

**SUBVERTING NOTIONS OF HYPERMASCULINITY AND EFFEMINACY IN PEDRO
ALMODÓVAR'S *TALK TO HER* AND *THE SKIN I LIVE IN***

Jijo John Varughese Guest Lecturer St. Thomas College, Ranni, Kerala
Sambhu R Assistant Professor in English N.S.S. College, Pandalam, Kerala
Mail id- 3333sambhu@gmail.com

Abstract

The nuanced ways in which the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's films have dealt with the concept of gender has always proved to be an inexhaustible topic of research for academics and students of film theory. Almodóvar, whose films signal a break with conventional cinematic techniques and narration, can rightly be called one of the precursors of what has come to be called "New Spanish Cinema", the defining feature of which is its exuberant visual stylistics, fragmented or non-linear narration, and the sophisticated take upon the plasticity of gender roles. By examining two of Almodóvar's films—*Talk to Her* (2002) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011), the present paper attempts to shed light on how Almodóvar deconstructs gender politics. It also analyses Almodóvar's commitment to making films that represent notions of identity and sexuality from a psychoanalytic feminist perspective.

Keywords: *gender, biology, subversion, stereotype, New Spanish Cinema*

In their introduction to *gender and Spanish Cinema*, Steven Marsh and Parvati Nair argue that "It was, of course, the eruption in the mid-1980s onto the scene of world cinema of Pedro Almodóvar, as the single most hyped representative of a new liberated and democratic Spain, that heralded new ways to approach Spanish cinema" (7). P.J. Smith corroborates this view when he writes that "Almodóvar anticipates that critique of identity and essence that was later to become so familiar in academic feminist, minority, and queer theory" (3). From these quotes, it should be clear that Pedro Almodóvar is a director with an idiosyncratic style, one whose innovative zeal expresses itself in problematising accepted notions of identity, nationality, sex, and gender at different levels. As someone who has consistently "welcomed the fringe of society into his films, especially transvestites, transsexuals and others with a multifaceted sex life" (Petraakis 21), Almodóvar has created his own film universe away from mainstream Spanish cinema, which is devoted to a faithful reproduction of Hollywood tropes. Almodóvar's films examined in this paper— *Talk to Her* (2002) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011)— not only go off the beaten path but do so with a bang.

Talk to Her is a film that examines the feminine side of men. Varying its tone from a melodrama to a tragedy, the film argues that the most redeeming quality that men can possess is to embrace femininity in situations that call for it. *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*), which stirred up a lot of controversy on its release on account of reviewers calling it "his [Almodóvar's] most obscenely entertaining and shamelessly exploitative work to date (Ide), presents the subversion of gender roles through a sex-realignment surgery. The film's balancing of its rumination on the nature of biology as endlessly malleable through the progressive use of technology with the relentlessness of patriarchal roles imbues its premise that gender roles exist in a flux with a great deal of contemporary political relevance.

The present paper attempts to analyse both films from a psychoanalytic perspective informed by feminist theory. It tries to problematize the preconceptions about gender roles created by patriarchal forces to keep women in a perennially subservient position. The paper uses psychoanalytic theory as an important tool to expose myths pertaining to femininity and masculinity as reflected in the given films. It also tries to present Almodóvar as a pioneer of the redefinition of gender in Spanish cinema.

Before analysing the manner in which Almodóvar debunks many of the myths about gender, it might be worthwhile to address the concept as it has been construed through the ages. Whereas patriarchal accounts of gender harp on its inflexibility, modern re-conceptualisations of the concept alert us to the impossibility of drawing its boundaries in any hermetic sense. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (18). Though the question whether our biological sex determines our gender was not answered satisfactorily in the past, now we

know that “sex” and “gender”, though tantalisingly similar, are not synonymous with each other. Beauvoir’s reference to gender as a “becoming”, or as a process which is not determined by biological factors, most of all the sexual characteristics one has at birth, suggests that gender is a sociocultural construct whose parameters are never fixed.

It is not just the correspondence between sex and gender that Almodóvar problematises in his films but also concepts such as gender neutrality and transgenderism, which have mostly slipped through the cracks of mainstream cinema. The present paper will make use of Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze theory”, which is situated at the crossroads of psychoanalysis and feminist critique, to explore *Talk to Her* and *The Skin I Live In* as films that shatter the conception of a distinct male and female gender as defining traits that can easily be placed on black and white squares on a sociocultural chessboard of teeming and perplexing gender variety to formulate collective values.

