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By Gautaman Bhaskaran
South Asia Editor



Pedro Almodovar

One of the most flamboyant movie directors is the Spanish master, Pedro Almodovar – who this year will chair the jury of the world's most important film festival at Cannes, which begins on May 17, 2017.

Born in times when Spain was under the dark and dictatorial rule of General Francisco Franco, Almodovar has traced the gradual emergence of his society from some sort of slavery to freedom through 20 of his movies, and what has been fascinating about his journey is his choice of characters. His most important have been women – brazen, bold, quirky and invariably dramatic in a kind of cinema that has been loudly, but tastefully colourful.

Almodovar – who has been truly recognised as Spain's key documentarist – has most wonderfully sugarcoated facts in fiction, using wit and sex and even drugs to tell his gripping stories. Yet, Almodovar – who has been a darling of his heroines (with his most favourite, Penelope Cruz, blowing kisses to him and shouting, “Pedro I love you” from the Cannes podium) and of the Cannes Film Festival — has never won the top Palm d 'Or.

But so what, one would say. His on-screen women have loved him – largely, largely because he has been able to understand them so well. Cruz has always said that she owes her success to Pedro, who moulded her into the fine actress that she now is.

Take the case of Adrian Ugarte, who as a little girl growing up in Spain dreamed of being part of an Almodovar movie. And 25 years later, her dream came true – when the auteur asked her to play the younger Julieta in a film also titled Julieta – inspired by the short stories of Alice Munro. In the movie, her life takes a U turn after an incident on a train.

Talking about Julieta – which Pedro called “his cinema of women” — Ugarte said at Cannes last year that she had always been amazed how “he can feel how we women feel”. It a mystery to me, she added.

Almodovar once said: “I feel that I can tell a richer and more entertaining story with women...I do write male and female characters, but I do find at least in Spanish culture, women to be more vivacious, more direct, more expressive, with a lot less of a sense of being fearful of making a fool of themselves.”

Indeed, Pedro burst on the international arena with a film about women. Titled *Women on the Verge of Breakdown*, this 1988 work – which was nominated for the Foreign-Language Oscar – is a frighteningly hilarious tale of a woman who has just been dropped by her lover, and she finds her house turning into a hotspot of hostages and drug overdoses!

This movie made him an overnight celebrity. Women began to adore him, and men too. And the most gripping fact about *Women on the Verge of a Breakdown* was its disarming honesty and simplicity shorn of pretension. And these were also what distinguished the helmer from the rest. In so many ways, his own character reflected in the cinema he created.

Pedro has always been brutally frank, never hiding anything about himself. He has even gone public with revelations such as “masochism, homosexuality, masturbation, drugs, porn and attacks have been part of my life”. And these are also the subjects that he has enriched his own cinema with.

When Franco died in 1975, the flood of creative expression helped Almodovar to even proclaim that he was gay. Obviously, he became a symbol of all things free in Spain – a country that had been fettered for decades and whose people had been forced to curb their joyous and gregarious nature. Italians and Spaniards are people with the most sunny disposition in Europe.

Almodovar was born in September 1949 in an awfully arid region of La Mancha, and his father, who sold olive oil and wine using a donkey to cart his goods, died in 1980 – the year Pedro's first commercial movie came out.

In any case, the father was hardly an influence in Almodovar's life, and he grew up in the midst of women. His mother was a key figure. We can see all this in his films, most graphically in his 1999 masterpiece, *All About My Mother*. He once said that his obsession with colours – with all his movies extraordinarily swathed in bright hues — “is a

response to my mother who spent so many years in mourning and blackness that goes against nature”.

Leaving home when he was just 16, Almodovar went to Madrid and discovered Alfred Hitchcock and Ingmar Bergman by watching their cinema. Of course, it is hard to find any influence of these men in Pedro's works, but he certainly learnt to be open like those masters.

Almodovar was one of the first helmers to include transsexuals and transvestites in his movies. Indeed, *All About My Mother*, which narrates a mother's search for her dead son's transvestite father, won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

Making use of astounding plot twists, he tells his tales through women who are doggedly determined and uniquely focussed. They even stoop to kill when pushed to the ground. And hide the bodies in huge refrigerators. We saw this in his extraordinary work with Cruz, *Volver*. The opening scene of dozens of women cleaning the graveyards of their husbands on a windswept morning in an annual ritual is one of cinema most graphic shots.

In recent years, his movies have turned even more dark and thoughtful. His latest, *Julieta* – which was shown at Cannes and which turned out to be his biggest box-office hit in years – is a poignant picture of a mother's search for a daughter who abandons her.

Today, he lives alone, as he quips, “ with my cats and ghosts”. Some of the ghosts emerged from his mother's gossip sessions with her neighbours, when they would all gather to make lace – a great Spanish pastime for women.

Indeed, Almodovar's fiction and fabulation have been arresting, and one hopes to see a lot of excitement at Cannes when he leads the jury this May.

The above writer, Gautaman Bhaskaran, is one of the 70 journalists, the only Indian, to have contributed to the 70th Cannes anniversary special edition volume. He was chosen from among the 5000-odd journalists who cover the Cannes Film Festival year after year. And he has covered the Festival for 27 years.

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Gautaman Bhaskaran is a veteran film critic and writer who has covered Cannes and other major international festivals, like Venice, Berlin, Montreal, Melbourne, and Fukuoka over the past two decades. He has been to Cannes alone for 15 years. He has worked in two of India's leading English newspapers, The Hindu and The Statesman, and is now completing an authorized biography of India's auteur-director, Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Penguin International will publish the book, whose research was funded by Ford Foundation.



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