

# **Feminist Narratives in Marigold Wreaths: Memory Politics and Gender Deconstruction in Coco**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the feminist narratives in *Coco* through the cultural lens of the Mexican Day of the Dead, analyzing how female characters like Imelda and Coco subvert patriarchal norms through memory and ritual. It examines Imelda's use of shoemaking tools as symbols of narrative power, Coco's aging body as a repository of emotional memory, and the collective labor of female kin through sewing machines to construct alternative gendered epistemologies. The study deconstructs the film's spatial and visual metaphors — such as the marigold bridge, altar configurations, and color palettes — to reveal women's roles in redefining family history and resisting male-centric memory politics. By weaving together Mexican feminist theory, cultural anthropology, and film semiotics, the paper argues that *Coco* foregrounds women's agency in preserving and reconstructing memory, offering a poetics of resilience that challenges digital-era amnesia and advocates for embodied, communal remembrance.

**Keywords:** Feminist Narratives; Memory Politics; Gender Deconstruction; Day of the Dead; Cinematic Metaphor

## **1. Introduction: When the Day of The Dead Becomes a Narrative Field for Women**

In the world of the dead constructed by Pixar, the Marigold Bridge is not only a passage connecting life and death, but also a hidden stage where female narratives exist. On the surface, *Coco* tells the musical adventure of the boy Miguel, but beneath it lies the epic of life woven with tenacity and memory by women like Imelda and Coco. The film cuts through the surface of the male narrative, revealing how the women in the film, within

the cultural framework of the Mexican Day of the Dead, reconstruct the gender narrative logic about family, dreams, and death, giving new life to the female experience in light and shadow [1].

## **2. Imelda's Scissors: Women's Cutting and Reconstructing of Family History**

### **2.1 The Gender Power Metaphor Implied in Leather Cutting**

In this close-up of the Rivera family shoemaking workshop, Imelda's scissors trace the leather, suggesting a woman's re-cutting of the family narrative. As she "cuts" her husband, Hector's musical dreams out of the family's memory, the rustling sound of the metal scissors touching the leather becomes a declaration of women reconstructing history. Sociologists point out that traditional Mexican women often achieve implicit empowerment by taking control of everyday production tools. In the state of Yucatan, embroidery, as an important engine of economic development, has enabled local women to further enhance their social status and achieve a certain degree of empowerment by earning a certain income through embroidery work. Imelda, who in the film, turns sewing tools into a medium for memory editing, a transformation that itself is a subversion of the history of male chauvinism [2]. The repeated shoe-making process in the film - women measuring the size of leather by hand, scissors cutting to the template, and sewing the fragments with needles and threads - constitutes a ritual for women to restore broken family history, demonstrating their ability to reweave meaning at historical breaks [3].

### **2.2 A Symbol of Costume Archaeology in the World of the Dead**

Imelda's dress in the Undead is a miniature

history of women's resistance: Her skeleton is dressed in the equestrian attire of a 19th-century Mexican female revolutionary, but is adorned with the "Ni Una Menos" emblem of the modern feminist movement. The gear element in her headwear retains both the identity of a shoemaker and alludes to the struggle memories of female workers during the Industrial Revolution. The costume designer deliberately created hollowed-out patterns of musical symbols at her ribs, a leather-covered detail that hints at women's hidden reservation of repressed desires [4]. When she led her family members in a dance that combined tap-dance and shoe-making movements in the undead world, the flapping trajectory of her skirt intertextured with leather-cut geometric patterns, completing a female narrative elevation from material production to cultural resistance [5].

### **3. Cocoa's Dresser: A Treasure Trove of Memory in an Aging Body**

#### **3.1 Alzheimer's Disease as a Breakthrough Point for Women's Narratives**

The film's portrayal of Coco as an elderly person with memory decline actually provides a unique entry point for the presentation of female experiences. In traditional narratives, older women are often seen as "containers of memory", but Coco's memory loss serves as an opportunity to reconstruct the family history - as the male-dominated narrative of "music betraying the family" fades, only the female body (even in old age) holds unspoken emotional truths [6]. A neuroscientific study shows that women's brains encode emotional memories more on sensory experiences, and this physiological difference is shown in the film as Coco's physical memory of her father's tobacco smell and guitar sound. When Mig awakens her memory with a guitar, the camera language highlights the subtle tremors in her nasal cavity and the conditioned reflexes at her fingertips, demonstrating the irreplaceability of the female body as a carrier of memory [7,8].

#### **3.2 Time Alchemy in the Dressing Mirror**

The dressing table in Coco's room is the overlooked narrative core: the scratched mirror reflects her transformation from a

young girl to an old woman, and the yellowed sheet music and broken guitar strings in the drawer form a repressed female memory bank. In Mexican folk traditions, women's dressing tables are the venue for private narratives, where they preserve personal memories through rituals such as makeup and hair styling [9]. In the film, Coco's unconscious act of touching her silver hair is actually a recreation of her father's body memory of braiding her; Her habit of applying chapped lips originated from a childhood game of stealing her mother's lipstick to imitate adults [10]. When Mig found the fragments of Hector's photograph in the dresser drawer, this corner, which was overlooked by the male narrative, finally became the key to uncovering the truth of the family, revealing the significant value of the female private space as a repository of historical evidence [11].