Talk to Her narrates the multi-layered relationships between Benigno Martín (Javier Cámara), an effeminate male nurse, Marco Zuluaga (Darío Grandinetti), a journalist and travel writer, Lydia (Rosario Flores), a female bullfighter, and Alicia (Leonor Watling), a dance student who became comatose following a horrific car accident. The film depicts how their lives intersect in a hospital when Benigno falls in love with Alicia and Marco with Lydia. In a film with manifest feminist overtones, it is however the unlikely friendship between Benigno and Marco that structures the narrative and prepares the ground for the director to experiment with the flexibility of gender roles later on. This feature of this film, rather than detracting from its value, communicates its belief that an allegiance to feminist values has very little to do with being biologically a woman. The film employs its non-linear structure replete with flashbacks and flashforwards to narrate the interlacing stories of these four characters with a lot of sympathy and charisma.

The film begins with the story of Benigno Martín and Marco Zuluaga, who first run into each other at a ballet performance, being united years later in the bleak confines of a hospital ward where Benigno works as a full-time nurse caring for Alicia, a ballet student who has been comatose following a gruesome accident. Benigno gets reacquainted with Marco when the latter admits his lover Lydia González in the hospital. Lydia, a famous Spanish bullfighter worshipped by the nation for her bravado, is also now in a coma following a mishap in the arena. *Talk to Her* inverts the traditional image of women as mobile “objects” meant for male speculation by portraying its central female characters as comatose. As the narrative unravels, we find the four characters are locked in a complex relationship. It is not just the love these men bear for the female characters that becomes the focus of the film but also the subtle homoerotic relationship between Benigno and Marco. Things come to a pass when Benigno is imprisoned for raping Alicia. As he believes her to reciprocate his love, he declares his wish to marry her. But since she is comatose, he knows his wish can never come true. Benigno, who realises that the only way to unite with Alicia is to embrace her comatose condition, now takes an overdose of pills, which instead of paralysing his body, kills him. The film presents its second twist when Alicia wakes from her coma during childbirth. However, the baby is stillborn and Benigno dies before Marco can deliver the news.

Talk to Her at length becomes an exploration of the communicative act as the focal point of any relationship. The film’s title alludes to Benigno’s penchant to talk to Alicia though she is comatose. By replacing the feminine onus to “talk” to the man with the responsibility of the male figure towards the woman in emotional exchanges, the film destabilises the conventional idea of “empathy” as being associated solely with the female sex. One of the dangers of this view was that while it exonerated men for their hot-headedness, truculence, and casual brutality, it never allowed women to “hold back” their abundant store of empathy. For generations, literature and film have stereotyped women as “carers” and “givers” while adumbrating the more powerful and aggressive side of their personality. Almodóvar contests this boldly when he portrays Benigno as an “effeminate” man who cries effusively at ballet performances and Lydia as a “bullfighter”. By endowing a male nurse with supposedly feminine attributes and a beautiful woman with the machismo of a bullfighter, Almodóvar upsets our traditional ideas of gender.

In *Talk to Her* Almodóvar not only challenges gender stereotypes but also subverts the idea that melodrama means having emotionally vulnerable female characters in a film. The film almost

threatens to explode with melodramatic elements like debilitating accidents, lop-sided love affairs, a mysterious pregnancy, and an unexpected suicide, yet it resists becoming another maudlin expostulation on the curative powers of love through a skilful manoeuvring of gender equations. Linda Williams argues that the film is marked by “ecstatic excess” of woe, which is symbolized with tears and sobs (Williams, 1995). Added to all the usual ingredients of melodrama is a short black-and-white sequence about a diminutive man disappearing into a vagina presented with the genuine intensity of the silent films of the first half of the 20th century—an episode which, while overtly referring to the act of “penetration”, serves also to reinterpret it as a “reverse birth”, thus depriving the sexual act of its erotic associations.

