

# Interpretation of Male Images in Almodóvar's Film— Taking *Bad Education* as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

Famous Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar has always been a controversial character, whose films are always exaggerated and strange and spare no efforts in demonstrating human's primitive desire, passion and violence. He is adept in exhibiting a new women image that is diverse and non-conventional to the public. Therefore, most of the studies on the images in Almodóvar's films are about women. Nevertheless, his *Bad education* tells a story from a male's perspective and the main characters are mostly male, which make it different from his other works. This paper uses *Bad education* as the subject and focuses on the analysis of the features of the male characters in the film, hoping to study the characteristics of how Almodóvar portrays male images.

**Keywords:** *Almodóvar, Bad education, male image, method*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Bad education* is created by Almodóvar in 2004, which is one of his few films that tells stories of men. To be more specific, it is a story of four gays. Almodóvar once said that it is an autobiographic film that is adapted from his true childhood experience. The story begins with a gay couple, Ignacio and Enrique, Ignacio's brother Juan and Priest Manolo. The story is told back and forth between reality, memories, script and film. Suspense built, suspense let down, and the complete story is told to the audience step by step, presenting four extremely vivid male images to people. Conventionally, the main male image is usually shaped in a movie by two ways. The first way is building a man filled with righteousness, a strong body and handsome face, perhaps a superhero who keeps the world safe or a man who undertakes the responsibility to feed the family and be their backbone. The second way is shaping a dark and evil image who are insidious and powerful. They represent a negative male power<sup>[1]</sup>. As for *Bad education*, even though it tells the story of four men (even the only feminine character Ignacio is a man who has not completely changed his gender), it does not come across as a film about male power or pure masculine. There is no absolute dualism in this movie, which shatters the conventional male stereotypes. These non-conventional and not-so-masculine male images present us with a richer and more diverse male perspective.

## 2. ANALYSIS ON FEATURES OF THE MALE IMAGES IN BAD EDUCATION

### 2.1 Marginalized and Polarized Images

Almodóvar's films are always filled with elements such as homosexuality, drugs, homicide, and fraud. Characters tend to be polarized when these elements are applied to them. The fact not only pushes the story, but also makes the images more dramatically tense to generate stronger emotions among the audience. Most characters appear in *Bad education* are socially marginalized people who live in the outskirts of city or the bottom of society. Some of them look positive and glamorous eternally, but keep a dark side internally, which reveals their solitude and desperation<sup>[2]</sup>. Ignacio was a homosexual, a transvestite and a transgender, and any of his identity would seem too atypical in the society. Although Almodóvar tried his best to create a relatively relaxing vibe where people were having fun in a tranny pub calmly while dancers were performing voluptuously on the stage and how Ignacio and his friends walked on the street fearlessly, all of which make the audience have an illusion that marginalized communities like homosexuals are normal in that environment. The fact, however, is not true. On the outside, Enrique was a passionate director who owned his own studio. But he was a homosexual who chose to conceal his true feelings but not accepted by the society at that time<sup>[3]</sup>. As a preacher, Priest Manolo was supreme, revered and respected on the outside, but he was actually a total pedophile who turned his back against his belief and could not control his desire. The fact made everything seem so paradoxical and absurd.

## 2.2 Tragic Characters

There are only two types of stories throughout the history, which are comedy and tragedy, and comedy is merely a disguised tragedy. Stories and characters that worth telling are usually tragic. In *Bad education*, Almodóvar attempted to exhibit the tragedy of characters in a relatively objective and not so sentimental way<sup>[4]</sup>.

