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Introduction

Margarita Manda’s 2009 award-winning film Gold Dust (Chrysoskoni) is an elegy to Athens, and a lament for the chaotic modernity that has overpowered the city. Manda is a contemporary Greek filmmaker who has written and directed stage productions, commercial and corporate videos, as well as short and feature-length films and documentaries. She has been an assistant director to many notable filmmakers, including Theo Angelopoulos for his films Ulysses’ Gaze, Eternity and a Day, The Weeping Meadow and The Dust of Time.

Born in Athens in 1963, Manda studied Political Science, French Literature and Film Direction, and has undoubtedly witnessed firsthand the transformation of her hometown from a charming and friendly city to a faceless and unforgiving megalopolis, tarnished by unattractive and distasteful development. In this, her first feature film, Manda explores some pressing issues faced by today’s Athenians in their continually evolving urban environment. She laments the rampant rate of change which mars their lives and living spaces, causing them ongoing unease and frustration. “The film dives into the Athenian negative, investigating the plurality of selves struggling for visibility and domination. It is also a film imbued with nostalgia for the ideal home, in which by now only death and absence exist” (Karalis, 2012: 274).

In this paper, I explore what different perspectives female directors bring to filmmaking, how they may differ from their male counterparts,
and how important it is for their films to be more broadly available and seen. I will be doing this through the lens of Margarita Manda and her film, *Gold Dust*. Based on a feminist film theory methodology, I argue for an inclusive and nuanced feminism, inspired by the achievements of the first and second wave of feminists who, guided by the values of the enlightenment, were opposed to obscurantism, which has, alas, been gaining traction recently.

The significance of Manda’s film is not just that it is created by a woman, but that it is an authentic, honest and frank depiction of the contemporary Athenian reality. It is a complex synthesis of its history, politics, economics, social conditions and aesthetics. It is accurately told by a woman born and bred in the city. It is intelligently constructed and impeccably executed; a film that speaks the voice of its creator, its auteur. As such, it goes beyond the boundaries of its plot, and encompasses the concerns and anxieties of its population for the future.

**Living Modernity**

Manda has chosen to examine themes of gender psychodynamics through the complex prism of a family unit, specifically focusing on three siblings; two sisters and a brother. The death of their mother, the fourth major character in the drama, appearing only through her diary, underpins the tensions that are explored between the siblings.¹

The main protagonist, Anna, a professional pianist and single woman in her forties, lives in twenty-first century Athens, a city undergoing rapid transformation in an urban environment that is constantly alienating its inhabitants; where the speed of modern life comes to a halt behind the wheel of a car in the unabatingly heavy traffic; where human contact is marred by constant friction with an exasperated taxi driver, an antagonistic co-worker, an intolerant neighbour, a careless fellow pedestrian; where male-chauvinist intolerance or sexism becomes a reaction of choice to life’s endless miseries; where alienation between family members turns them from sources of support for each other to sources of angst and animosity; a city whose citizens are at war with the memory of its glorious past and its currently relentless decadence.

Anna and her siblings represent three distinct points of view; three poles or facets that can be interpreted as Manda’s own internal debate. Anna, a dominant personality and strong advocate, not necessarily for tradition but for preserving what is valuable from the past, is presumed to reflect the voice of
the director most strongly. Anna is a dynamic character, full of nostalgia for her childhood home, which she wants to keep in the family, hoping that in retaining ownership of it, she may honour the memory of her mother, her childhood and a revered bygone era. For her, it is an ideal; the quintessential family home, having captured all the sacred memories of a blissful, carefree childhood.

Anna’s brother, Alexis, a lawyer separated from his wife and guided by pragmatic self-interest, wants to sell the house and put the money to good use in supporting his young son. Anna’s sister, Amalia, a bank employee, vacillates between emotion and pragmatism, no doubt representing the conciliatory aspect of the author’s personality. Her husband wants his share of the money from the sale of the house and, typical of an outsider, has no empathy for Anna’s sensibilities: a constant source of friction between the couple. Like any remaining single dwelling in Athens, the house is sure to be sold to a developer who will erect yet another apartment block in its place, among a sea of similarly impersonal residential monstrosities.