The melodramatic elements of the film reach a climax when an ingenuous Benigno, whose name echoes “benignity”, sacrifices his life for the sake of Alicia. But instead of affording spectators the usual mode of engagement along patriarchal lines, the film at once becomes a parody of its own “excesses”. In this sense, Almodóvar’s *Talk to Her* can be interpreted as a good example of the ironic reworking of melodrama. By using melodrama to problematize binary oppositions like male/female, weak/strong, sentimental/bold, etc., the film underscores the futility of circumscribing gender roles within the boundaries of biological sex. The film, in short, is like a waltz in which “masculinity and femininity weave in and out”, one in which “men are identified with feminine and women with the masculine, and where the unconscious is treated as if conscious” (Hammond 58).

Pedro Almodóvar’s *The Skin I Live In*, adapted from Thierry Jonquet’s novel *Tarantula* (1984), is another masterpiece of Almodóvar’s that mixes horror and suspense dexterously to unravel a plot that audaciously broaches the question of what exactly constitutes gender identity. The film places itself at the cusp of the biology-as-destiny and gender-as-cultural inscription debate and makes us question the widely accepted formulations of sex and gender as self-contained categories. Whereas sex is seen as strictly biological and gender as strictly cultural by most theorists of gender, the film bursts our complacency regarding such insularities by offering a critique that confirms the mutual permeability of sex and gender.

The Skin I Live In tells the gut-wrenching story of a brilliant yet narcissistic surgeon, Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas), who is working on an indestructible, artificial skin which he fondly calls ‘GAL’. It is revealed through analepses that the motivation behind his relentless work is a personal loss he suffered some years back: his wife, herself called Gal, committed suicide by defenestration, following the trauma of a car accident which occurred while she was trying to elope with Ledgard’s half-brother Zeca. Ledgard, who identifies his own impassivity and ruthlessness as the real reason for Gal’s infidelity and consequent death, turns his attention to his daughter, Norma, whom he wishes to guard from the shadow cast by her mother’s death.

Although Norma is happy with her father at first, she understands that his affection for her is occasioned more by a premonition of possible loss than by any genuine feeling. Unable to thaw her father’s constitutional frigidity which estranges her from him at a deeper level, she retracts into her personal space. Norma’s alienation from her father is complete when she is confined to a mental asylum following a date rape, which Norma, in her deranged state, believes her father to have perpetrated. Ledgard is now thrown into a jolt at the tragic realization of his tacit complicity in the wreckage of his conjugal and filial relations. In a last-straw attempt to rebuild his ruined life, he tracks down Norma’s molester, Vicente, and incarcerates him in his lab as a test subject for ‘GAL.’

What Ledgard undertakes as an act of sadomasochistic retribution, beginning with the sexual reconstitution of Vicente into Vera, things take a surprising turn with the transgendered Vicente coming to resemble Ledgard’s late wife Gal down to the minutest detail. Vicente’s sexual reorientation is the manifestation of Ledgard’s unconscious desire to repossess his lost wife and erase the strain of personal blame from his memory. As Ledgard finally falls in love with his creation in an instance of pygmalionism, he not only seeks to re-enact his once-failed role as a loving husband but also projects all his unaccomplished dreams about Gal onto Vera with obsessive insistence. But Vera, who still possesses Vicente’s psyche despite her sex change, kills Ledgard in the act of consummating their love and returns to her mother’s dress shop. The film ends at the crucial moment where Vicente as Vera confronts his mother and announces that her son has returned.

The Skin I live In, which invites parallels with a Hitchcockian classic, wins over the viewers at once by purveying before them vivid images— a high-tech hospital in a sort of catacomb, gleaming scalpels, a cryogenic vat, wigs and a tiger suit— all suggestive of the film’s preoccupation with the question of identity. No one in the film is who or what they seem, although Robert comes closest to being a true representation of his tortured, terrible self—a man with no scruples, scientific or otherwise. He mourns the wife he lost after a fiery car crash and tells himself that he could have saved her with the skin he has only now perfected. Vera occupies the middle space between the Vicente he once was and the Vicente he longs to be; and Norma, whose name in Spanish means ‘the norm’, is ironically quite abnormal.

