

Week 2 : Chinese Cinema

Chinese Cinema's Criticism of Patriarchy : Female characters in *Raise the Red*

Lantern (1992)

On the surface, Zhang Yimou's *Raise The Red Lantern* (1992) is a powerful domestic drama of romantic rivalry, set in the 1920s, but it is in fact more than just a historical epic. *Raise the Red Lantern* questions and criticizes the patriarchy through its representation of women, their social roles and place within the hierarchy.

Songlian, *Raise the Red Lantern's* female protagonist, has the potential to be strong and independent, however she, as well as the other female characters, are locked into competing to be the perfect wife. The audience is first introduced to Songlian in medium close-up, looking into the static camera as she refers to being a wife as being a concubine. Tears roll slowly down her face during this long duration shot emphasizing her impending fate. This first shot establishes two things: one, the main character is confined to her position to being just a wife, and two, her performance and delivery demonstrates this criticism of patriarchy.

When Songlian arrives at the Chen household to take her place as Chen's fourth wife she is dressed in a white shirt and black skirt and her hair is braided in pig tails, connoting the fact she's educated. She also walked instead of being carried in the traditional bride sedan and carries her own luggage. All the makings of a non traditional independent Chinese woman, but the mise-en-scene heavily contradicts this. Once in the household, Songlian is mostly in long shot, showing the audience the grey high walls of the disorientating house that Loeb describes as an, "eerily symmetrical labyrinth of corridors" (2011: 206) which surrounds her. She also walks and looks around uncomfortably demonstrating the feeling of imprisonment.

Master Chen is also never truly seen. He is shown in long shot and often in shadows such as the scene at the table where the viewers only hear his voice off-screen. He is almost an invisible force that binds these women to the household – the embodiment of the law. There are also many high-angle shots throughout the film, looking down on the courtyards and entrances to the wives' houses – giving the spectator a feeling of surveillance. This is enhanced by the fact that Meishan, the third wife, is punished with death for having an affair; her attempt to escape from patriarchal tradition. This all suggests that Songlian's, and any of the female characters' personalities, strengths and attributes are meaningless as they are prisoners of the patriarchy.

One key element of the film is the representation of the women as rivals. When Chen chooses where to sleep each night the four wives are forced to stand and watch as the housekeeper announces the Master's favourite wife. Red lanterns are lit around the chosen household – the colour red is significant in this film as it portrays power and status. For example, the Master's favoured wife has privileges such as choosing the household meal the following day – so red symbolizes the wife's status and place within the hierarchy of the household. A low-angle close up of a single red lantern is followed by a montage of medium long shots of the wives emphasizing the women's their performance; all glaring at each other, especially Songlian and Meishan who are binary opposites in style and background and, at the beginning, have the bitterest rivalry between the wives.

Mcfarlane states that there is a build up from the beginning of conspiracy and jealousy between the wives (2006) and the character Zhuoyan, the second wife, is a perfect example of this. Unlike Songlian and Meishan, she is not as young or as conventionally beautiful. Zhuoyan is first introduced as a substitute mother for Songlian who is generous and kind. However, later the viewers find out that Zhuoyan had tried and failed to cause Meishan to have a miscarriage when they were both pregnant. Eventually

she took drugs to try to give birth before Meishan because she wanted the honour and status of having a son first. Unfortunately she failed and gave birth after Meishan and to a daughter instead of a desired son; at one point she says, "I'm useless! I only have a daughter!". This enforces the patriarchal value and importance of motherhood. This is later enhanced by the permanent red lanterns and red décor in Songlian's house when she claims she is pregnant. Zhuoyan is sneaky and twisted as she makes Yan'er, Songlian's maid, create a voodoo doll of Songlian and also lies to the Master to turn him against Songlian and to favour herself. All these bitter actions by Zhuoyan and the tension between Songlian and Meishan are all caused by the patriarchy forcing them to compete for the attention of their master through their bodies, sexuality and maternity by promising them status and power .

In conclusion, *Raise the Red Lantern* is far more than just an historical love drama – it underlines issues and faults within the patriarchy through the representation of Chen's wives. Nowell Smith describes the film as a period piece centred on women rebelling against the patriarchy much like *Judou* (Zhang 1990). These women, all in their own ways, are strong characters with different talents, and regardless of the rivalry between them, they all occupy the traditional role of the tortured and desperate wife who is trapped in a hopeless situation (Chow 1995).

