

Roma:

A Humanistic Portrait of an Inhumane Reality

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Writing 101: *Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Film*

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I would like to thank the Academy for recognizing a film [that] centers around an indigenous woman, one of the 70 million domestic workers in the world without work rights, a character that historically has been relegated to the background in cinema. As artists, our job is to look where others don't. This responsibility becomes much more important especially in times when we are encouraged to look away" (Cuarón).

This short speech by Alfonso Cuarón upon receiving the Academy Award for Best Director in 2018 is itself the thesis statement of *Roma*—the Chilango director's personal tribute to the women who raised him (his mother and his maid nicknamed "Libo"). Indeed, *Roma* offers an intimate look into the lives of domestic workers from the perspective of a live-in maid. The first Mexican film to win the Best Foreign Language Film Award, *Roma* revolves around the story of Cleo, one of two domestic workers working for an upper-middle class family with four children in 1970s Mexico City. It portrays Cleo's experience working as a caretaker, housekeeper and at times a pseudo family member in her employer's household. Informed by *Roma's* realistic and humanistic account of the experience of domestic workers, this essay examines the role of cinematography in establishing a documentary-style realism that underpins the narrative, how aspects of the humanity of live-in maids are explored through the relationship between Cleo and her employers' family, and why such a narrative is indispensable in highlighting the overlooked issues faced by domestic workers in the real world.

Set in Colonia Roma, a neighborhood in New Mexico City in the 1970s, *Roma* sheds light on a long-neglected issue in the country. Domestic work has been a distinct feature of the hierarchical structure of Mexican society—a structure that is built on the ideological vestiges of Spanish colonialism. There are currently around 2.3 million domestic workers in Mexico, and more than 90% of them are women, often indigenous women who were forced to move to the cities in other states from their rural villages to seek employment for a living (Lakhani). The statistics here indicates that despite the overall economic progress achieved by the country over the years, Mexico's informal domestic work sector is still a booming industry. Yet, domestic workers in Mexico are deprived of basic labor rights due to the non-existence of any legal recognition of their work, as evident in the Mexican census in 1970 that classified 79.9% of women as "economically inactive" merely because domestic work was perceived as "informal labor" (Arizpe 28). Moreover, domestic workers, especially women, face pervasive oppression rooted in a stigma that views them as second-class citizens and at times reduces them to mere servants and even slaves. This is the existence of the lives of live-in maids in Mexico, living in a social void that is shunned by societal stigma and ostracized by the institutions of the country. This is the void that is at the center of Cuarón's epic tribute to the women who raised him, and the void which *Roma* sets out to fill with a story from the past that is still crucially relevant today.



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I have always been a film lover and a staunch believer in the power of cinema in making the unseen seen and the unheard heard.

Roma is one of the few movies that leaves me moved and in deep reflection. Growing up in a Chinese family in Malaysia, I am no stranger to domestic work as it is part of everyday life in my community. Hence, *Roma* struck me as not only a film that gives voice to the oppressed and the overlooked, but also a masterpiece that compels me to reflect on some of the taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes about domestic workers within my own community.

I set out to write a film analysis on this Oscar-winning and thought-provoking movie, but ended up with a pseudo op-ed under the guise of film commentary as I became increasingly absorbed into the social realities behind the story. I would like to thank Professor Sandra Sotelo-Miller, whose support and guidance throughout the writing of this piece made it possible for me to succeed in finding my own voice and elucidating the complexity of the subject. I would also like to thank Professor Sheryl Welte Emch for supporting me throughout the process of revising this essay despite our time zone challenges. Finally, I would like to thank my parents who are the only reason I am able to pursue my dreams and passion today.

I hope this piece serves more than just as a record of my musings on the film, but a reflection on the social plight of the long-neglected community of domestic workers around the world.

A Reconstruction of the Past

Roma reconstructs Cuarón's childhood memories in a realistic manner that does not lose touch with the present through the use of black-and-white cinematography and long shots. As director Frank Darabont opines, black-and-white cinematography "gives [the audience] a view of the world that really doesn't exist in real life" (Morrow). Though true for most black-and-white film classics, Darabont's perspective on black-and-white cinematography does not fully elucidate the nuanced purpose of the use of such cinematography in *Roma*, as it goes far beyond re-creating a reality from the past in the film. Shooting *Roma* in black and white allows Cuarón to maintain the fine balance between defining a temporal fourth wall and offering a vicarious reconstruction of the past. In other words, the choice of cinematography here is instrumental in conveying the realness of these events (similar to black-and-white period films based on historical events) without compromising the temporal fourth wall that constantly reminds the audience of the hindsight through which the story is told. Narrating *Roma's* story in black and white keeps the audience at an emotional distance that prevents them from being seduced by the drama and emotions in the scenes, thus allowing for a more conscious and critical engagement with the familiar narrative of domestic work throughout the film.