There is no wailing scene in the ending part of the film but only held tears back, quivering Adam's apple and mirthless eyes. These restrained and held-back emotions devour the heart of the audience gradually. Finally, it seems that all emotions are cracking down when Juan wailed uncontrollably. These are the emotions of the characters as well as the audience. In the end, the audience will wonder how the film plans to wrap it up when everything has come to light, such as whether the bad guy is going to get what he deserves and whether Enrique is going to revenge yet another time. But our guesses are all wrong since there is no end to the story. Ignacio's script is adapted into a film which he never has the chance to see it. In the face of Juan who killed his first love, Enrique's resentment and sorrow were not so obvious. There is no judgement of good and evil, and no satisfying ending. Sometimes, calmness is even scarier than death and fierce fight-back, which means people are accepting the cruelty of the reality and live on with their pain of loss and sorrow of not having what they want, and this is the darkest tragedy<sup>[5]</sup>.

## 2.3 Absence of Father Image

Normally, Almodóvar tends to focus on the depiction of mother images in his films while father image is weak. As an important part of patriarchy, fatherhood is utterly missing in this male-dominated film, and no father of the main characters has ever appeared or been mentioned throughout the film<sup>[6]</sup>. However, even though Ignacio and Juan's mother appeared only for a few minutes, she demonstrated her kindness and amiableness who always believed in and tolerated the good image of her own children. She believed that both of her sons were kind even if Ignacio was doing drugs and stealing things, she always chose to believe in him. Even though Juan killed his own brother, she never showed any doubt. If the loss of father image is the director's purpose, the positive image of mother will make the loss even more extreme.

## 3. APPROACHES TO BUILD MALE CHARACTERS IN BAD EDUCATION

### 3.1 Shaping of Characters (Strengths, Weaknesses and Transitions)

In *Bad education*, Almodóvar never deliberately embellished or defamed anyone, but presented these

paradoxical and controversial figures in front of the audience.

Ignacio represents kindness and beauty in the film. He had a beautiful face and melodious voice when he was a boy, looking so innocent, even he sold his flesh and soul in order to keep his love. When Ignacio was an adult, he became a completely different person from whom he used to be. That was a shocking, ugly and incongruous body, even his character became obnoxious with drugs, blackmailing and theft. He was insulting his own body and soul with all these indecencies. Ignacio once said that he was thinking about becoming clean of drugs before his death. But if you thought about it, was it really what he wanted? Even if it was, would he get rid of his rotten lifestyle? It was hard to say yes.

Enrique claimed to be a hedonist who didn't have a religion or belief. He had suspected Juan's identity a long time ago and he still keep Juan. Not only did he agree that Juan can take Ignacio's role, but he also indulged himself in the carnal desire with him. Enrique was pure and friendly in his childhood, and protected Ignacio while facing the awe-inspiring priest. But he became snobbish after became a director. He was enthusiastic about dramatic arts and always challenged his own extremes. He would chase after misery and finally devoured between art and reality.

Juan's beauty was purely physical in comparison with his brother Ignacio, who had beautiful voice and love. But he seemed to be more direct and lucrative. His beauty resembled a blossoming rose that gave out appealing fragrance in the first half of the film. The story, however, took an unexpected downturn after what was behind the priest was exposed, and it turned out to be a dangerous poppy. Juan was an outstanding actor who didn't have a childhood like Ignacio's, which was bound by religion and violated, but he had a more twisted character. He even murdered his brother to replace him and achieved his goal with lies and talents.

As the priest of the church and the school headmaster, Manolo should have stood for religious redemption but instead, he was the symbol of social power. Manolo took away Ignacio's virginity and then his life with heroin, which is extremely heinous in terms of morality. But his obsession about young boys also makes him a pathetic figure. How he wanted to control Ignacio and how he courted Juan, all of which showed the childishness and blindness of a man crazily in love. But Manolo was bound to be devoured by his own desire when his desire broke off religious taboos and moral restraints. Leaving aside the rationality of pedophilia itself, what can be confirmed is that when a person goes through all the struggling between desire and morality, fantasy and practice, it is completely different between a pedophile and a pedophile who has actually violated children<sup>[7]</sup>.

### 3.2 Complicated Relations of Characters

The relations of the four characters in *Bad education* are complicated which enrich the entire story, and lead to different destinies of these characters.

