

Objectification and voyeurism of females by the patriarchy during World War II-- in the case of *Malèna*

Jennifer-Yuhan Lou^{1, *, †}, Vivian-Dengkai Xiao^{2, †}, Tina-Chuhan Zhao^{3, †}

¹Zhengzhou No.47 High School, Zhengzhou, China

²Qibao Dwight High School, Shanghai, China

³The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

*Corresponding author: 100474@yzpc.edu.cn

†These authors contributed equally.

Abstract. Through the setting of the camera shots and the advancement of the plot, the film *Malèna*, was directed by Giuseppe and released in 2000, exposes the tragic denouement of the objectification and voyeurism of women in a patriarchal society, especially based on the environment background of Fascist Axis of World War II. Additionally, the background information and the women status in the Fascist Axis of World War II would be revealed. Besides, this essay is based on the feminist critical theory and a psychoanalytic approach to analyze the female character of *Malèna* to expose the objectification and voyeurism of females by the patriarchy during World War II. This academic essay and research are designed to tackle with the problem of disclosing erotic elements and characters' roles in film *Malèna*, further revealing women social status and living situations in patriarchal society during World War II with real historic background. Through this elaborate research, we concluded that the women were once seen as castrating, as inducing voyeurism and as instruments of fertility in the era of the Fascist Axis of World War II. As the development of human mindset and the complement of feminism, women would be no longer neglected, and they are paramount forces in this world no matter in which field.

Keywords: Objectification, Voyeurism, male gaze, patriarchal society in World War II.

1. Introduction

During World War II, Hitler once said in a speech on September 13, 1935, that "motherhood is not a degradation of a woman's status, but rather her greatest achievement. There is nothing greater for a woman than to bear and raise a child". Goebbels, the head of Nazi propaganda at the time, agreed with the Führer, stating that "the task of a woman is to make herself beautiful and to bring children into the world, just as the female makes herself beautiful for the male, so she hatches eggs for him". This idea was passed on from Germany to the rest of the fascist Axis countries, and childbirth became the highest measure of female success [1]. In the eyes of the Nazis, women should be more conservative, wear no makeup, and dress in national traditional clothing to conform to their Nazi values. Overdressing themselves with lipstick, powder, and other cosmetics was considered an unnatural and decadent expression. Excessive makeup was seen by the Nazis of the time as an act of pretense and total regression of civilization. They often compared pictures of lively, simple housewives with the capricious, indulgent, heavily made-up women of Western democracies, and viewed those women of Western democracies with a critical eye. In the fascist countries of the Second World War, women objected to being objectified and sexualized.

The film *Malèna*, directed by Giuseppe Tornatore, was released in Italy in 2000. *Malèna* uses the perspective of the male protagonist, teenager Renaldo, as a male gaze on the life of *Malèna*, a beautiful young woman on the Italian island of Sicily during World War II. *Malèna* is a beautiful woman with a stunning face, but the townspeople shun her and insult her because of her beauty, and her life becomes increasingly difficult; thus, she was forced to work as a prostitute. After the end of World War II, the local people humiliated and beat *Malèna* in public, and *Malèna* left the town and returned a year later to live again with her husband.

Monica Bellucci successfully portrays the role of Malèna, making it a representation of sexuality. Her behavior draws the men and women of the town, but it is this beauty that causes Malèna to suffer physical and psychological trauma in a patriarchal society during World War II. Feminist criticism refers to the analysis of women's roles in the film to explore the lack of female consciousness and to criticize masculinity, with the aim of awakening female consciousness. This paper uses feminist critical theory and a psychoanalytic approach to analyze the female character of Malèna to investigate the objectification and voyeurism of females by the patriarchy during World War II.

2. *Malèna* and World War II

Whether the film is about the legend of a beautiful woman in Sicily or a legendary beautiful woman in Sicily, the legend itself conveys war, destroying beauty. Malèna was not only a sexy and alienated woman in World War II, but she was also the epitome of Italy, as she had a very similar experience to Italy. Sicily belonged to Italy, which was forced into World War II after being in the company of the Germans, of whom Italy and Germany were important members of the Axis. It was eventually overrun by the Allies and withdrew from the Axis but remained in an extremely awkward and isolated position in the international community. At the time of German occupation, the men take sexual pleasure, someone rapes, and force and stop providing food, and do physical relation in the hotel and the women envy her beauty, her voice her everything. But at time of American occupation the women oppress and do persecution on her [2].

The people of the town were not like the common people of Italy at the time, who said they loved the land and loved "Malèna", but in turn denigrated her and spat on the land with abuse. Behind the true goodness and ugliness of the town, the whole of Italy was in turmoil during the Second World War. When the Allies' counterattack on Europe first took Sicily, the Allies entered the town. For the inhabitants of the island, it was not so much liberated as defeated. In this context, the women of the town dragged Malèna out of the brothel and beat and abused her in the street, not simply because they were jealous of her beauty or because she had previously been sheltered by the Germans, but because she had entertained German soldiers. They beat Malèna as a way of pledging their allegiance to the Allies and separating themselves from Germany, which was also an Axis power. Malèna, who has been taken back from Messina by her husband, ends the film by returning with him to the place that brought her all the pain. Malèna who is no longer beautiful is accepted by the others and greets her with a smile, and Malèna faces the women who used to beat and scold her without the slightest hint of hatred and responds to them quietly. One returns to the original point in life because it is as if Malèna has now lost her pearl in the clam's shell and has become mediocre. The pearls that she once had have been gnawed and sucked up by the people of the town, leaving no remnants.