Week 6 : Iranian Cinema

Jafar Panahi's Criticism of the Mistreatment of Women in Iranian Society: *The Circle*

(2000)

The Circle (Panahi, 2000) was and is still banned in Iran due to the fact that it questions and criticises the mistreatment of women in Iranian society. This is not only done

by the bluntness of the female characters' tragic lives within the narrative but also through the visual representation of imprisonment and restriction. This is heavily implied through the film's mise-en-scene and cinematography.

The Circle follows the difficult and problematic lives of several women; two women temporarily released from prison, another who escaped from prison and is in need of an abortion, a prostitute and a mother who is a drug user. They have all been in prison at some point and the audience never discovers the allegations behind their arrests. Cardullo believes that this is done to suggest that the women's crime is nothing more than their gender (2002).

Many of the female characters are often in scenes which contain bars, grates and railings – connoting entrapment. The most noticeable character this happens to is Pari. She is a woman who is in need of an abortion but cannot have one due to the fact she does not have a man's permission. Her husband has been executed and her father refuses to speak with her, so she has no male consent. At one point, she is shot talking with Monir, an old female friend who works at the local theatre. They are both behind the ticket booth, which is grated with thick steel bars - signifying a prison as well as obstructing the audience's view. In addition, when men come to buy tickets, their bodies completely block the spectator's view of the women connoting the unimportance of women compared to men. This is continued in another scene in which Pari is filmed in a hospital through a small plastic window, very much like a prison peep-hole. She is in very long shot, making her seem very small to the audience. As the corridor is shrouded in shadows she appears trapped and confined.

The scene at the hospital between Pari and Elham, a friend and a nurse, is very significant since it not only shows female restriction but the patriarchal dominance in Iranian society. Pari is seated on the metal grated bench facing the audience in a static

medium shot and Elham walks in and hands her a prison-like tray of food. Elham then sits on a bench behind Pari, her back to the camera. There are a lot of opposites in this scene; Elham wears white whereas Pari wears black, Elham is on the left Pari on the right, Elham facing away from the viewers and Pari facing them. The women are also both separated by the bars of the metal bench. This separation is significant because Elham is married to a doctor and therefore has some freedom and rights, though limited, due to her husband's power. In contrast, Pari is in need of an abortion, has no husband and no money. Regardless of the fact they have been friends for a very long time, Elham is not willing to risk losing her husband and her few privileges to help Pari get an abortion. Naficy says that there is no decent life for any of *The Circle's* female characters because they are condemned by their circumstances- prostitution, pregnancy, abortion, crime and male oppression (2012: 129). This whole scene proves this because it suggests that Pari is powerless over her own life and choices. She is completely trapped due to the fact she is a woman, but even more, a woman without a man.

The feeling of entrapment is also portrayed through the restricted narrative causing the illusion of constant danger. Near the beginning, the film follows two women; Nargess, an 18 year old girl, and Arezou, a slightly older woman who is helping her. The audience knows nothing of these women other than they are on the run from police – creating the feeling of worry and anxiety. They also had a third friend but after a few minutes of screen time she disappeared, taken by the police, suggesting the instability and fragility of their lives. Johnson claims that these women are just puppets in a mechanically closing trap (2001: 55). This is enhanced by the shaky hand-held camera that follows them, giving the impression of trauma and worry. This is noticeable in a scene where Nargess and Arezou are hidden behind a car. There are sounds of police sirens and cars, Arezou looks around the car cautiously, holding Nargess back. The camera never sees what Arezou is looking

at, and since the shot lasts an uncomfortably long time, tension builds up causing the audience to panic for them. The film does not reveal their worries or crimes, it only highlights that they are hunted, portraying their vulnerability within the society they live in.

In conclusion, these women have no real freedom or voice. Cardullo states that Panahi made the female characters actual prisoners to underscore that Iran is a prison as these characters find they are no less confined outside prison than in it (2000: 635). This is clearly represented by the restricted spaces and the mise-en-scene's connotations to prison life.