Ledgard’s Toledo villa is the prison-house where the impeccable Vera, played exquisitely by Elena Anaya, is kept. The movie’s first image is of Vera’s body extended in a yoga pose, though what looks to be her flawless skin turns out to be a body stocking that at a thematic level strikes parallels with the many layers of meaning of the film itself. The twisted science responsible for her plight is blood-curdling: it is the product of a twisted mind that seeks to lay its authorial imprint on the world. Ledgard’s hobby, which is bonsai trees, is again symbolic of his desire to warp Nature.

If we contrast the first words spoken by Ledgard: “Our face identifies us” (Almodóvar 2011) with the last words spoken by Vera: “I’m Vicente,” (Almodóvar 2011), it is clear that Almodóvar wishes to communicate the difference in perception regarding the constitution of gender identities. Robert Ledgard is obsessed with appearances; the artificial skin he creates is the culmination of his desire to demonstrate to the world that we are what we resemble outwardly. For him, a person becomes ‘man’ or ‘woman’ by virtue of his/her biology. But Vicente’s last words remind us that “the skin we live in” is not the *de facto* container of gender identities. In spite of being a woman on the exterior, Vera still has the thought-processes of a man. His fate is irresolvable as he resists containment into either category of sex and exists at the end of the film as a promise of post-genderism—the reminder that gender identities cannot be shoehorned into the mould of sexual binarism.

What Almodóvar calls into question in this path-breaking film is the rigidity of the sexual binaries. In this regard Almodóvar’s contention is similar to the one put forward by Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*. She says:

“When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.” (6)

Almodóvar also opposes the treatment of sex and gender as existing in a mimetic relation to each other. The film makes us think if what we understand by the term sex is solely the result of hormonal and chromosomal functions or if it is in any way the result of certain cultural practices too.

Gender roles can be described as “social norms, or rules and standards that dictate different interests, responsibilities, opportunities, limitations, and behaviours for men and women” (Johnson 37). Gender roles structure the various parts that individuals play throughout their lives, determining aspects of daily life from sartorial to occupational choices. Individuals learn the appropriate or expected behaviour for their gender informally by virtue of living in a social world. They internalize the discursive nuances which enable them to locate themselves in a social formation as either male or female. While individuals can accept or resist traditional gender roles in their own presentation of self, gender roles are a powerful means of social organization that impact many aspects of society. For this reason, individuals inevitably internalize conventional and stereotypical gender roles, irrespective of their particular chosen gender, and develop their sense of gender in the face of strong indoctrination about the correct gender role for their perceived body. Gender roles shape and constrain individuals’ experiences: men, women, and other genders are treated differently and have diverse life trajectories as a result of their ascribed role and the degree to which they conform. Thus conventional, dualistic understandings of gender roles become problematic, inasmuch as they are not representative of the diversity that exists within and across gender identities. The embeddedness of dyadic gender roles in society also contributes to the discrimination of individuals who do not conform to these prescribed

roles. Furthermore, “the notion of gender as a role obfuscates the performative and distinctive nature of gender, instead suggesting a situated and static function” (West and Zimmerman 127).

The feminist study of gender in film was launched in the early 1970s, with publications such as Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus* (1973) and Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape* (1973). These works chronicled the changing image of women in Hollywood and European art film, highlighting how the female characters related to the history of each era, how they were stereotyped, how active or passive they were, how much screen time they were allotted, and whether they served as positive or negative models for women in the audience. One of the most influential essays to emerge out of this engagement of film with gender was Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” first published in 1975. In this essay, Mulvey advances a theory of gendered representation and the “masculinization” of spectatorship in the classical Hollywood cinema based on Lacanian psychoanalytic theories.

Lacan is famous for his declaration that “there’s no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital W indicating the universal” (72). For him, it is a fabrication rather than a metaphysical concept with determinate content. By modelling her theory on Lacan’s views, Mulvey argues that “sexual objectification relates to the “male gaze” in the fact that it views a person as a sexual object for fetishistic fantasies, and disregards the person’s personality” (22). Her theory is also informed by the ideas of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Althusser argued “that ideology, which asserts itself through cultural and social institutions and practices, hails or interpellates us (73). Individuals do not exist prior to or apart from systems of ideology – they are produced as effects of it.

