
The Female Body: 21st Century Perspective(s) of Women's Sexuality in the Post-World War Society

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Abstract

With the increasing fight for sexual agency for women in the 1920s, there was seen an increase in sexual freedom for women but this was only misconstrued as free accessibility for men to have their way with women, especially before and during the Second World War. After World War II ended, the relations between the sexes remained changed and caused further complications with the representation of female sexuality and its repercussions in a phallogocentric society. This paper is going to look at two popular films of the 21st century, which represent female sexuality according to the time epochs they are set in. The first film that this paper will analyse is Giuseppe Tornatore's *Malèna* (2000) which represents a sensual female protagonist and how the society, in the aftermath of the Second World War, reacts to such an unbound manifestation of female sexuality. The second film is Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001) which is a very interesting representation of political issues paralleled with the unresolved sexuality of the protagonist, Erika Kohut. The former film enables us to look into

society during the Second World War (the 1940s) and how the existing “norms” dealt with a manifestation of “dangerous” female sexuality. The latter, on the other hand, forces us to look at the post-World War world by defamiliarizing it in the most disturbing way possible. Such a “disturbing” and “macabre” representation of female sexuality again raises questions on the repercussions of the world war on the relation of the sexes.

Keywords:

Women’s Sexuality; Post-World War Cinema; Female Sexuality; Malena; The Piano Teacher.

The expression of feminine sexuality has been identified as a dangerous and malicious element in any existent patriarchal society. The patriarchal control has indefinitely strived to limit and control female sexuality in order to subjugate women and deny their sexualities. Even though sexual revolutions have occurred in different parts of the world to normalise the manifestation of female sexuality, patriarchy still tries to restrict it in order to “stabilise” society.

During the Second World War, in Europe and America, increasingly loose sexual boundaries were evident between both unmarried and married men and women. With thousands of men deployed overseas fighting the war, wives and war widows were seen to have affairs with men at home. The changing societal structure resulted in women now “taking over previously male-dominated positions including working in factories, shipyards, and defence plants”. (McFadden 1) As women started stepping into the public sphere, their sexuality became a topic of rising discussions and contentions. This expression of female sexuality in the open sphere was a threat to society and the government and military officials began to see this increased female sexuality as a threat to the nation. Hegarty writes, “The wartime state’s interpretation of sexuality and gender produced a monolithic discourse around a category ‘woman’: she was imbued with sex; she was all sex; she was a dangerous individual capable of

destroying male health and thus the nation's strength." (40) There was seen a rise in the belief in femininity as a sex symbol and women as mere male seducers.

After the victory of the Allies and the end of World War II, the state apparatus attempted to bring this "problematic" situation to normalcy. This normalcy constituted traditional gender roles for men and women and increased focus on "family" as the building unit of society. As the military men returned to their partners and family, they wanted to find the same women they left behind, not considering the changes brought by their stepping into the public sphere. (McFadden 2) Female sexuality and its manifestation was still very much a part of the societal culture and suppressing it was the aim of the patriarchal authorities.

Cinema, a largely male-dominated sphere even today, has not been very kind to representations of women and their sexuality. The majority of researchers maintain that mass media has typically objectified women and their content has been largely directed towards a male audience. (Reyes) Even if we look at representations outside the Western cinema, for example, the existing concepts of item numbers in Indian Cinema, we can easily gather that "appealing" female sexuality has become a way to garner male attention and the camera focus is adjusted according to the needs, or rather wants, of the male audience. The mainstream movies, directed and produced by men, portray female bodies in accordance with the "male gaze". The feminist male gaze theory developed in Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," examines these issues of representations of female sexuality in mainstream mass media through a male voyeur/female object cinematic framework. Mulvey writes: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." (808-809) She continues, "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence." (810) Mulvey also talks about the scopophilia which becomes the underscoring idea of employing the male gaze while bringing any film narrative to life.