A ‘city film’, encapsulating experiences within the urban landscape, Gold Dust is a reference to the ‘golden dust’ of things past, in juxtaposition to the ‘everyday dust of life’, of the Athenian urban indoor and outdoor landscape, where time is always in short supply and the mobile phone rules. The stillness of each apartment is shuttered as soon as its inhabitants return from work, rushing to perform their next task or family obligations. Meetings are hurried, occasionally interrupted by the lighting of a cigarette, a persistent pastime of many of its inhabitants.

Within the first few minutes of the film, we witness the prearranged meeting of the siblings at the brother’s office, to decide the fate of the family home. Alexis is anxious to persuade his sisters to sell urgently, following an offer he considers best timed to maximise returns. He suggests a more casual venue for their discussion, a nearby bar for a beer, conducive to easing tensions and facilitating decisions, but Amalia, busy as always, declines, and Anna bluntly refuses to sell, her demeanour reflecting her dissatisfaction with what she perceives as her brother’s lack of respect for their childhood home.

Angry, abrupt and on edge, Anna is the first to leave, ignoring the pleas of her sister. Amalia tells Alexis that it is not an easy decision, especially under duress, and Alexis gets frustrated at the lost opportunity to capitalise. Ensuing camera shots of Anna walking through the noisy congestion of the unrelenting Athenian streetscape serves as a constant reminder of the changed city and
its impact on Anna’s daily life and wellbeing. Amalia returns to her desk at the
bank in a hurry, complaining about the awful traffic to her female colleague,
who, in turn, mumbles insolently that it is like that every day. While Alexis
resumes his daily duties, Anna visits a local park where she finds a boy playing
‘houses’ with stones and reminisces with him about her childhood memories of
playing the same game.

Back from work, the siblings are experiencing domesticity in different
ways according to their married, divorced and single status, though their sense
of frustration and alienation is similarly palpable. In her house, Amalia is
performing her household duties by cooking dinner on her own, while her son
is totally absorbed in a computer soccer game. The frustration of mundanity is
painted on her face as her husband returns, still busy on his mobile phone with
a colleague. He gets no answer when he asks her what is on the menu, or when
his son wants to be left alone “now that he is winning the game”, in this all-too-
familiar modern domestic scene. He asks Amalia what the siblings decided that
morning about the sale of the house, and when he finds out that Anna does
not agree, he scoffs, accusing her of being self-centred and living in a utopian
romantic fantasy.

Having separated from his wife, Alexis returns to an empty house. A
message waiting for him from his ex-wife reminds him that he has forgotten
to arrange their son’s enrolment for swimming lessons. He rings her back
to apologise. She is not too pleased and asks him to deal with his issues. He
imitates her words mockingly as he puts down the phone and grabs a beer.
He listens, uninterested, to the news, and the self-assured but meaningless
drivels of political leaders’ speeches. The camera cuts to Anna practising on her
piano amidst a neighbour’s shouts accusing her of insensibility and banging
on the walls to keep quiet. She opens her front door and the neighbour’s abuse
intensifies. With no other choice, she goes out to the balcony and hums a tune
while looking at the neighbouring balconies, some of which are occupied by
their tenants. At her family home, she was encouraged to play the piano, but
modern apartment living does not afford similar freedoms to their inhabitants.

Anna’s sense of frustration continues unabated the next day. In the taxi,
the clearly frustrated foul-mouthed driver is incessantly complaining about
everything; the foreigners who drive taxis without a proper licence; the age of
the Greek soccer team’s players; that half of them are foreigners and the other
half Albanians. Weary of his angry tirades, Anna asks him to stop the taxi,
and gets out. Annoyed at her, he lashes out calling her a peasant, and turns his attentions and angry insults to the surrounding drivers who, frustrated as well, are beeping him to move on. Arriving late at her quartet’s rehearsal, Anna apologises. The scene cuts out when she makes a mistake during the insufficiently rehearsed piece.

