



Symbolism in Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*

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ABSTRACT: Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018) is a richly layered cinematic text that invites critical exploration through its symbolic architecture. This paper examines the film's use of visual and narrative symbolism to articulate intersecting themes of memory, class, domestic labor, and political transition in 1970s Mexico. Central to this analysis is the figure of Cleo, the Indigenous domestic worker whose quiet resilience becomes the emotional and moral anchor of the film. Through recurring motifs—such as water, thresholds, airplanes, and natural disasters—*Roma* constructs a visual lexicon that bridges personal memory with collective history. The study draws from Cuarón's own interviews and statements about the film's production, as well as scholarly and journalistic criticism, to trace how symbolism is embedded within formal cinematic elements: mise-en-scène, camera movement, black-and-white cinematography, and ambient sound. Rather than treating these techniques as merely aesthetic, the paper argues that they function as political and emotional signifiers—silent but resonant markers of Cleo's internal world and the socio-political structures that shape her life. Interdisciplinary in approach, this analysis integrates perspectives from Latin American film studies, feminist criticism, and affect theory. Sources from *Film Quarterly*, *The New York Times*, *Architectural Digest*, and other critical platforms provide a framework for understanding *Roma* not only as an autobiographical memory film but also as a global art object that complicates narratives of visibility, service, and belonging. In centering its symbolism around silences, absences, and repetition, *Roma* resists conventional plot-driven storytelling and instead crafts a contemplative, symbolic grammar that deepens its emotional and political resonance.

KEYWORDS: *Roma*, Cleo, symbolism, domestic labor, visual storytelling, Indigenous representation, memory and identity, Latin American cinema.

I. INTRODUCTION

During and after watching *Roma* the viewer is left with a myriad of questions as is the characteristic of any good work of art. In this research

paper I will attempt to answer some of the questions by decoding the symbols and underlying themes in *Roma*. Directed by none other than the Oscar winning director of *Gravity*, Alfonso Cuarón once again went on to win the best director and cinematographer for *Roma*. *Roma* is an epic of intimate proportions inspired by his childhood nanny Liboria "Libo" Rodríguez, a domestic worker who worked for the director's family for several decades.

Roma opens with a mesmerizing four-minute credit sequence: the mopping of a courtyard. Water is *Roma*'s most prevalent recurring motif. The film opens on a shot of empty tile while we hear the sounds of mopping in the background. Then a puddle of water fills the frame and in its reflection we see a view of the sky above the family house, just as a plane crosses. Such a brilliant way to marry the mundane life of this domestic worker and the greater world she will never inhabit. At one Q&A, pressed about the significance of this closing scene, Cuarón noted that his insistence on the overflying planes was not merely to register a lived reality in the neighbourhood of Mexico City in which he grew up, which is quite proximate to the airport. He also intended to draw attention to the fact that, though people today live in an era that is capable of great advancements, as evidenced by the technological marvel of the airplane, they have been incapable of solving human-scale problems such as those that pertain to the equitable treatment of the domestic working class. Cuarón said "The whole idea was the film begins by looking at the floor that is the earth, in which water begins to flow, cleaning but getting murkier and murkier, with all this foam", which is an obvious reference to the waves later on. "All truths in *Roma* are revealed by water." was made, aptly enough, by the director of *The Shape of Water* (2017), Guillermo del Toro. Perhaps he's right: the beach scene, where Cleo must enter into the rough ocean water to save the children, amply supports del Toro's claim. In the first scene, she loses her baby; in the second, she comes to terms with her feelings about her stillborn child only after she has saved the family's children. In the aftermath of averting a tragedy, while she and the rest of the family are piled up in a communal embrace on the



beach, she speaks up about her repressed feelings toward the baby she lost: “I didn’t want her to be born”. It is a powerful moment of tension and emotional relief, not just for the characters on-screen but for the audience itself.