Week 8: Spanish Cinema

Pedro Almodóvar's celebration of motherhood: *All about My Mother* (1999)

Stone describes Almodóvar's films as camp and cosy but with an underlining moral hangover (2002: 73). This criteria fits *All About My Mother* (Almodóvar, 1999) which on the surface is celebrating motherhood while at the same time questioning the patriarchal family structure. *All About My Mother* follows the life of a woman called Manuela who loses her son, Esteban, and then tries to find his father in an attempt of granting her dead child his last wish. The film highlights the importance of motherhood through the relationships between the film's predominant female cast. At the same time, it completely disregards fatherhood through the negative portrayal of the few male characters as well as the lack of them.

All About My Mother focuses heavily on positive female traits, especially those relating to motherhood. The obvious relationship between Manuela and Esteban is what drives the narrative. Manuela is the first character the audience sees, which already

establishes her as the main character. In an early scene she is shown preparing dinner for Esteban and as they eat she states that she would do anything for him. On top of which she is an intensive care nurse which enhances the idea of her being a carer. Esteban dies early in the film however the mother-son bond is shown through close-ups of Manuela. When Esteban dies, there is a big close-up on Manuela's face as she cries out for her son. This also happens when she speaks to the other female characters, the camera lingers on her giving the spectator a chance to reflect on her pain signifying that even though he is gone she is still his mother. This can also be seen through the colour of red, which is predominant in the character's costume. When Esteban is still alive, Manuela almost always wears red. When outside of the theatre Manuela wears a red coat and is stood in front of a bright red poster of Huma. When Esteban dies at the hospital, Manuela has removed her red coat and is dressed in dull grey and black clothing. The colour red is often associated with motherhood, so when Manuela loses her son her colourful red clothes are lost too. Though, once Manuela starts caring for others, she slowly begins to add the colour red back into her life. Sofair says that the title "All about..." describes motherhood as an 'all about' presence, something that isn't fixed or structured (2001: 42). This idea can be seen after Esteban's death when Manuela's mothering instincts are placed within other characters, primarily female characters. She isn't by blood their mother but symbolically placed in the parental position. When Rosa, a not so rule abiding nun, becomes pregnant she runs to Manuela for sanctuary. Manuela takes care of Rosa regardless of the fact she barely knows her. Huma says that she has always depended on the kindness of strangers and this is the case for all the female characters. Having faith and an emotional connection to people has always been seen as a typical female and motherly trait. In *All About my Mother* it is portrayed very positively through the caring attitude of Manuela's character and motherly instincts.

Rosa's mother is the only 'negative' mother within the film. She refers to Rosa as an 'alien' and leaves Rosa in the care of Manuela when she discovers that her daughter is pregnant. This 'bad-mother' figure seems to be more of an attack on men than it is on motherhood. Rosa's mother is distant from her child due to the fact she has to look after her husband, the only heterosexual father in the film. He is only scene twice in the whole film and mostly in long shot. Due to age and illness he does not remember his family, he does not even recognise his daughter, Rosa. He only ever asks women what their height and age are; Sofair argues that this is done as if to reduce women to the criteria of his sexual desire (2001: 42). The fact that he is incapable of caring for his child and needs to be cared for himself makes him a liability and stops Rosa's mother from being a good mother to her child.

The only other father in the film is Esteban's transsexual father, Lola, also the father to Rosa's baby who she names Esteban after Manuela's late son. Lola's name is mentioned occasionally throughout the film where she is referred to as a cheat and a thief. She is only ever seen near the end when she discovers that Esteban is dead and new baby Esteban has HIV like her. She only sees her new born son once and is then never seen again. Huma informs Manuela that Lola has died at the end of the film; her death and even her life serving little importance. She was never there for her eldest son and never met him, and now she can never be there for her youngest son to whom she infected with the HIV virus.

All About My Mother was made during Spanish Cinema's 'blue period' where film engaged with social themes such as child abuse and domestic violence. These interests and themes were often linked and intersected with traditional patriarchal structures (Pavlović 2009: 186-187). So, in conclusion, Almodóvar enforced and celebrated motherhood in *All About My Mother* while demeaning fatherhood as an attempt to create

an alternative to the patriarchal family model where the father played the most important role as a way to address these social problems.

WORD COUNT : 2726

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