

It's a Woman's World: Almodóvar's Fighting Girls vs. the Struggles of the 90s

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Pedro Almodóvar is a well-known director that centers his films around his home country of Spain. Almodóvar was one of the heads of the arts movement called La Movida Madrileña. Dr. Mark Allinson wrote the book *A Spanish Labyrinth: Films of Pedro Almodóvar*, which analyzes Almodóvar's background and breaks down his films, "Pedro Almodóvar symbolized free and democratic Spain – as its chronicler and as its agent provocateur..." (Allinson 3). Almodóvar has been seen as a provocateur for his shock-filled and controversial films. His films have been seen as a starter of a movement of liberating Spain from its oppressed past and a look into the dark sides of the world. Almodóvar used his film, *All about My Mother* to fight against the oppression of women and the LGBTQ community from Spain's history and to bring forth the struggles that were faced in the 1990s. The oppression of these groups is rooted in Spain's history that goes back to the coup d'état of the Republic and the dictatorship of Franco.

The Republic, 1931-1939, was a golden age of for women in Spain. "According to the historian Mirta Núñez (2004), the Republic prompted women to have and seek an autonomous presence in the public sphere, a presence not subordinated to men. It pushed them to seek and find paid employment in order to make a living on their own, and it also tried to instill equality in early education" (Ayerra 247). During this time, women were extremely independent in living on their own and making a head way for the feminist movement in Spain. Women were powerhouse figure during the time of the Republic. Women held jobs in the government and could make very important decisions for the country. This included decisions during the second World War. "In 1933 the Spanish branch of the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism, was launched by the Communist Party along the lines of the Third Communist International. It was a unitary female organization devoted to the struggle against fascism and Hitler and Mussolini's war plans" (Ayerra 250). Franco was the biggest supporter of becoming allies with the likes of

Hitler and Mussolini. Franco's view points matched up with the dictatorships of the surrounding countries of Germany and Italy. This would lead to Franco's start of the coup d'état.

Francisco Franco started his dictatorship after being a general during the Spanish Civil War and the leader of the coup d'état in 1939 (Carbayo-Abengoza 81). During his time as dictator, Franco focused his power on giving the military and Catholic Church more power. "One of the most important reforms the Republic intended to carry out was the separation, once and for all, of Church and State" (Ayerra 248). But the coup d'état put a stop to this reform and the Catholic Church made many of social decisions for the country during this time. The powers of Hitler and Mussolini supported Franco and his changes. Doing so made Spain an enemy of the Axis Powers during World War Two. The treatment of women took a complete turn-around when Franco came into power. Women were able to have jobs and were able to take part in government decisions during the Republic. Once Franco took over Spain, women took a million steps backwards on the progression of women coming into power. Women were treated as dirty objects that were needed to just take care of the house and the children. "By referring to all women and their desire for dependency and by using the term 'bad germs', a word much used in advertising, the desires are manipulated and are kept under control through unconscious associations" (Carbayo-Abengoza 82). Treating women this way was how men tore down the women's self-esteem and was used to control them and their actions. The Catholic Church made women out to be the enemies of the church and that any women that didn't follow the submissive way that they were supposed to act were labeled as whores, trash, etc. "The burden or representation for Spanish women of Francoism consisted of an enormous responsibility, as seen throughout this article: the creation of a new image of women, the control of sexual desire, the maintenance of a pure, clean and Christian society and finally the physical and ideological

reproduction of new heroes” (Carbayo-Abengoza 86). Franco’s views were patriarchal. Franco’s view of women was that if women weren’t controlled, then he and the church did not have control of the country. Anyone who went against Franco and the Church’s Spain was scrutinized and judged as being a sinner/enemy of the country. This went with single mothers, women who didn’t want kids, and people who identify as being LGBTQ. The LGBTQ community also has had a long history of oppression by being looked at as having a mental illness and being kicked out of their homes by their families due to their gender identity and/or their sexual preferences.