In the very first moments of Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma*, he establishes a stunning symbol – dog feces. That poop symbolizes the literal and figurative shit that is a constant in the life of the film’s main character Cleo the humble housekeeper of a middle-class family in 1970’s Mexico City. Her work is never really done, just as she can never really keep up with the dog’s excrement. That symbol even represents how well Cleo takes all the crap in her life in stride, never complaining, dutifully cleaning it up again and again, and starting each day anew. It also symbolizes the failing relation between Sofia and Antonio. A master of constructing environments that convey volumes of essential information about the people who move through them, Cuarón deploys exquisite visual and aural details, sometimes seemingly random but always clearly resonant to do the heavy lifting usually reserved for plot, dialogue and characterization. For instance, in an interview Cuarón says that to recreate 1970 Mexico, he tracked down the old vendors to produce the same call and chant ads in the 1970’s. He was able to procure around 70% of the old furniture of his house to recreate it on the set. He has such an eye for detail that while creating the set he put the same things in the drawers which were there when he was growing up. He admitted that even though he knew not every drawer would be opened, but it helped him and the cast to get into that mind-set. There is a long focus of the camera on the caged birds symbolizing the trapped condition of the two leading women in the movie. Sofia is a wealthy, educated wife, and mother of four, and her maid Cleo is a stand-in for the oppressed, the silent, and those without a voice. Despite this they have similarities between them. Sofia’s husband leaves her and his kids to their own devices as does Fermín when Cleo tells him that she is pregnant. As Fermín is leaving the theatre, the movie they are watching shows an aeroplane crashing, foreshadowing the bad turn of events as Fermín abandons Cleo. This is yet another example of these subtle symbols persistent throughout the movie. Women are perceived by the men as a mere footnote, cast easily aside, slightly irrelevant to the main narrative of their lives.

Another question that arises in the viewer’s mind is the reason behind Cleo’s scanty dialogues. She hardly speaks a sentence or two in continuation. This raises the question- “Does the film silence the

very character it purports to give a voice to?”. Cleo has a silent demeanour but that necessarily does not mean that she is silenced. Cleo’s “silence” is used as a tool for her dramatic arc—that leads to her most intimate pain being revealed, after the ocean rescue: “I didn’t want her to be born,” Cleo surpasses and holds her emotions in silence until they finally pour out. Spoken word is not cinema’s most powerful tool, cinema developed originally as a mute medium, dependent on images and editing to convey meaning. *Roma* is almost entirely structured around Cleo’s point of view and her experiences; this is the central aesthetic and narrative paradigm that drives the film.

Masculinity and violence are consistently linked in the film and subtly handled. We are first introduced to the absentee father with a series of close-up shots from within the car, as he manipulates the controls, snuffs out a cigarette, and painstakingly fits it into the tightest of spaces. He pays more attention to the car than his family, a massive Ford Galaxy that barely fits in the family’s walled-in driveway. His character symbolizes materialism and superficiality. Another sign of his interest in status over substance. His shallowness is hammered home in a later scene where he appears to gallantly comfort Cleo but is caught flagrantly putting in flattering appearances rather than true care. When he returns to clear out his stuff, he takes the bookshelves – but leaves the books. The narcissistic gesture underlines a quest for form without content, a vacuity that is not, however, represented as directly violent as is Fermín, whose martial-arts prowess, disdain for Cleo and for his unborn child, and armed aggression toward her in the department store are all indicators of his penchant for violence. This proclivity is underlined by his role in the paramilitary group Los Halcones (The Hawks) responsible for the massacre that the film depicts. The last good-bye between Sofia and Antonio, as she embraces him on the street before he leaves on his fictional trip to “Canada” is punctuated by a military escort that marches past. The film that Cleo and Fermín are watching in a movie theatre during their final date, when she gives him the news that she has missed her period (after which he abandons her) may be a comedy, but it is also a war movie.

The still born birth of Cleo’s baby is hinted several times through foreshadowing. When Cleo goes to the hospital for her check-up, there is an earthquake. The shot is focused on a newborn who is killed from the debris falling on his incubator. During the Christmas party in a very symbolic scene, a friend of Cleo makes a toast, “To a beautiful 1971 and your baby’s health”, but the glass from Cleo’s hand falls and shatters on the ground. When Cleo is shopping



for a baby crib with Sofia's mother, in the midst of the 1971 Corpus Cristi Massacre of students, Fermín re-appears as one of the government militia, hunting and shooting the students down. The cause-and-effect logic of the sequence pins the blame for her water breaking not merely on the shock of seeing the violence erupt outside, but on suddenly finding herself held at gunpoint by Fermín, her unborn baby's father. This scene is significant because it clearly fuses the personal with the political and demonstrates their inextricability. Cleo suddenly goes into labour but is stuck in the chaos and pandemonium because of the riot for two hours. By the time she reaches the hospital it is too late. The forces of death over-power the forces of life.

II. CONCLUSION:

Roma is an epic poem recounting the battle between men and women, rich and poor, the powerful and the weak.. The gender wars serve in both films as a metaphor for man's inhumanity to man – through our inability to embrace love, our insensitivity to those weaker or poorer than us, our lack of care for the impact of today's systems on the generations to come. With "Roma," one of Cuarón delved into an experience uniquely his own to create something that feels simultaneously *sui generis* and universal, A parable as relevant today as it is to the 1970s Mexico deeply private and instantly recognizable. That describes a great work of art, and that's precisely what *Roma* is.

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