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Almodovar is renowned for the way he creates his women characters and celebrates them. I still remember a graphically moving opening scene in the 2006 Cannes premiere, Volver, in which tens of widows are scrubbing and polishing their husbands graves on a wind-swept day, the fallen leaves strewn all over. There is another scene where Raimunda, essayed by Cruz, shoves a dead body inside her huge refrigerator – which was brazenly copied in a Tamil film!

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The director shot to international fame with his 1988 'Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown", which was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Oscar. Success then followed him like a shadow, and movies like 'Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down' (1990),' High Heels' (1991), and 'Live Flesh' (1997) took him to starry heights. Later, his 'All About My Mother' (1999) and 'Talk to Her' (2002) earned him Academy Awards. His romantic work, 'Broken Embraces' (2009) and the psychological thriller 'The Skin I Live In' (2011) were critically lauded. The 2019 'Julieta' and the 2019 'Pain and Glory' competed at Cannes for the Palm dÓr.

Actress Adriana Ugarte, who stars in 'Julieta' (loosely based on the short stories of Alice Munro), grew up in Spain dreaming of acting in an Almodovar work. She got her chance in 'Julieta'. "When it comes to Mr. Almodóvar and his female characters", Ugarte said once, "It's a mystery, but he can feel how we feel and how we are."

For the four decades, the helmer has been at the helm of films, he has drawn inspiration from diverse directors like — Alfred Hitchcock and Pina Bausch, to name just two. But Almodovar's fascination for women characters and his ability to write them with passion and tenderness has remained constantly with him, and the actresses have loved him to bits. There was an occasion at Cannes when Cruz shouted "Pedro I love You" and blew him a kiss. He was seated in the auditorium, and she was on the stage.

"I was lucky to meet his mother when she was alive, and it helped me to understand a lot the way he is and the fascination he has for women and how well he knows women," quipped Cruz. "He was raised by his mother and her sisters and neighbours, with a lot of women together. It's a little bit of what you see in 'Volver'— his 2006 film about a family of women and a matriarch who reappears as a ghost — and he was always watching and observing."

His latest outing 'Parallel Mothers' seems like yet, yet another attempt to celebrate women.

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## (Author, movie critic Gautaman Bhaskaran has covered the Venice Film Festival for 20 years)

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