The LGBTQ community has a history of having to go into hiding because their way of life was turned into an actual criminal act around the world. Homosexuality was looked at as a mental illness until it was taken out of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973 (Drescher 1). If anyone would come out to their family, they would be sent to a mental institution because it went against the social norms at the time or religious beliefs. Around the world, LGBTQ individuals were prosecuted for who they were and so many decided to camouflage into society until hopefully their time would come to be able to express themselves and live the way they wanted without the strict judgement. This all ended with Franco’s death in 1975. This allowed Almodóvar to begin his creative journey and bring his stories to life.

Almodóvar was born on September 25, 1949 (Marsh 1). This was right in the middle of the dictatorship. He attended a Catholic school in his small rural community of La Mancha. During his time in his small town, he discovered his love for movies at a small little movie theater. Almodóvar decided to move from his small country town to the big city of Madrid to try to follow his dream as a director, but that dream had to be put on hold due to Franco’s harsh

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censorship laws. During this time, Almodóvar worked at a telephone company and this experience and the people he met inspired a lot of the experiences/characters that we would later see in his movies (Allinson, 8). Almodóvar would later become one of the front-men for the film part of the cultural movement La Movida Madrileña (The Madrid Scene). The Madrid Scene was the time after Franco that Spain was now making a new identity as a country and taking back all the liberties that Franco took. This movement is described as having two effects on the country: “first, it ascribed what is arguably an over-determined role to youth cultures as the ambassadors of the new Spain; second, the cultural legacy of liberated Spain originated mainly with a youth which would inevitably grow” (Allinson 14). These effects came from Spain trying to reverse the policies that Franco created. This movement allowed Almodóvar to express the way he wanted to use the experiences he had witnessed to bring his stories to life. Almodóvar identifies as gay and this made him have to face what a lot of LGBTQ individuals face, and this is one of the topics that he brings up in his movies (Marsh, 6). Almodóvar likes for his characters to be women and/or LGBTQ individuals to show the audience that problems that these groups can overcome. One of the prime examples of this is his film *All about My Mother*.

All about My Mother came out in 1999 and earned Almodóvar one of his Academy Awards (Kakoudaki 141). The film centers around a mother who suffers the loss of her only son and she goes on a journey back to her home in Barcelona to try to find the boy’s father. The boy’s father is a transgender woman who had no idea she had a son. When she gets back to Barcelona, she meets up with old friends, meets new friends, and learns that she has found another to be a family again with the people that help her on her journey. On her journey, the mother and her friends have to handle the struggles of the time period on their way to find the boy’s father. All the characters consist of different women that have their own individual

problems that they must overcome. Almodóvar puts all this into one movie to show the audience the relevancy of the characters and the relevancy of overcoming the problems that were going on when the film came out in 1999. By doing this, Almodóvar make his characters overcome the oppression that had struck the country of Spain and turn them into powerhouses.

Manuela is the main protagonist. She is a single mother who lived with her 17-year-old son, Esteban. Manuela aspired to be an actress but had to give up that dream to have Esteban. Due to this, Esteban is obsessed with playwrights and his favorite play is *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which Manuela played one of the leading roles of Stella before having Esteban. Manuela gets tickets to go see the famous Huma Rojo play *Blanche* in the play. After the play, Esteban tries to get Huma Rojo's autograph, and this is where he gets hit by a car and dies. Manuela would have been judged by everyone, especially by the Catholic Church, for being a single mother and if they knew about Esteban's father being transgendered would cause an uproar. The first struggle that Manuela has to face is to decide to donate Esteban's organs or not. Manuela is a nurse in the transplant department and she understands how important donations are. Manuela has to handle the death of her child which every parent expects that they will pass before their children. Manuela overcomes this experience and decides to go on a journey to find Esteban's father, a transgendered woman name Lola. When Manuela goes back to Barcelona, she finds Huma Rojo as she is putting on the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* again. The use of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is an artistical decision that contrasts to *All About My Mother*.