Mulvey adapted Althusser’s ideas to argue that the formal conventions of classic Hollywood cinema position the viewer to accept the patriarchal ideology articulated by films. Mulvey also adapts the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan to argue that the classical Hollywood film is structured according to the logic of the “patriarchal unconscious” that privileges male desire. Men *look* and women are *looked at*. The central male protagonist advances the plot through his gaze and actions. The male spectator engages in a narcissistic identification with the male hero, a process that repeats the discovery of an image of oneself in the “mirror phase” postulated by Lacan. The female character is presented as a passive erotic object for the visual pleasure of both the male hero and spectator. Gazing upon the female form (scopophilia) is posited in Hollywood films as pleasurable for the male subject.

Mulvey’s argument that it is through the gaze of the male protagonist, male director, and male spectator that the ‘signifier’ of woman is decoded is reflected in both films taken for sturdy here. Almodóvar’s films conform to Mulvey’s Lacanian thought in that they defy the fragmentation of the female body and its subsequent fetishism. Mulvey’s argument that the male gaze objectifies female characters by locating their bodies as sites that lack the phallus resonates with the anti-essentialist philosophy of *Talk to Her* and *The Skin I Live In*. These films destabilise the concept of the “active male” and the “passive female” by obfuscating gender boundaries.

In *Talk to Her*, Benigno, who is rather effeminate, proceeds to molest Alicia, and then takes an overdose of pills when fate balks at their reunification. By portraying a male character as swinging between gender polarities, Almodóvar insists that what is at stake is not the biological instantiation of gender, but the differing gradations of masculinity and femininity that do not allow for any strict demarcation. Similarly, *The Skin I Live In* subverts the fetishistic idealization of the female body by dissipating the ‘male gaze.’ Vicente, who rapes Norma in a drunken party, invites the male viewer to identify with him. It must be remembered that the name ‘Vicente’, which is derived from the Latin term ‘vincentius’, means ‘conquering.’ Norma’s body, the subject of his gaze, is the site where the patriarchal discourse that constructs women as the inevitable victims of male aggression is inscribed. But the film forces the male viewer to draw a line here as the legitimate extent to which the film seems to valorise a patriarchal discourse. It progressively deflates all patriarchal pretensions and turns the exclusivity of the ‘male gaze’ on its head with the abduction and subsequent sexual reassignment of Vicente.

The male viewer who so far identified himself with Vicente’s perceived macho image is in a quandary when he finds himself transformed into Vera on the screen by a process of reverse mimesis. The male viewer’s sense of phallic superiority is shaken when he vicariously shares Vicente’s

emasculatory anxiety as Vera. A rather disturbing moment for him would be Vera's rape at the hands of Zeca who is deluded into believing that Gal is still alive. It is interesting to note here that Zeca, while molesting Vera, wears a tiger suit—a trope that emphasizes masculine attributes. Thus, Almodóvar makes us reconsider the notion of gender as fixed through crafting plotlines and characters that do not yield to conventional interpretations.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1971. 127-188.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex* (Vintage Feminism Short Edition). United Kingdom, Random House, 2015.
- Hammond, M. "Talk to Her: Gender and Changing States in a Film by Almodóvar". *Journal of the British Association of Psychotherapists*, 43, 2005, pp. 56-63.
- Hein, Carolina. Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Germany, GRIN Verlag, 2008.
- Johnson, J. L. *Better Science with Sex and Gender: A Primer for Health Research*. Canada: Women's Health Research Network, 2007.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Nair, Parvati, Steven Marsh. *Gender and Spanish Cinema*. United Kingdom, Berg Publishers, 2004.
- Petrakis, J. "Masterful Melodrama, Pedro Almodóvar". The Christian Century Foundation, 2003.
- Smith, Paul Julian (1994), *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, London and New York: Verso
- Talk to Her*. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Pef. Antonio Banderas, Elena Anaya, Marisa Paredes, Jan Cornet, and Roberto Álamo. El Deseo S.A., 2011.
- The Skin I Live In*. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Performances by Javier Cámara, Darío Grandinetti, Leonor Watling, Geraldine Chaplin, and Rosario Flores. El Deseo S.A., 2002.
- West, C., and D.H Zimmerman. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society*." 1.2 (1987) 125-151.
- Williams, Linda, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess", in Stam, R & Miller, T (eds), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000, pp.207-221.