The movies that are going to be discussed in the ambit of this paper are Giuseppe Tornatore's *Malena* (2000) and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001). Both of these movies are male-directed and give a 21st-century perspective of female sexuality as perceived during and after the second world war. *Malena* spans the Fascist regime in Italy, followed by a brief Nazi occupation and then finally the victory of the Allies. *The Piano Teacher* is set in the Post- World War Vienna, a hub of consumerist and capitalist patriarchal culture. Primarily this paper going to look at the representation of female sexuality in these movies individually and then compare these representations as done through a 21st century lens, keeping in mind their male direction. I am going to argue that these movies present a problematic suppression of female sexuality in European society in the latter half of the 20th century but that this problematisation is still done through a male perspective which gives more space to female objectification and the male gaze.

Malena tells the story of a beautiful woman named Malena Scordia, who becomes an object of infatuation and sexual desire for a young boy named Renato Amoroso during World War II in a small town named Castelcutto in Sicily. At the onset, the film can be viewed as the coming of age of a teenage boy who experiences sexual awakening because of a beautiful married woman. Many critics have argued that it is much more than a moral rendering of limiting female sexuality. It can be seen as a retaliation to a society which attempts to discard and control women's sexuality on their own terms. I think that it can be viewed as a protest against all those normative forces which stop the woman from living a natural life and manifesting her sexuality and sensuality of her own accord.

The voyeuristic and scopophilic nature of the cinematography of *Malena* provides the audience with an entry point through the gaze of young Renato. For the most part, we view the action from Renato's point of view and it is this vantage point which makes us as much a part of his voyeuristic actions and sexual desires. The observatory position of Renato as an actant puts Malena, played by Monica Bellucci, in a passive position of a desirable object. She has little to no agency, negligible voice, and no active dialogue. We as the audience are only aware of the incidents which are

witnessed by Renato and the pathos of his vantage point deeply affects our emotions towards Malena and her treatment by the cruel society.

The selection of a young teenager for the voyeur character is a very interesting choice on Tornatore's part. Although adult scopophilic activities by a male protagonist would not have been frowned upon, there might have been some ambiguity towards the reception of such a scopophilic activity. William Hope writes that "Rather ingeniously, Tornatore selected an adolescent for the role of the film's voyeuristic protagonist, an individual whose emotional perspectives occupy a liminal status between childhood and adulthood - an ambivalent position equidistant between legitimate infant curiosity and transgressive adult perversion." (261) This voyeuristic quest by Renato is the boat for the narrative to sail upon and admire the sexuality of Malena from a safe distance.

Malena Scordia is introduced in the movie parallelly to a destruction of an ant. This destruction of the ant might entail the destruction of female sexuality awaited in the denouement of the film. From the very beginning, we do not see Malena as a person, but as her body parts. She is presented to us as her breasts on which the cross dangles, and then her thighs or her buttocks. This reduction of a woman to her body parts, primarily sexual body parts, sets the tone for how through Renato, the viewers are going to see her throughout the movie. Even when she walks in the street, she maintains a passive expression, not paying attention to all the boys and men who gawk at her. The male gaze she is subjected to is because of her beauty and sensuality. Her married status at the beginning of the film protects her from the direct attack of her male admirers and they all devour her from a distance. However, when the false news of the death of her husband comes, she becomes a victim of her own beauty, subjected to rapes for the very basic necessities, and is reduced to prostitution with Nazi officers for survival. Her beauty becomes "a force of nature that disrupts the tranquillity of the whole town", writes Stanislao Pugliese. (698)

More than a story of the unrequited love of a teenager, it can be viewed as a "subtle critique of provincial bourgeois mores" according to Pugliese. (698) In its denouement, Malena is thrashed and beaten by the women of the town in protest of her "prostitutional" activities. The women do not thrash her for being with the Nazi

soldiers, in a whim of patriotism. Rather, they beat her for her beauty and sexuality and her sexuality becomes a source of vulnerability and oppression at the hands of the women of this town. They attack her for disrupting their families by attracting their husbands and other men of the town. She is blamed for their husbands' infidelities and she becomes the object of their anger and frustration. This purging of the society of Malena's sexuality is portrayed against the backdrop of the victory of the Allies and American soldiers and trucks coming in. This symbolises a restoration to normalcy, a kind of which Malena cannot be a part. Her screams at the townspeople after her lynching is the retaliation for her suppression and subjugation of her sexuality. These screams symbolise not just a protest of a war widow but also "the ceremonial degradation of an icon of aesthetic beauty" according to Hope. (270) The audience can feel the full force of her rage because of the camera position amongst the group of men. This camera point of view puts the viewer equally with the group which subjugated and wronged her because the viewer as a voyeur is as much a part in objectifying her as Renato.

