

The Scent Of Green Papaya: Female Solidarity and Male Disengagement

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This essay discusses Tran Anh Hung's *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993). It analyzes the film's powerful cinematic language, particularly the music and the mise-en-scène, that brings women together in places of duty and trauma regardless of class differences. More significantly, it argues that this solidarity among women is necessitated and reinforced by men's emotional distance and inability to engage with their immediate world.

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Made in 1993 by Vietnamese French filmmaker Tran Anh Hung, *The Scent of Green Papaya* (original Vietnamese title *Mùi Đu Đủ Xanh*) is widely critically acclaimed. Less of a story and more of a visual exhibit, the moving picture follows a little rural girl who works as a maid for a middle-class family in Saigon in the 1950s. With the entire film set in the domestic life of two households, the film features women working together to support their house in the abstracted presence of men.

In her book *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism*, film scholar Lan Duong asserts that *The Scent of Green Papaya* represents female solidarity (Duong, 2012). Drawing mostly on the set of the first household, this essay demonstrates this female solidarity. More importantly, this essay argues that the female bond is reinforced by men's inability to be fully present in the world with women or involve women in the world of men.

The film is set in two middle-class families in Saigon during the 1950s and 1960s. It opens with the to-be-maid child, Mui (Man San Lu), entering an alley looking for her new employer's house during a late hour. The camera follows Mui's cautious steps and observing eyes to explore the alley at night with a three-minute long take, almost without a sound, even when she inquires about her destination. Leading into the film with a quiet long take not only offers a slice of a Saigon alley during sleep hours with full attention to the visuals of silent business signs and people sleeping on the sidewalk and in their rickshaw (*cyclo*). More significantly, it introduces a young girl with a keen sense of observation who is always inquisitive and perceptive of her surroundings.

In the morning light of the next day, the panning camera introduces the house as a large traditional Vietnamese wooden estate. Introductory long takes pan the entire household and define hierarchical spaces that include space for the masters, space for the live-in servants, and even space for the short-term hired labour who is kept outside the house and only regarded through window frames.

The compartmentalization of space with steps, thresholds, walls, doors and windows also adds to the division of labour and positioning of different inhabitants and non-inhabitants of the house. It also exudes a sense of ranks and class division.

More significantly, however, it seems that the mentioned compartmentalization of space is introduced early on only to later highlight that the boundaries between these defined spaces are crossable. These different spaces are connected by the constant and agile moving of Mùì and the mistress (Truong Thi Loc) which is closely followed by the tracking camera. Following Mùì's errands and the mistress' household management, the camera shows them oscillate harmoniously between these spaces. We see Mùì mopping the floor along different spaces past thresholds and poles. We also see the lady of the house walking from the living room to the kitchen, not only to supervise but also to help with food preparation. It seems that the maids are there only to help with the housework that the mother alone simply cannot take care of, rather than to elevate her status as a middle-class lady. As such, the film brings women together to a point of solidarity regardless of class (Lan Duong, 2012): the master and the servants come together in one place (e.g., the kitchen, the living room, the altar chamber, the fabric shop) regardless of class difference.

The class line is also blurred when the lady of a middle-class family considers the maid a daughter instead of a mere servant. From the moment Mùì enters the house, the mistress already expresses a warm affection and care for her, addressing her as a relative. She exclaims with her husband (Tran Ngoc Trung): "I feel for the little girl, she walked here all the way from her village." The mistress' motherly affection for Mùì is expressed not only in word but also in action. When Mùì accidentally breaks the family's most valuable antique vase, the mother, instead of chastising Mùì as might be expected of a mistress, sympathetically comforts the fearful little girl. When Mùì, now as an adult, leaves the family to work for another, the mother gives Mùì a traditional Vietnamese long dress (*áo dài*), gold jewelry, and a pair of shoes, all of which make a typical set of dowry a mother would give her to-be-wedded daughter. The class line is blurred and often crossed, physically and symbolically. The gender gap, however, is not to be bridged.

In fact, I argue that men's inability to show affection for and engage with women makes it all the more essential for women to unite regardless of the class difference. The males in the house are either unconcerned and withdrawn to their own musical world or helplessly silent. If the visual creates an intimate bond among the women, the sound detaches the men from the domestic surroundings and elevates them to an isolated, artistic space. The film's diegetic music is owned by men, first by the lady's husband and eldest son, and later by Khuyển (Vuong Hoa Hoi), Mùì's second-employer-turning-lover. These men own not only musical instruments but music itself by producing it and having it played for them, be it traditional Vietnamese music or classical Western music. Unconcerned with the domesticity, performing music is the only activity men participate in at home besides the absolute necessities such as eating. Music is also how the men interact with one another, for example, when the father and the eldest son perform a duet in replacement of verbal communication after the son comes back home at night. Women, however, are excluded from this leisurely musical world in which men indulge themselves. The only woman that showcases any affiliation with music is Khuyển's Westernized fiancée (Talisman Vantha) who tries to read a music sheet which is then taken away by her fiancé, or when she moves her head accordingly with the rhythm of the piano music Khuyển is playing.