On the other hand, the effective use of panoramic long shots with deep focus and fixed camera positions allows Cuarón to maintain the focus on both the setting and the characters of the film. In general, cinematographers agree that long shots "frame much more of the environment around the person, object, or action and often shows their relationships in physical space much better" (Thompson 10). In other words, long shots are frequently used to depict the relationships between the characters and the setting by placing equal emphasis on both the *mise en scène* and the main characters. The use of long shots, for instance, plays a pivotal role in establishing the realistic tone of the narrative in the opening scenes of *Roma*. Capturing Cleo's work routine of cleaning the patio and the house through distant shots and a wide frame, these long shots immerse viewers in the mundane rhythms of household chores. Contrary to the convention of using close-up shots to create a personal point of view for the audience, Cuarón adroitly combines these long and panoramic shots to focus on both Cleo and her work environment, thus highlighting her overwhelming workload that speaks volumes about the physical demands and mundanity of domestic work.

In short, the choice of black-and-white cinematography and the use of long shots contribute to *Roma's* unapologetically truthful depiction of the lives of domestic workers. The camerawork discussed above plays an indispensable role in *Roma's* cinematography that humanizes domestic work by framing the audience's point of view on the story from the perspective of domestic workers. This is essential for building empathy for domestic workers as it compels the audience to engage vicariously with the daily struggles of live-in maids.

Mops, Middlewoman and Motherhood

Having captured the details of domestic work through a documentary-style cinematography, Cuarón further develops *Roma's* narrative of domestic work with a realistic portrayal of live-in maids' role as a middlewoman and a mother-like figure in the household. To the children, Cleo is their "acting" mother, cheering them up whenever they are having a bad day and putting them to bed without fail every

night; to the adults in the family, her role alternates between that of a middlewoman who always provides a safe space for their emotional outbursts in light of conflicts within the family, and a servant who is ever ready to serve. It is with a careful portrayal of Cleo's nuanced relationship with her employers' family that *Roma* offers an authentic depiction of the real challenges faced by live-in maids in the household.

Live-in maids are often inevitably embroiled in their employers' family matters, and they are forced to maneuver their way through the complex relationships between family members at the cost of their own emotional capacity. This is best illustrated by the relationship between Cleo and her employer, Sofia. Though Sofia often expresses her appreciation and acceptance of Cleo as a family member, Cleo is at times treated as a mere servant and a victim of her emotional catharsis. In one scene, a desperate Sofia, agitated about her strained relationship with her husband, berates Cleo for not cleaning the feces off the driveway, as if that mess was the reason her husband abandoned the family for another woman. Sofia's outburst is clearly more cathartic than instructive, and her instinctive reaction to her husband's departure—which is to take out her anger on an ever-patient Cleo—reveals how she still subconsciously sees Cleo as a servant who should entertain her emotional outbursts. Hence, *Roma* offers a humanistic account of the untold emotional labor of live-in domestic workers through the characterization of Cleo as a middlewoman who is often the collateral victim of the conflicts between members of her employer's family.

Roma explores the motherhood of live-in maids and challenges the stereotypes that often reduce them to second-class citizens struggling to make ends meet. The genuineness of Cleo's love for the children in the household is reciprocated by the children's acceptance of her as a member of the family, as depicted in the loving and tender scenes between Cleo and the children. While this positive portrayal of the loving relationship between Cleo and the children is significant for providing a humanistic portrait of domestic workers, *Roma's* depiction of Cleo's own motherhood—especially with the demise of her own daughter—reveals a darker side of the story. Though Sofia is accommodating towards her pregnancy, Cleo's initial concerns about losing the job due to her pregnancy alludes to yet another unspoken rule in the industry: unconditional loyalty. Drawing from qualitative research that includes personal interviews with live-in maids, Tejada argues in her doctoral thesis that the "artificial" motherhood of maids towards the employer's children inadvertently contributes towards the tacit and unjust expectations among employers; the motherly image of domestic workers "reproduces the marginalization of women" in this occupation and further entrenches employers' demand that good maids should stay "childless and therefore fully loyal to the development of the middle class family"

(Saldaña-Tejeda 148). In other words, live-in maids are often stripped of their own motherhood as they become victims of this exploitative demand for motherhood by their employers.