At Amalia work, she is not faring any better. The bank queue is getting restless and her brother is on the phone asking her to mediate with Anna, who is not answering anyone’s calls. The customer at the head of the queue takes his seat, asking for a loan. Under pressure, Amalia angrily ends the call by shouting out that she is busy, and if Alexis wants to talk to Anna he should ring her up himself. She apologises profusely to the stunned customer. Heeding Amalia’s advice, Alexis calls Anna, leaving her messages when she ignores his calls.

Even among all the frustration, there is always some humour on display. Alexis’ takeaway coffee is accidentally spilled by the café owner; when he realises his mistake, he tells a speechless Alexis that he will make him another coffee, joking that you can tell if a day will be good from the way it starts in the morning, as the Greek saying goes. At the end of the rehearsal, Anna’s ex-boyfriend, the group’s violinist, asks her if she would like to go for coffee, but she has a lesson to go to and leaves. Amalia returns home with her hands full of shopping, unable to answer her incessantly ringing mobile, still blaring as she opens the door. Her husband has left a message that he will be home late. When the message ends, she says mockingly; “yes; because the other days you come home early”.

Manda continues to alternate between scenes of loneliness and alienation. Alexis sits on a bench outside a shop observing the traffic. Elsewhere, on another bench, the camera focuses on Anna who is waiting for her bus. The man next to her is holding a bunch of flowers and complains about the lack of state polity. Back in her kitchen, washing up, Amalia calls out to her son to stop playing his car-chase video game; lack of sleep is now a common complaint of parents whose children get addicted to them. He is not compliant, and she parrots his standard “yeah, OK” response. She good-humouredly turns off her son’s video game and sends him to bed – a scene repeated with Anna’s nephew, Alexis’ son, at his wife’s place, who has been playing with Anna, his aunt.

Alone at a bar, Alexis reveals to the barman his frustrated dreams. It is a common theme among Greek families who insist on certain professions for their children’s education to safeguard their future. Alexis wanted to become
a pilot, but his plans were thwarted by his mother’s fear of him getting killed in an air-crash, and his father’s threat that he would not finance his studies unless he studied law. He fears he may later do the same to his own son. After her nephew goes to sleep, his mother, Sophia, shares with Anna her concerns about her son’s drawings which have recently become careless and aggressive. Probably believing her separation from Alexis to be the cause, she pleads with Anna to speak to him about it, but Anna refuses, because of the situation with the childhood home. Sophia thinks that selling the house would be fairer for everyone, but Anna retorts it would favour Sophia and Alexis, and leaves visibly annoyed, evidently thinking that she, too, is motivated by greed.

Amalia waits up for her husband, in need of support, but he is too tired to oblige. The camera cuts to Alexis who is preparing his house for the arrival of his son. In a typical scene, out go the cigarette butts from the full ashtray and the spoiled food from the refrigerator. After vacuuming, the house is clean and ready. In another taxi, Anna listens to the news on the radio about the new Acropolis Museum; the old museum’s exhibits are gradually being transferred to the new museum. The taxi driver comments that they want to take the Acropolis and move it to the museum to protect it from pollution. He acknowledges he is not an expert and, although he has only ever visited it once at the age of 20-22, he enjoys seeing the Acropolis from down below every day. Anna smiles. He continues; “when the time comes, the Acropolis should be allowed to fall on its own rock; not to be moved like a mummy to a museum”. In typical fashion, every Greek has an opinion, though no one is an expert.

**Confronting the Past**

Looking for inspiration, Anna visits the old house and collects the mostly junk mail at the gate. She opens the windows, waters the garden, drinks water from the tap, and looks through the mail strewn on the kitchen table. Amalia leaves her a message inviting her over for lunch with her family and Alexis. It has been a while since the family had shared a meal together. Anna meets up with her ex-boyfriend and discusses the house with him. She fears that her bond with the house of her youth will be severed if they sell it to a developer who will build another miserable residential block in its place. Their conversation exemplifies her reservations.