The mistress' second son, Lãm (Do Nhat), although not as indifferent as her husband and her eldest son, is unable to offer consolation to his mother due to his internalized stoicism. Being a middle son, whose available models of masculinity are the emotionally distant father and elder brother (Souvannavong Keo), he embodies an unvoiced anger towards his father and an equally suppressed sympathy towards his mother. When the father abandons the family with all their savings (again), the family can only afford to have tongue-numbingly salty pork to serve with rice which his little brother (Neth Gérard) refuses to eat. Lãm demonstrates to his little brother a troubling degree of stoicism by not only eating the pork without rice but also drinking a mouthful of even saltier fish sauce with an unsettling calm expression on his face. Not being able to voice his anger towards the father, the boy projects his frustration and rage onto helpless living creatures. The disturbing long takes and closeups of the boy killing red ants with hot candle liquid and another time with his finger are reminiscent of Michael Haneke's long take challenge in his 1997 film *Funny Games* (Koepnick, 2017). It is difficult to watch not only because we fear for the fate of the ants, but more so because we fear for the progression towards a point of no return where the boy slowly transforms into a psychopathic violent young man. The boy carries an unvoiced rage towards the father and the same unspoken and helpless love and sympathy towards the mother. The only time we witness him cry is when he sees his grandmother scold his mother for not making her son happy enough to want to stay home, yet he does it silently and to himself. When too upset, he goes and hides in a corner where his mother finds him, at which point, the camera refuses to show the boy's emotions by depriving us of a face shot; rather, it shows his hand hesitantly reaching out to caress his weeping mother's foot to offer her some comfort.

In such ways, both her husband and sons, albeit indifferent or sympathetic, fail to offer the wife/mother the confidence and solace she needs from them. Because of such deprivation, she could only find support and solidarity from the other women in the household, that is Mũi and the old maid (Nguyen Anh Hoa). As this source of emotional support and affiliation is so vital to the mother's life, quite conspicuously, the event of Mũi leaving the house to work for another household is treated as a point of breakdown for the mother. If a film can think and feel itself through a "filmind" as radically proposed by Daniel Frampton in his book *Filmosophy* (2006), the entire "filmind" expresses its devastation for the separation through both visual and acoustic means. Compared to the other tragedies of the family, Mũi's leaving is distinctly the most dramatic moment in her employer's life. Indeed, that the mother's husband takes off with the family's savings is considered a mere fact of life. When that happens, her facial expression does not draw a headshot or close-up shot from the camera. Refusing to dramatise the trouble caused by the husband, the film lingers on the empty box that previously stored money and jewelry, then shows that the light is turned off and the mother slowly goes back to bed. The next scene cuts to the mother crying silently while watching Mũi who is fast asleep in her bed, as she tries to draw some consolation from the sight of the little girl. Even when the husband dies, the film also refuses to dramatize her suffering. It does not show her crying or lamenting the loss; it simply gives a glimpse of her collapsing.



"Tran Nu Yên-Khê (*L'odeur de la papaye verte*)" by Jean Bigue is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.

Mùi's departure, however, is decidedly a climax of emotions for the mother, which is pronounced via the sudden change in the acting style and the film music. The mother not only collapses on the mattress but also sobs out loud on the dramatic background music, which is unique compared to the hitherto suave music and the suppressed acting style consistent throughout the film. The precarious music signals the mother's escalating emotional disarray, right up to the moment Mùi shows up to say goodbye. This externalization of the character's inner voice through music is remarkably comparable to *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) in which Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) pulls himself together to stop the uncontrollable music seemingly pouring out from his own chaotic emotional state after losing one of his comrades (Winters, 2010). In more or less the same manner, the music abruptly stops when the mother pulls herself up to reach out to Mùi when she shows up in front of her, for a few seconds, just long enough for the mother to call Mùi "my dear daughter" for the first time, then collapse again to the even more alarming noise of a diegetic patrol aircraft. This dramatization of the acting style and the film music is out-of-character compared to the otherwise consistent non-dramatic "aesthetics of distance" (Lan Duong, 2012) that is employed throughout the film. It underscores the break of bondage between the two women as the most significant loss for the mother, especially when her husband has died, her eldest son has always been living in his own male world, and her second son has also left.

The essay has demonstrated how the subtle cinematic language in Tran Anh Hung's *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993) illustrates female solidarity. While the mise-en-scene of the household seemingly defines class boundaries among the women, the panning camera and the stylization of music and acting unite them as they oscillate through these social spaces, crossing the boundaries

and consolidate in duty and trauma. More significantly, the essay has argued that men's failure to stay engaged in domestic life and offer emotional support for women elicits and reinforces women solidarity. While the little boy's stoic silence is a source of disturbance, he grows up to be a writer, which is an outlet for his suppressed emotions. In the same way, the men's ownership of and affiliation with music afford them an artistic space where they can escape the mundane and even the precarious situation of the raging American war in the 1950s, 1960s. The women, however, are left with the quotidian, with their motherly, wifely and womanly duties. They could only rely on each other for comfort and solidarity.

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