This representation of sexuality discomforts the viewer by making him question the kind of restraints this society puts on a woman or a widow. The sexuality of Malena is a nuanced and complex manifestation of female sexuality presented through a voyeuristic gaze of a young boy, which comes to life through the vision of a male director.

The Piano Teacher, however, presents a distorted kind of feminine sexuality which had been repressed for long and is now manifested in normatively uncomfortable and often violent ways. Erika Kohut, the protagonist, is a victim of a suppressed sexuality at the hands of her mother and manifests her sexuality in bizarre and often disturbing ways. Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* has been categorised as disturbing, bizarre, uncomfortable and many more such adjectives. But Haneke's portrayal of Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* relies on this discomfort of the audience to propagate the problematics of manifesting sexuality in a post-war consumerist culture, in a "society of voyeurs in which spectatorship replaces intimate engagement" writes Margarete Landwehr. (117)

Erika Kohut, played by Isabelle Huppert, is the symbol of repressed sexuality who finds “perverse” ways to express it. Although many critics like Teitelbaum talk about Erika's sexuality in terms of “neo-sexuality bordering into the madness of psychopathy” (154), we have to look at how Haneke and Jelinek use her sexuality to comment on the repression of it because of her mother and their indulgence in consumerist culture through television media. Teitelbaum describes Erika as a hatchling trying to break the plaster wall of her egg. Her life, including her sexuality, is dominated by her mother, where there is no space for a third individual. Walter Klemmer tries to enter her life as a lover striving to give Erika sexual pleasure but her life is perfectly expressed in the scene wherein, she slams the elevator door shut on the face of Klemmer, enclosing herself and her mother in the compact elevator space, the camera behind them showing the congestion in their private space.

Throughout the movie, we see bizarre manifestations of Erika's sexual excitation like urinating and vomiting. Vomiting after giving fellatio to Klemmer is a rejection of Walter's normative sexuality as opposed to Erika's “neo-sexuality”. The act of urination after these sexual excitations shows that she is incapable of experiencing orgasms and urinating/excreting is a way of achieving sexual fulfilment.

Jean Wyatt describes Erika as “the femme fatale who tries to seduce the representative of a solid masculine identity, Walter, into her world of destructive sexuality—a sexual immersion that would dissolve his masculinity by depriving him of the autonomy, mastery, and phallic control that constitute its core.” (466) The disturbing manifestations of her sexuality that we see when she cuts her genitals or when she sniffs the semen in the tissues used by men attending the pornographic peep shows climax in the formal letter that she gives to Klemmer.

The letter becomes important as the height of “perversity” that Erika's sexuality can reach. To Klemmer, this vocalisation of Erika's banal desires is disgusting, and he would not want to “soil his hands” by touching her. His sexuality is too “narrow and self-absorbed” to understand Erika's sexual preoccupations, according to Christopher Sharrett. (39)

The climax of the movie wherein she gets raped, beaten and thrashed shows the resultant reaction of the society to a “disturbed” sexuality like that of Erika's. Walter's

final act of taking revenge on Erika for trying to dominate his “normal” male sexuality leaves Erika harassed and the excruciatingly long close-up of Erika’s pained reaction forces us to confront her suffering and her assailant’s callousness.

Both these movies were released in the early 2000s and provide a seminal argument to critique the patriarchal constrictions of female sexuality by representing its manifestation in “disturbing” manners. These representations, although set during and after the second world war, come to life in the context of 21st century cinema. The audience, viewing it from a contemporary lens, not only finds these representations disturbing but they are forced to question the control that patriarchy posits on the manifestation of female sexuality and the way it reacts to an unbound expression of it.

Conclusions

This article analyses the unconventional representation of female sexuality in the movies *Malena* and *The Piano Teacher* and how these representations have been perceived in the context of 21st century society, almost 50 years after the epoch the movies are set in. The paper looks at the problematics of manifestation of female sexuality during and after the Second World War and a try at normalisation of this manifestation which can be seen as the primary goal of these movies.

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