“I cannot bear it any longer; there is nothing remaining from when I was a kid. It’s like this city is suffering from Alzheimer’s”, she tells him; but he thinks
that the city is just following its own era. “It’s only following its apathy; its ugliness, which is what we are getting used to, also, ourselves. That’s why I don’t want to let the house go”, she counters. “Yes, but the house was once in a nice neighbourhood that does not exist anymore; and even if you keep it today, your nephews will give it away. You don’t fight ugliness by going against your era; your problem is not really the house. You cannot always be against everybody and everything. It gets weird”, he tells her. “But someone needs to remember”, she continues. “One must also live; not just remember” he concludes. Annoyed, she puts an end to the conversation: “In that case, we will never be able to communicate with each other”.

In his car, Alexis is bonding with his son by imitating the sounds of the car horns in the traffic. At home, they play games and Alexis shares with him stories from his childhood, and how children used to play in the past; a childhood totally missing from Athens today. Alone on her couch Anna switches TV channels. She rings her sister, but Anna refuses the invitation. Over for lunch, Amalia tells Alexis that Anna “is not well”. Alexis acknowledges that he, too, cares for the house and the memories being lost with the passage of time. But reflecting on his son’s ignorance of all the childhood staples of his youth, he has come to the realisation that the house died along with their mother. He now has his opportunity to reveal his point of view.

“Buried in there is our whole life” says Amalia. “Not for me” says Alexis. “My childhood years there had their positives and negatives; but I am sick of Anna’s fairytale that everything old is good and everything new is bad. My son, your son, are not worthless. It is her prerogative if she doesn’t want to grow up; but she shouldn’t be unfair towards everyone else. Our sister is a child; a spoiled child” he says. “She may be a fearful child” Amalia counters. “So, what is she afraid of?” he asks. “That everything is changing, very rapidly and very badly, perhaps? That worries me too. Every day I, too, feel that I lose something; I live in this city and cannot recognise it anymore; it does not leave any room for me; I am always trying to catch up, and time is always running away from me; I live like an automaton; I’ve lost my happiness; I do things without happiness, with unhappy people in an unhappy city; it scares me and what’s worse is that I don’t know how to change things” she expounds. “It scares me too” he agrees.

Alone at the movies, Anna poignantly watches Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1964 film Red Desert, a bleak vision of a forbidding industrial landscape. The Greek subtitles read (in translation):
Giuliana’s son: Why is that smoke yellow?

Giuliana: Because it’s poisonous.

Giuliana’s son: You mean if a little birdie flies there, it’ll die? Giuliana: The little birdies know by now. They don’t fly there anymore.

Leaving the cinema, Anna comes across another aspect of the city’s new reality; two foreign immigrants are selling bric-a-brac; she briefly looks at their wares but has a change of heart and buys nothing. She sits on a bench and observes the new city. Alexis returns his son to his ex-wife. In his car, he tries to call Anna, to no avail. When Anna reaches her apartment; her ex-boyfriend is waiting outside. They embrace and go up. She shares her takeaway food with him. She does not answer the phone when Alexis calls again.

Anna is now at a crossroads. Antonioni’s vision is still concerning, but the world is waiting for no one. Her ex-boyfriend wants a serious discussion, but she is unable to communicate. Alexis rings the bell, but she does not open. Her boyfriend tries to bring her back to her senses. If she is afraid of losing everything, turning away every loved one who disagrees with her is not the best way to avoid it, he tells her; her behaviour is irrational. “Is it irrational to want to live as a human being? In a place that allows me space?” she asks. “No; it is the way you are going about it that is irrational. You see enemies everywhere; you insist; you shut yourself in; is this any way to treat Alexis? He is your brother; he is not against you; he only wants to talk to you” he reminds her.

“I know very well what Alexis wants to say to me” she argues. “No, you don’t; you only listen to what you want to hear. You think you are the only one who has sensibilities and needs. You are good, and we are all bad. OK, then; go to your family home and lock yourself in and live as a human the way you have dreamt of it. But stay away from people, because you can’t get on with them. Life is changing, Anna, regardless of us. We will always lose something. And as we get older, the world will be leaving us less and less space. The only thing it cannot take away from us is ourselves; and our relationships. Think about that. Bye” he says and leaves. Alexis sits out in the open trying to collect his thoughts, while a storm is brewing. Inside her flat, Anna calls out to her mother and weeps. Amalia is lying in bed sleepless. Anna dreams of her mother sitting at the edge of the bed. Amalia takes time off work to visit the old house.
**Mother’s Diary**

The male protagonists are full of anxiety and stress, working long and frustrating hours, seemingly fixated on monetary gains. Their modern lifestyles have not altered their outlook from that of a generation ago. The female characters are equally burdened with anxieties, centred primarily around social and family issues. The sisters are close, but they do not initially share the same opinion. Their affinity with each other does, however, provide the impetus and motivation to come to a joint decision.