3. Female's role in *Malèna*

The female characters in *Malèna* can be roughly divided into two types. The first type is the sexualized and objectified women represented by Malèna. This type of woman will be coveted and molested by men because of their appearance and body shape. Even, women in this category will be spied on and discussed by men. Usually, women in this category do not end up well and often end up in a tragic situation. The second type of woman is those who objectify and humiliate other women (Malèna). As an example, Malèna was stripped naked and humiliated in public after World War II, and it was this group of women who committed the atrocities. The behavior of this group of women was indeed wrong, but it is also true that they were poor women who were poisoned and domesticated by a patriarchal society, and they were indeed pathetic [3].

Psychoanalytic theory is better seen as a political weapon that illuminates how the unintentionality of patriarchal societies' knowledge has constructed the cinematic form [4]. The paradox of phallocentrism, as shown in all aspects of the film's female protagonist, is that it relies on an emasculated female figure to give order and meaning to the world. In the social system, the idea of

the defamation of the feminine is firmly engraved: it is the absence of the feminine that makes the phallus a symbolic presence; it is her desire that compensates for the absence to which the phallus refers. Such a contradictory view subliminally influences the tragic lives of Malèna and other female characters. Furthermore, these two different types of women play the same role in *Malèna* - the objectified and sexualized women of a patriarchal society. The director uses two seemingly opposing characters to implicitly express the abuse of women in a patriarchal society during World War II, their low status, and their disrespectful situation.

3.1 The female role with an awakened feminist consciousness

In traditional arts, directors always portray female characters as polarized based on Madonna and whore dichotomy: either they are traditional women with the kindest hearts, who work diligently and sacrifice themselves for their families, or they are ruthless women who betray their husbands and seek superficial pleasure. In *Malèna*, the uniqueness of Malèna's image is mainly reflected in three aspects: firstly, her cold appearance; secondly, her unconventional behavior; and thirdly, her inner fortitude. Such a unique female character is presented by the director with a lot of camera language.

The director uses a lot of close-ups to portray Malèna's beauty and spirit, with high heels, long hair, thighs, and breasts, which are typical female features that vaguely reveal sensuality. Besides, she is strictly distinguished from the traditional image of the conservative, unpretentious woman, but Malèna kept waiting for her husband, she kept to herself while he was in the war zone, and she kept her love pure in her heart. There is an awakening of a feminist consciousness within Malèna, an awareness of her own heart, and her subjectivity that she can live in a less mundane way.

3.2 The female role gazes as weak, vulnerable, and inferior under patriarchy

In *Malèna*, the female figure Malèna is on the one hand different from the traditional female characters, but on the other hand, as the plot develops further, we observe that she is not free from societal norms and stereotypes. From being a "goddess" to a prostitute in the service of the Germans, this change in status is the result of the oppression and sanction of a patriarchal society, from which Malèna is never released.

The major cause of Malèna's tragic situation is the absence of the male roles of husband and father in the family, which is in line with the patriarchal idea of male dominance. Malèna, having no financial or emotional support tries to fetch minor jobs [5]. The criticism of Malèna in the town is partly due to her beauty and partly since her husband leaves her alone, leaving her open to mischievous men. The death of her father is a direct result of the breakdown of Malèna's economic supply, and the economic crisis that forces her to sacrifice her body to make a living in this unstable society during wartime.

Renaldo fantasizes about Malèna as his 'lover', about Malèna's naked body in public, about having sex with her, and about being a hero to Malèna, while the Malèna in his imaginary world is a flirtatious woman, which is also a patriarchal. This is also a misinterpretation of women by men in the patriarchy. From a gender perspective where males regard themselves as heroic figures and females as vulnerable and in need of rescue, Renaldo subconsciously regards himself as a hero and Malèna as vulnerable in the patriarchy.

In *Malèna*, there are a lot of "watching" and voyeuristic perspectives, including the "watching" of Malèna by the men of the town and the voyeurism of Renaldo.

When Malèna appears in public eyesight, males lose themselves observing her: the lawyer takes the newspaper upside down, and the dentist pulls the wrong tooth. Malèna is surrounded by others' gazes everywhere she goes, and she endures countless jealous stares and endless psychological torture. Specifically, the woman plays the role of being 'watched', she lacks the choice and capability to fight, but can only silently endure these vicious eyes.