The artistic element of using the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is that this play is a staple for oppression of women. The two lead female characters in the play, Stella and Blanche, are victims in the play. Stella is in a very abusive marriage and ends up pregnant by her abusive husband. Blanche, Stella's sister, comes to stay at her sister's home and ends up getting rape by

Stella's husband, Stanley. Stanley makes Blanche look as if she is crazy and makes everyone think she is crazy. Blanche ends up being sent to a mental institution. Almodóvar uses this play to parallel his film with having his characters to not let their situations to consume them. Despina Kakoudaki notes how *All About My Mother* differs from *Streetcar* when she writes, "In *All about My Mother*, however, the traffic between onstage and offstage worlds is two-way: characters extend their personal dramas into performance" (Kakoudaki 144). This parallel that intertwines on and off the stage is what will later bring the characters together and help figure out the struggles that the women have to face.

The Catholic Church had a lot of power during the time of Franco and since Almodóvar is a gay man living in a highly catholic country, he had to give something to the Catholic Church in *All About My Mother*. The Catholic Church does not agree with a lot of the topics looked at in the film like drug use, prostitution, and the LGTBQ community. So, Almodóvar created the character of Rosa. Rosa is a young nun who helps people who are drug addicts, prostitutes, and transgender individuals. She is someone that these people can go to for help, and she doesn't judge. But, Rosa is different. Rosa is a nun who is HIV-positive and is pregnant by a transgendered woman. Rosa's whole character goes against everything that the Catholic Church stands for. "Here the nuns who are tempted by what the outside world offers... have ventured out into a sordid world of prostitution, drug addiction and AIDS..." (Allinson, 35). With this notion of Rosa being the Catholic Church's symbol in the film, Rosa feels the effects of having her parents turn their backs on her, just like the people that she helps go through.

"Rosa's mother is a cynical pragmatist who does not understand her daughter's vocation, interpreting it as an act of rebellion" (Allinson, 64). Rosa's mother is the parent figure that turns her back on her daughter for her life choices. Rosa's father isn't in the picture due to him

suffering with Alzheimer's disease (Almodóvar). Rosa's mother does not agree with the path that Rosa has chosen and lives taking care of Rosa to Manuela. Manuela becomes Rosa's motherly figure that embraces Rosa. Doing this is filling the loss of a child that Manuela feels after Esteban's death. Towards the end of the film before Rosa's timely death Manuela says to Rosa, "If only I had you and your child to myself" (Almodóvar). Manuela had made this connection with the young Rosa which leads Rosa to giving Manuela custody of baby Esteban. Almodóvar throughout the film looks at Rosa and Manuela as single mothers that overcome their hardships together. The relationship between Rosa and Manuela turns out to be more positive as single mothers than the relationship between Rosa and her family. "Both these 'model mothers' are single mothers, Almodóvar presenting the alternative family in a positive light" (Allinson, 66). Being a single mother is still judged today, but it was very harshly looked at during the times of Franco and the Catholic Church. When Manuela first meets Rosa, Agrado introduces Manuela to Rosa at the help clinic that Rosa works at. Manuela tells Rosa "I'm not a whore despite how I've been treated sometimes" (Almodóvar). This tells us that Manuela has been judged about her past and she makes sure that people do not label her for things that she had to do. A lot of the prostitutes during this time were forced into the profession due to life choices that went against the cultural and religious values of the country.

Prostitution was on the rise in the 1990s as people in the LGBTQ community were kicked out of their homes by their families due to their sexual orientation and/or gender orientation. Almodóvar has one character that actually chose to be a prostitute and that is Agrado (Almodóvar). Agrado is everything she goes against Franco and the Church's belief. She is transgendered, embraces her enjoyment of sex, and is a prostitute. Agrado means agreeable and Agrado has a monologue in the film that describes how she lives. In this monologue she says,