They have each visited the forlorn family home separately, unbeknown to each other, to experience the dimension it occupies in their psyche. While Anna revels in the pathos of a house of absence and death, Amalia searches deeply for any sign of a past presence that may help her decide the fate of the home. She opens the window and closes it again; the old garden, an oasis in the concrete jungle surrounding it, does not provide her with any answers. She opens the wardrobe, but her dear mother’s old clothes can only bear witness to her loss.

She keeps looking for a sign of past life and finds it among other dear mementos: her mother’s diary. Having taken the day off work, she visits Anna ready to have a long-awaited deep and meaningful conversation with her. She reveals to her older sister the powerlessness she felt as the youngest child among the siblings. Her coping mechanism has always been to stay silent whenever the older siblings fought. To be passive and agreeable and never antagonise the older siblings, as her mother had always directed. She holds no grudges but, in revealing this facet of her past, she can now bring an awareness of the power dynamics in the family to her sister, to make her become more understanding and sensitive to the wishes and thoughts of the other siblings. Anna, in turn, reveals the reason why she was so vocal as a child: she was always afraid she would not, otherwise, be heard.

Amalia’s phone rings; her husband wants her to pick up their son. Having expected the call, Amalia ignores it. Failing to find an alternative, her husband is forced to look after their son on his own for the first time, thereby having a rare opportunity to really get to know his child. The sisters, full of nostalgia, share tender moments singing and playing an old song on the piano, and get ready to read their mother’s diary, filled with both terror and awe at what they may uncover.

The narration starts with Anna, and then Amalia, and continues against the backdrop of a bustling modern Athenian landscape, alternating between
central and suburban areas, with familial scenes that bear a deep connection to
the mother’s diary narration in the first person, from a time when she was of a
similar age to that of the sisters’ age now, revealing her inner thoughts.

Juxtaposed to the narration runs a visual backdrop that forms the essence
of the film’s thematic journey. The sisters, sitting together, and closer than ever
before in their adult life, are eager to find the thread that may guide them back to
their source and become the catalyst to finding their way forward. As children of
different personalities, they are keen to know how they were perceived by their
mother, in this rare and unique opportunity for self-reflection and discovery.
When their brother, Alexis, is mentioned in the narration, the background
scenery makes a temporal leap to a loving scene of separation between Alexis
and his son, returning to his mother outside her apartment. As Alexis closes the
building’s front door, Anna’s voice reads their mother’s description of him as a
tree full of cicadas, ready to explode from their amplified synchronicity.

Anna now discovers that, for her mother, she was like a stormy sea, and
her sister, Amalia, like autumn, while the visuals show the lonely receding
figure of Alexis, walking in the middle of a typically Athenian one-way street,
with a row of parked cars on either side, against a somewhat predominantly
grey background. He is driving his car just as his father’s wishes about him
are revealed. Athens is seen through Alexis’ car windows, as a city under
construction, overdeveloped and in a state of flux. Rows of old, deserted or
dilapidated buildings emerge, whose original owners have either passed away or
migrated to faraway lands. The mother reflects on the father’s plans for his son.
She could see it in his eyes when he looked at his son with pride, that he wanted
him to follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer; though never verbalised, he
never had such aspirations for his daughters.