4. Objectification by different groups of people in the patriarchal society

4.1 Teenager

Malèna becomes a catalyst for what wordsmiths and philosophers may call Renato's "sexual awakening" [6]. The story starts with the hot summer, the season of hormonal restlessness. The appearance of Malèna brings the young people an unconcealed sexual urge. Exposing that "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" [7]. A group of young men follows Malèna, and they use the ability to sleep with Malèna as a criterion for their ability. The film is narrated from Renaldo's point of view while showing the sheer beauty of Malèna. Unlike other frivolous young men, in Renaldo's mind, Malèna is supreme, like a goddess: in the diagonal composition of Malèna calling Renaldo to buy cigarettes, Malèna is large and high up in the frame, holding out her hand with coins in style, and Renaldo is at her feet as a submissive admirer. This is the embodiment of chivalry. Even though the world is changing, Malèna is still the inviolable goddess in Renaldo's heart. The strong pressure of society and family on teenage males produces sexual oppression. Renaldo, as a young and vigorous boy, is severely punished by his family for masturbating in his dreams, and he has to take the path of prostitution: once he touches the thighs of prostitutes in the dark blue cinema, the dark blue closed space is also his repressed heart; another time is his father takes him to prostitutes, the scarlet room is full of bad sexual seduction, which also reflects the lack of sex education and distortion in the family.

4.2 Adult male

The men of the town sneered at Malèna, who had been separated from her military husband for long period: "Who bets she'll sleep alone." It seems that beautiful women must have no integrity, and beautiful women must be sluts. This is typical of the macho mindset. The composition of the men under Malèna's skirt as she walks through the streets of the town is quite subtle - the men, young and old, high and low, all fall under Malèna's skirt. The men of the town want Malèna's late husband to fall soon so that they can seduce her to their heart's content.

4.3 Women

The women of the town also want Malèna to become a slut soon, so they can humiliate her as much as they want, justify their criticism, and verbally abuse her. The men and women of the town help each other in this atrocity. There is a famous scene that when American troops enter the town, the women throw Malèna out into the street and beat her severely [8]. The cruelty of the small-town women reflects the perverted psychology and self-alienation of women under sexual oppression in a patriarchal society. Especially when the news of Malèna's husband's "death" came, Malèna's status fell to the bottom, reflecting that women's status was recognized only when they were dependent on men and could assume the social role of "wife", which was the embodiment of patriarchy. The women of the town are accomplices of the executioner in the patriarchal society, and they try to use this set of values to shape themselves and judge others. The small-town women transfer the pressure on themselves to Malèna, and the women who are deeply poisoned by male power have gone off the rails. When Malèna chooses to be a prostitute, it is in part a reflection of her autonomy that her body can not only be trampled on but also used as a tool to earn a living. But in the end, Malèna's attempt to "resist" fails, and in such a patriarchal society, she cannot succeed, and she can only be redeemed when her husband returns and assumes the role of her "savior".

5. Voyeurism of Malèna

In 1988 director Giuseppe Tornatore came to international attention with *Cinema Paradiso*. He is famous for the lyricism and beauty of his films. *Malèna* upholds this tradition. The camera work, lighting, use of locations and editing are all of the highest order. Everything about this film is large –

cast, sets and scope. This is incongruous, however, given the simple coming of age/film noir tale it tells. Even Morricone's lush score is too heavy for the story [9].

The film *Malèna* offers many pleasures, and voyeurism is one of them. In some cases, watching itself is a source of pleasure. Just as in the opposite form, there is also pleasure in being looked at. In *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud begins by separating voyeurism as one of the constituent elements of the sexual instinct. Later, in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, Freud further developed his theory of voyeurism as a pre-genital stage of self-masturbation, after which the pleasure of looking is transferred to others by analogy [10]. Although the instinct adjusts to other factors, especially the constitution of the ego, it remains as the viewing of others. But it still exists as the erotic basis of the pleasure obtained by viewing the other as an object. In the extreme, it is fixed in a kind of inversion, prompting the creation of obsessed voyeurs and peeping toms, whose sexual satisfaction, in the sense of active control, can only come from peering at the objectified other. Such a theory can then be reflected in the relationship between Renaldo and a group of teenagers and *Malèna*. In this film, the woman represents the expression of sexual arousal, prompting a group of teenagers to sit on the fence and follow her body with their eyes, prompting the adult men on the street to look at *Malèna* with unabashed eroticism and Renaldo's voyeurism during the night.

6. Conclusions

The film *Malèna* uses some sexualized shots to depict the tragic life of *Malèna*'s character in a straightforward manner. The psychoanalytic approach and the feminist critical theory discussed in this paper are related to the pleasure offered by the film *Malèna*. The use of voyeurism under phallocentrism in psychoanalysis is fully reflected in this film. This argument goes a step further in terms of the structure of representation by adding a deeper layer of what the ideology of the patriarchal order demands, precisely in the form of cinema. At the same time, the ideology of the patriarchal order during World War II is fully revealed in this film, where women, as representations that refer to castration, induce voyeurism and are seen as instruments of emasculated sexuality. *Malèna* exposes the status of women in the World War II era and the poisoning and domestication of women's consciousness by a patriarchal society. During the fascist regime, feminism was criminalized and ridiculed. Women are used to be considered as objects and tools to reproduce. As history progressed and the ideology of the times advanced, more and more women joined the military on their initiative, and more and more women's movements were launched, women ceased to be objectified and sexualized symbols, and they became an indispensable and powerful force in the functioning of society.

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