The pure love between Ignacio and Enrique is the warmest part of the film, even though this relationship perished because of the forceful intervention of Manolo. Enrique was a successful director in reality and had been loyal to his pure first love. After all, he directed a film that could not replace the fact itself, and he was enamored by the fake Ignacio. Ignacio once wrote him before he died, saying that he thought he succeeded, and at a moment, he still looked like the innocent youth who yearned for success and love with his lover. Ignacio loved Enrique till the day he died, however, it is an unequal relationship that can be told from their different situations.

The relationship between Priest Manolo and Ignacio is controller and the controlled. Manolo destroyed Ignacio twice. First, he took over Ignacio with his religious authority to cater his perverted desire, and that was when Ignacio lost his belief. Second, he took away his life with highly concentrated heroin. It can be said that Manolo was the one to blame for the tragic life of Ignacio.

The relations between Juan and Manolo, Juan and Ignacio, Juan and Enrique, Juan was always the one in control in comparison with these straightforward relations above. Apparently, Juan was a powerful person who was consistent with the material spirit of the new age, and every move he took came with a purpose. Externally, Manolo took over his body with money externally, but in fact, Juan made use of Manolo's desire to murder. On the outside, Enrique still took over his body even though he knew Juan was faking as another person, while Juan used Enrique and paved the way to his own actor career.

### 3.3 Dramatic Conflicts

Where there are people, there is conflict. Conflicts were created again and again by Almodóvar in *Bad education*, and each conflict escalated the paradoxes among people, people and themselves as well as people and the environment, all of which push the story forward and make the audience be curious about how their destinies would be. The pure love between Ignacio and Enrique was not religiously acknowledged, while Manolo took advantage of the religion and took away Ignacio's virginity. Their conflict not only changed Ignacio's destiny, but also led to the hatred inside his heart. Hatred is what drove him to revenge, so Ignacio blackmailed others when he grew up and saw himself as a victim, and that was the reason he turned from good to evil<sup>[8]</sup>.

The brothers, Ignacio and Juan, who shared similarities, such as they both looked even more attractive than women when they were dressed up, and they yearned for their artistic career, but they were completely different too. Juan was more cunning who knew how to make the resources he had and people he knew useful. Juan showed no care or sympathy towards his brother (at least that was how it looked in the film) but hatred. This conflict drove Juan make plans to murder his own brother. At last, Juan wailed heavily when he was shooting the scene when Ignacio was murdered, and others believed that he was simply fully devoted into

the story, but only he himself knew that it was him who led the death of his brother. Perhaps at that moment he was regretful after he actually experienced the entire tragic life of his brother, and that can be seen as the end of the conflict between Juan and Ignacio.

The conflict between Juan and Manolo is completely about Manolo's obsession about him and Juan being indifferent and only wanted to use him. The comparison between grown-up Juan and Ignacio shows that Juan was more like the young Ignacio, so naturally, Manolo's love for Ignacio shifted to the grown-up Juan, and that marked the beginning of murders. When Manolo became useless and threatened the interests of Juan, Manolo's fate can only be death. Such ending is the least satisfactory yet most realistic, it demonstrated the cruelty and chaos of the world.

## 4. CONCLUSION

While Almodóvar was away from what he is known for, women-dominated films, he still managed to achieve a breakthrough in terms of his grip over male-dominated films and the way to shape male image. Throughout the movie, to describe the shaping of several male figures in one word, it is complicated. Those exaggerated, absurd and extreme elements, inextricable relationships between characters, and connection between characters and environment in *Bad education*, not only make the entire story stand out, but also give a new feeling to male images. So, the audience's feelings after watching the movie will be mixed.

When Almodóvar presents figures, who seem far away from audience, they are not feeling out of reach. Because this movie unearthed the common feelings shared between marginalized and ordinary people in the film, explored the truth of human nature, making the audience resonate or empathize with the character's encounter. And the male characters in the film all ascend the conventional patriarchy, allowing the audience to see all sides of each character. The truth of the reality world is hidden behind the seemingly absurd story, and this is something rare we can see in traditional male-dominated films.

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