The mother was keenly aware that Athens was changing and expanding.
The houses around their own were all being sold to developers to erect
apartments, but it was not this change per se that bothered her, but its rampant
and merciless haste. Her alienation from the formerly familiar but everchanging
environment, was now even further magnified by her husband’s refusal to leave
the house. Like so many working men of the era who worked six-day weeks,
before the two-day weekend was introduced in 1980, Sunday was a day of rest
spent exclusively inside one’s home. The house walls were oppressing her, but
he could not see it; nor did he consider her wishes a legitimate concern. In the
eyes of men, women who stayed at home had all day to socialise if they wanted
to, when in reality, women had little opportunity to work, due, among other things, to inflexible hours and lack of further education.

The ‘four walls of the house’ were still choking her. She had always been there for her children and husband but felt she was taken for granted. Her emotional alienation from her family and manifest isolation from the outside world were becoming hard for her to bear, with the unfolding background of the bustling Athenian metropolis through alternately degraded and attractive areas being a testament to it. She had never complained; she had accepted her primary role as a wife and mother, and her only time to herself was spent secretly writing her deepest thoughts in her diary. When Amalia once saw her writing it, the mother felt exposed and ashamed not only for the content of those thoughts, but also for their mere existence.

Like most people, she was saddened to hear of the Kennedy assassinations. She always wanted to travel to America, but her husband did not share her wishes. He had attributed his lack of interest to the Americanisation of the world, so eloquently captured in the modern buildings of foreign banks in the background visuals. The moon landing newsreel she saw at the Athenian Cineac, a cinema institution between the 1930s and 1970s – had given her hope; hope for the next generation and hope for the whole of humanity.

Television was bringing the faraway world closer – now juxtaposed with the ugly TV antennas protruding from the top of virtually every building, dominating the visuals and obscuring part of the sky. The new technology, a Pye TV, was taking pride of place where the old record player once stood. The arrival of the piano would fill the house with music and bring the sisters closer together, while also driving an imaginary wedge between them, with the older daughter’s greater strength impacting her younger sister’s self-confidence.

**Towards Reconciliation**

The unfolding imagery, interspersed with antennas, balcony railings and solar panels, while the diary is being read, reveals the repeating cycle of life between the parents’ and children’s generations. This realisation is offering a new understanding that could allow the siblings to acknowledge their feelings for each other and live for the present while grieving for the loss of the past. They could now let go of their fears and reconcile, restoring their love and support for each other. The past can reshape the present in a way their mother would undoubtedly have wished for but could hardly ever expect.
It was the urgency of the impending decision that forced the siblings to face up to their demons and, in the process, resolve their longstanding personal differences. The catalyst was Amalia’s discovery of their mother’s diary, in which she had been confiding her anxieties and fears. By sharing the diary, a light is shone on the ‘gold dust’ of their childhood memories that can now be lifted and blown away. Free of the chains of an unacknowledged past, they have learned how they, as adults, can make their decisions jointly, and that to honour the past, they need to make peace and safeguard their shared future.

When Anna visits Alexis at his office, ready for the conversation they never had, he is angry she had avoided him the whole of the previous day, in spite of his enormous efforts to speak to her. He is also very busy with clients, but she is ready to talk and will happily wait. When he is finally free, she shows him the diary. “Everything we have failed to speak about is in here” she tells him. “Mother had to die for us to grow up”. She then breaks the ice by playing with his tie, and they start a mock fight, like when they were children.

Amalia’s husband waits outside her workplace, whistling Strangers in the Night to attract her attention when she exits the door; he invites her to go walking with him to Athens’ National Gardens. Anna is now rehearsing with her quartet. She walks through the streets while we listen to her narration of the diary’s final pages. The three siblings are seen playing together as children, chasing each other. The mother’s voice is calling them’, “Alexis! Amalia! Anna! Anna! Anna! Come children! It’s ready. Children!” The house is obscured by a gold dust, full of nostalgia, while Manos Hadjidakis sings his song Kyrie, and the screen turns dark.

