was so named first by Connell in 1987, and was thus introduced to sociologists of gender. It was applied to the set of assumptions and beliefs about masculinity that pass as common sense” (9). A fisherman by profession, Xoan embodies the characteristics of stereotypical male figures who are emotionally elusive. His infidelity with Ava deeply disturbs Julieta and creates an emotional upheaval in their relationship. His extramarital relation is not only a personal betrayal but can also be read as a reflection of those ideals placed upon women to maintain the heterosexual relationships despite the failings of their respective partners. Xoan’s death leaves Julieta to deal with the consequences of his actions on her own. Rather than recognizing her father’s recklessness, Antia

blames Julieta for her father's death. Antia's emotional detachment and the eventual estrangement highlight how Julieta bears the burden for the consequences of Xoan's decisions.

Julieta's father, Samuel, is an example of complicit masculinity, which "refers to masculinity that in and of itself is not dominant but supports dominant masculinity" (Kahn 35). He is also portrayed as having an extra marital affair with the housemaid when his wife suffers from Alzheimer's disease. Though he looks after her, the emotional detachment he shows is evident in his actions. An example can be pointed out from a scene where Samuel comes to receive Julieta and Antía. Both Samuel and Sanaa greet them after locking Julieta's mother in her room. This action mirrors those of Xoan's, showcasing a pattern in the characterizations of these male characters, in giving priority to their own desires, while leaving their partners in their most vulnerable states. Neither of them provides the necessary emotional support, leaving their female counterparts to deal with the fallout on their own. It can be seen as a critique of those patriarchal aspects which neglect the emotional wellbeing of women and compound their roles only in nurturing and caregiving.

In contrast to these characters, Lorenzo appears to be embodying a more nuanced portrayal, showcasing empathy and emotional openness. His character can be identified as the new man who maintains less oppressive relationships with women. About the concept of new man MacKinnon observes,

The so-called 'new man' was created first in the 1970s but has been recreated in a variety of forms since then. He would seem to be a middle-class professional, white heterosexual, aged usually between mid-twenties and early forties, with a female partner-not necessarily wife-who has imbibed feminist ideas. Such information about him can be gleaned from 'lifestyle' men's magazines in particular. Traditional masculinity has been revised by the 'new man' so that he embodies the sort of anti-sexism which is characterized by his attempts to form non-oppressive relationships with women, children and other men. (13).

Although, in comparison, Lorenzo has a smaller role in Julieta's life, his actions and attitudes stand in stark contrast to the other male figures. He offers her emotional support without forcing her to disclose the painful details of her past. It is Lorenzo who interprets Antia's inclusion of her



address as an invitation to visit her. This act alone makes Lorenzo different, embodying a personality which gives importance to emotional attachment and empathy over domination.

All things considered, it is apparent that in *Julieta*, by keeping the women characters at the centre and male characters at the periphery, Pedro Almodovar meticulously weaves a narrative that explore the complexities of gender and the dynamics of gender roles. The experiences of Julieta and Antia illustrate how the burden of societal expectations has been placed upon them and how the patriarchal ideologies play a vital part in shaping their identities and emotional landscapes. While Xoan and Samuel's lack of emotional support forefronts the failings of hegemonic masculinity, Lorenzo presents before us another spectrum where masculinity is equated with emotion and empathy.

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