Roma is not simply a portrayal of these egregious expectations that confront live-in maids, but rather it compels viewers to engage with the normalization of such unjustified demands in the industry. This is evident in the climax of the film where Cleo risks her life to save Sofia's children at the beach. In stark contrast to the intense dramatic context of the scene, Cuarón decides to shoot the whole scene in one long shot with the camera focusing mainly on Cleo, without any dramatic tension between the danger the children are in and her desperate effort to save them. The camerawork here does not allow viewers to be absorbed by the drama of the scene, but instead engages them to ponder on Cleo's selfless act of saving her employers' children shortly after losing her own daughter. Cleo's admitting that she did not want her daughter to be born hints subtly at the unjust demand for live-in maids' unconditional loyalty, thus highlighting the normalized injustice domestic workers face.

The juxtaposition of Cleo's personal and professional lives in *Roma* has effectively portrayed the plight of domestic



workers; just as Cleo is alternately treated as an outsider and a member of the family, live-in maids often struggle to find their position in the household. Perhaps this is the cost of live-in domestic work, for in spite of their own humanity, the identity of live-in maids is often contingent on the employers' family. In Cleo's case, despite far exceeding her job expectations by selflessly caring for every member of the family, including the dogs and the house itself, her physical and emotional labor was never reciprocated with the same care from her employers. Such is the humanistic story of *Roma* that shines a light on the often understated emotional labor of domestic work apart from the overwhelming physical demands of the job.

Spanish, Mixtec and the Indigenous Inequality of Domestic Work

Culture and ethnicity are two main aspects of an individual's identity, yet they are also the most neglected aspects of the identity of domestic workers. Most live-in domestic workers in Mexico come from the indigenous groups which are often the victims of socio-economic inequality and class hierarchy. In *Roma*, the indigeneity of Adela and Cleo is made clear from the outset of the film by using their native Mixtec language, distinguished for the viewers by the children's reaction upon hearing them speak a language that is foreign to them. *Roma* depicts the reality behind the oppression faced by live-in maids as indigenous Mexicans who are often the victims of class division and social hierarchy in Mexico.

The key moment that best depicts the class division between the employers and the domestic workers is the scene where the family goes on a Christmas vacation in a luxurious hacienda. As the hosts and guests indulge themselves in drinking and dancing, Cleo could only observe as she sits on the floor looking after one of the children. Later, under her colleague's insistence, she is led downstairs to a party at the basement where the indigenous workers working on the hacienda gather for their own celebration of Christmas. This sequence underlines the class discrimination that confronts domestic workers by showing how they are still expected to work during the Christmas/New Year season—one of the most important holidays of the year for Mexicans—and the social discrimination they face. Furthermore, it depicts the hierarchy that separates the employers and the indigenous domestic workers. The upper-class employers enjoy their party in the spacious main room of the hacienda whereas the indigenous workers had to remain in the cramped basement, depicting how they are literally trapped at the lower echelons of society. This juxtaposition between the employers' party and the indigenous workers' separate party powerfully depicts the class division that incarcerates indigenous

domestic workers, thereby highlighting the social inequality that has plagued the Mexican society for decades.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Roma* offers a nuanced narrative on the lives of live-in domestic workers—one that encompasses the swirling emotions hidden underneath the piles of dishes and the untold struggles of maneuvering the relationship with members of their employers' family. By capturing the neglected details of domestic work through his characteristic cinematography, Cuarón builds a compelling case for portraying the struggles and challenges faced by domestic workers. It is a humanistic account of domestic work that depicts the class division and the complex employer-worker relationships often confronting live-in domestic workers. Such a realistic account challenges the pre-existing notions about domestic work which are rife with bias and prejudice. While the authentic depiction of Cleo's overwhelming workload directly challenges the biased representation of domestic work as being of little importance and deserving little pay, the portrayal of Cleo's emotional labor provides a much-needed emotional context for the current revised narrative of domestic work. This unapologetic narrative contributes to not only a greater understanding of the plight of domestic workers, but also a new definition of domestic work, one that includes the struggle, stigma, classism and pain experienced by domestic workers.

Challenging preconceived notions in Mexican society that have long been taken for granted, Cuarón's masterpiece is undoubtedly a tour-de-force given its impacts in the real world. It has not only advocated for the rights of live-in maids, but also instigated a social movement in support of a domestic workers' rights bill in Mexico (Richford). Indeed, *Roma* serves as a cinematic mirror that can hopefully bring hope and change to the present as it challenges us to re-examine societal stereotypes of domestic workers through an uncomfortably moving story.

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