Feminist Foundations

In line with the 1960s French critical theory of authorship, and contrary to post-structuralist critical theory, Manda is the auteur of her film, placing herself within it through the voice of the mother of her characters, as well as their own, and creating her unique and authentic style, free from male, or female, bias. Regardless of any reservations expressed by some early feminist film critics in relation to the auteur theory, Manda is irrefutably the auteur of her oeuvre, having carefully crafted her characters to represent distinct points of view, in a respectful and non-polemic way, letting them subtly ‘speak’ their truth without preaching or shouting out their message. Manda’s image of Woman has a distinct quality; her heroines are realistic characters without any hidden subtext or agenda (Johnston, 1999: 34-35).
Gold Dust is a narrative film whose female voices are as strong as those of her male protagonists, notwithstanding their distinct individuality. The daughters’ personalities speak with authority and assertiveness, and the maternal voice, far from being silenced, plays a dominant and defining role, portrayed in a positive and not impotent light. Although her passing places her in a position of exteriority, she is at the core of the unfolding narrative. Her voice, though detached from her corporeal body is in no way disembodied (Chaudhuri, 2006: 55).

Manda’s women are not a passive spectacle, nor do they elicit passivity in their spectators; they are every bit as active as their male counterparts and though they exist in a political world of patriarchy, they are never directly involved in its politics. Amalia’s domestic duties as a wife and mother do not prevent her from exercising her free will to decide when to make herself available to answer the phone when her husband tries to contact her, though the feeling of guilt for neglecting their children remains a common theme among women today, whether or not they blame their career “for ‘undermining’ their husbands’ masculinity and their own femininity” (Friedan and Quindlen, 2001: 18).

Manda has imbued her characters with nuanced sensitivities, avoiding unrealistic generalisations and broad classifications. Scopophilia does not have a narrow focus on an objectified female; the viewers can identify with each of her characters, depending on their age, gender, space and time. Although the males retain some traditional masculine characteristics in the scenes depicting workplace engagement and absence from the general running of the household, they have a certain willingness to share in those duties when the need arises – something that may be more akin and familiar, perhaps, to a younger generation – though rather reluctantly at first.

The alienation among family members, due to long hours of work or disaffection with one’s lifestyle, has also created a lonely experience of living, with or without a partner, that is typical of this century. A psychoanalytic description of the ‘negative Oedipus complex’ as a result of separation from the mother – in this case by her death – is arguably apparent in both female protagonists, perhaps slightly more so in Anna, where the mother has retained its pleasurable experience as an object of adoration past childhood, due to unresolved tensions through to maturity. Adaptation to a rapidly changing environment could have further delayed the separation from the mother and created a tendency to cling to a stable past.
In certain ways, Amalia’s conciliatory role represents Manda’s own mature voice within the triumvirate of perspectives, as Amalia is the one who has patiently uncovered the diary which became the catalyst in overcoming the impasse between the siblings. Far from irrational, it is she who had the resolve, “with rationality and transcendence of body”, to methodically explore and discover a way to unravel the complex and impenetrable emotions that were preventing them from understanding their intangible compulsion of preserving the past (Chaudhuri, 2006: 16).

In this incarnation, the female is a much more complex and nuanced being than a principally Freudian construct. Though the masculine is evident in the three male characters, that is, the unseen father, his son and son-in-law, who stereotypically undervalue feminine emotion in favour of materialistic gain, other facets of their masculinity have undergone a substantial change through the generations. Males are now more mobile and agreeable, and females more independent, willing and able to address their own issues without keeping eternally silent or being comfortable to rely on a male partner. The new era has allowed them agency and the ability to exercise their own voice by speaking up – or choosing to remain silent.

The Male has not remained the all-dominant paradigm he once was, and gender is but one quality through which to understand each of the film’s characters. Even the maternal voice, which had been kept silent while she was alive, has now been heard and established as a ‘discursive agent’. In contrast to Silverman’s pronouncement, the sisters have emphatically decided to resume their familial bond and end their separatism (Silverman, 1988: 44).

The binary oppositions equating masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity are essentially irrelevant in a contemporary setting and there are multiple manifestations of masculinity and femininity, both affected by such factors as class, race or age. Yet, the family still retains its central position as an image of unity, forming “the traditional model for the construction of all other collective identities (community, town, nation)” (Silverman, 2017: 41-2).