“They call me La Agrado, because I have always tried to make everyone life more pleasant. I used to work the streets, on bridges, near the cemetery.... Aside from being pleasant I am also very authentic” (Almodóvar). After saying that she is very authentic, she goes into all the surgery she has had to become a woman. The way she looks makes her confident and she embraces femininity. Simone de Beauvoir express in her book *The Second Sex* that “It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality know as femininity” (xiii). Agrado is a character that threatens the traditional sense of the word feminine due to the fact that she was born a man. She has found herself and she has accepted that she was meant to be a woman. She accepts herself and she wants to make others lives pleasant because she understands the hardships that life can throw at people due to her experiences of being a transgendered prostitute. At the end of her speech, she expresses the work put into being authentic. “It cost me a lot to be authentic. But we must not be cheap in regard to the way we look. Because a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself” (Almodóvar). In this statement, she isn’t just talking about the cost of money that it took to look like a woman. She is talking about the hard work and struggle she had to go through to be able to look like her dream self. Agrado accepts her situation and is able to live with what goes on with her life, but a lot of people in her situation normally have to just adapt and deal with being thrown into prostitution, which can normally lead to drug addiction.

One of the struggles that did not start in the 1990s, but certainly did increase during this time is the drug epidemic. “Drug use is the prime cause of AIDS in Spain and the country has the highest infection rate in the EU (Truscott and Garcia 1998: 266) ... More significant perhaps, is the fact that despite the sexual risks of prostitution, drug use rather than sex is the transmission

route, which testifies to the reality of contemporary Spain's drug problem". (Allinson, 62).

Almodóvar uses the nightlife in the beginning of the film to bring forth very common social issues that were a problem during this time. The problem of drugs, in the film, is just used as a little side problem that the characters have to deal with. Out of all the characters of the film, Lola and Nina Cruz are the only characters that deals with the issues of drugs in the film. Lola is Esteban and baby Esteban's transgendered father. Lola is a transgendered prostitute that is addicted to drugs. Lola is also the one who gave Rosa HIV. Lola obtained HIV through drugs and not due to his sexual orientation (Almodóvar). Lola and Nina both run away from their drug problems instead of allowing the people around them to help them. Nina is Huma Rojo's co-star in the play and lover. Nina struggles with drug addiction. This brings the drug epidemic during the 1990s into the limelight and how the one person's addiction effects their life, along with the lives of those who are in the addict's life. The film really brings out the effects that addicts' loved ones feel by showing how Nina's addict effects Huma Rojo. When Nina goes missing on one of her drug binges, Huma is absolutely struck with worry because she has no idea where Nina could be. Then when Manuela comes back after leaving with baby Esteban, Huma Rojo can't even be in the same room when Agrado tells Manuela about Nina leaving (Almodóvar). When Manuela returns to her makeshift family with baby Esteban, she brings the story together with a miracle.

The miracle is that baby Esteban did not contract HIV from his mother when he was born. Everyone is shocked at the news because he is the first baby to be born without HIV (Almodóvar). Almodóvar uses Baby Esteban as symbolism to a new beginning for the younger generation. This goes back to the younger generation being the leaders of the post-Francoism Spain. The Madrid Scene movement gave both the older and younger generations relief from

Franco's policies. "...the change in the cultural environment was rapid and at times excessive. Thus, while for many adults Spain's new democracy represented the achievement of radical political ambition through peaceful means, for the younger generation it meant an instantaneous break with repressive social norms and regulations" (Allinson, 13). Baby Esteban being HIV free shows that the world can be free of the AIDS epidemic and people can stop treating people with AIDS and the LGBTQ community like leopards. Baby Esteban is the main reason for Manuela to return to her new found family.

Almodóvar made his film *All about My Mother* to prove that the oppressions of the past would not be Spain's national identity. His characters in his film prove to overcome the struggles that they are faced with and that it doesn't take blood to make a family. The struggles of the 1990s helped make families of their own with the strengthening of the LGBTQ community, the family that the prostitute community made for themselves, and the war on drugs more prominent. The characters of *All About My Mother* are introduced to the struggles of the 1990s in the forefront so they can beat them and embrace the new decade of the 2000s with the power to push forward to fight the oppression even more. These women made their own family and made the world their own. It's a woman's world and Almodóvar will never let the audience forget it.

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