Manda’s nuanced fictional characters are created with utmost respect for their points of view. Her sophisticated ability for introspection and honesty never caricatures or trivialises them and recognises the importance of acknowledging the validity of differing opinions in a pluralist society. The humour imprinted on their occasionally mocking faces is also another candid portrayal of a contemporary personality. Her male characters are not endowed
with negative qualities as might have been expected from a woman, nor devalued in the way many dominant discourses might tend to do with women. Yet, her male characters ring true, and are not contrived or castrated. They do retain their authentic voices but are never the only dominant contender through the duration of the film.

Though Manda naturally speaks from a female perspective, her analysis of power relations encompasses the respective dynamics of both her own and her parents’ generation, and her film is neither only about women, nor against men (Chaudhuri, 2006: 4). Instead of trying to create meaning by utilising hidden structures and subtexts that rely on camera movement, lighting and editing, she uses psychoanalysis to create her authentic characters, and semiotics to place them in their environment (Chaudhuri, 2006: 8).

Although psychoanalysis was blamed in the 1960s for leading a ‘counter-revolution against feminism’, it was not “a recommendation for a patriarchal society but an analysis of one”, which rendered it indispensable for feminism (Mitchell, 1990: xv). Much like a mirror that presents an ideal ego, the screen facilitates direct rapport between the image and the spectator. For the female spectator, each character will elicit a range of responses throughout the film. In spite of her natural tendency to identify with the heroine, she may cross the lines of gender to identify with the male hero, depending on her particular preferences or circumstances (Chaudhuri, 2006: 38-42).

Manda’s gender representations are authentic with all her characters. The three females are constructed to form an imaginary cultural representation of Woman. They represent distinct characteristics common to all three, evident even diachronically in their respective socio-historical specificities through their generations; they all possess ‘agency and self-determination’ (De Lauretis, 1987: 9). Yet, this is no cinema made by a woman for women. It addresses all points of identification in its narrative strategies.

Narrative, a key technology of gender and mechanism of coherence, is a major feature of Manda’s film, engaging the audience with the real issues impacting all the film’s characters. It is not characterised by dominant codes and does not fulfil their oppressive functions. Although theirs are local issues and their treatment bears the unique characteristics of their mise-en-scène, the characters’ struggles and specific conditions and history, they have global dimensions, which manifest differently in different settings, but are relevant to most audiences (De Lauretis, 1990: 17).
Conclusion

Despite the fracturing and shrinking of the nuclear family, and the spreading out of the extended one, family is still seen to play a pivotal role in addressing enduring issues between its members. The family unit is where many of society’s problems have their origins and where solutions may therefore be sought.

The feminist paradigm presented here has had the power to resolve the impasse and restore the strong familial bond between siblings, as implied in the narrative’s closure. Irrespective of their pluralist standpoints, when women tell their own stories, whether as filmmakers, cinematographers, producers or actors, there are important convergences in the way they address issues of both male and female representation and spectatorship, which defy a rigid psychoanalytic description and add truth and substance to their characters.

In spite of certain dissenting voices arguing to the contrary, inclusion of new pluralist elements that encompass diverse aspects of the human condition and experience is proving to be an enriching quality in the field of feminist film theory, and by injecting new lived experiences into a body of work that deals with so vast a human diversity and knowledge, its viability and relevance should be assured.

References


Notes

1 Plot summary, as described by the Director: “Athens, today. Three siblings face the prospect of selling their family home. The potential buyers will tear it down and erect a modern building in its place. Alexis defends the sale, documenting his position with the financial benefits that this will bring. Anna reacts negatively. For her, their family home is the memory of her childhood. Amalia hesitates in making a decision, trapped between her emotional reservations and the practical needs. The heroes are in conflict with themselves in a city that is in conflict with the memory of its history. The sale of the family home functions as a pretext for the heroes to bring to light their interpersonal relations. The image they have of each other in absentia, the “non dit” that characterizes family ties and reveals raw wounds when the surface of childhood is scratched. A surface sprinkled with gold dust, like a fairytale. But the fairytale is weakened by a chance occurrence. A message from the past functions as a catalyst, prompting the heroes to make their own mark in their own age. To find a balance between the debt of memory and the debt of forgetfulness. To come of age, taking the present of their own lives in their hands.” (IMDb, 2018)