### **4. The Sewing Machine of the Women's Alliance: From Production Collaboration to Memory Resonance**

#### **4.1 Women's Acoustic Landscape in a Shoe-Making Workshop**

The sewing group formed by Mig's mother, Sokoro, and her aunts created the most powerful female vocal field in the film. The rhythm with which they pedal the sewing machine form complex polyphony - the pedals of older women are heavy and steady, while those of younger women are fast and crisp. This "female polyphony" contrasts sharply with the single melody of male music, suggesting an alternative value system constructed by women through collective labor [12]. Musicologists have analyzed that when they discuss their dreams of Mig music, the speed of the sewing machine changes with mood, and the subtle fluctuations in the sound form a unique "vocal narrative" of women, expressing their ambience to family bans more truly than words [13]. When they collectively stopped their sewing machines to look at Mig, the sudden silence became the strongest declaration of female power [14].

#### **4.2 Female Topology at the Altar of the Dead**

In the family altar scene of the Undead world, the spatial occupation of female characters

conceals a subversive narrative. Imelda's memorial tablet is placed in the Mesoamerican sacred space of the altar, beneath which are spirally arranged portraits of female ancestors throughout the ages, and the position of the male ancestors is arranged in the secular space at the edge of the altar. This spatial arrangement echoes the concept of "women as the center of the universe" in Mexican Nava culture - even in the undead world, women still carry the responsibility of maintaining the family's energy cycle [15]. The offerings on the altar are even more meaningful: in front of the positions of female undead are placed "non-elite" handicrafts such as amulets and herbal bags they made during their lifetimes, while in front of the positions of male undead are placed "public achievement" symbols such as Musical Instruments and trophies. This difference shows an alternative view of immortality constructed by women through their daily life practices [9]. As Mig played the guitar in front of the altar, the glimmer of light in the cranial eye pits of the female dead gradually converged into a ring, completing a visual reconstruction of the male-centered narrative [12].

## **5. The Explosion of Gender Narratives: Women Redefining 'Forgetting' and 'Remembering'**

### **5.1 Legitimizing the Stigmatized "Female Memory"**

The film's portrayal of Delacús and Hector implies a critique of male memory from a female perspective. Delacús' "memory of success" is built on plundering others' creations, while Hector's "memory of chasing dreams" is actually an evasion of family responsibilities. Both male memories are at risk of being forgotten due to a lack of emotional sincerity. Feminist scholars point out that Coco deconstructs the male-dominated view of memory through these two characters - true remembrance is not about the splendor of grand narratives, but about weaving a network of memories like Imelda does with daily persistence, and preserving emotional warmth like Coco does with physical sensations. When Mig finally chose to incorporate the family story into the

music, he actually embraced the "memory ethics" defined by women: establishing an organic connection between personal dreams and family emotions.

### **5.2 Women's "Politics of Forgetting"**

Unlike men's ambition for eternal remembrance, the women in the film show a unique wisdom about "forgetting". Imelda's choice to "forget" Hector's musical talent is actually to protect the emotional integrity of the family; Coco gradually "forgets" the specific details at the end of her life, but always retains the essential perception of fatherly love [11]. This "strategic forgetting" reflects women's pragmatic attitude towards memory - they do not pursue the integrity of memory but focus on the emotional authenticity of it [15]. In Mexican feminist theory, this memory strategy is called "Memoria de Nopal" - preserving the most essential emotional nourishment in a dry memory environment like a cactus stores water [14]. At the end of the film, when Coco's memory meets Hector's song again in the world of the dead, it proves that the feminine "selective memory" is more resilient to life than the masculine "total remembrance" [6].

## **6. Cultural Decoding: The Day of the Dead Ritual from a Female Perspective**

### **6.1 Marigold as a Metaphor for Female Reproduction**

In Aztec mythology, marigolds are closely associated with the goddess of female fertility, Xiuhtecuhtli, and the radial structure of its petals is regarded as a symbol of female fertility [13]. In the film, Imelda's undead image is always associated with the marigold, and the bud at the tip of her cane opens and closes with her mood - closing like a fist when angry and blooming like a skirt when gentle. This design creatively combines female fertility with the role of a guide of the undead, suggesting the mediating position of women between life and death. When Mig crosses the marigold bridge, the tracks formed by the falling petals simulate the anatomy of a female uterus, completing the transformation from a natural symbol to a gender symbol, revealing the dual belief in Mexican culture that "women are both the giver of life and the

ferriman of the soul.” [13]

## **6.2 The Altar Serves as a Space of Resistance for Women**

The altar for the Day of the Dead in Mexico is traditionally built by women, and this cultural practice has profound political implications in the film [9]. The Imelda family’s altar, which combines Catholic ICONS with indigenous clay figurines, is a cultural blend that Mexican women have created as a resistance strategy throughout colonial history - they preserve their native experience under the dominance of mainstream culture through a “mixed memory” approach [15]. The “Pan de Muerto” placed on the altar is molded into the shape of a woman’s breast, a food symbol that ingeniously links the ritual of death with the conception of life, demonstrating women’s unique understanding of the cycle of life [14]. When male characters indulge in the public glory brought by music, women build this “family ritual” through the altar, creating a secret base against historical forgetting, a cultural practice that demonstrates women’s extraordinary wisdom in creating meaning in the crevices of power [10].

## **7. Gender Coding of Cinematic Language: Female Narratives from Color to Rhythm**

### **7.1 The Gender Geography of Color**

Coco’s use of colors conceals a female narrative map. In the Undead world, the family areas where women gather are dominated by warm terracotta tones, and the walls are decorated with colorful hand-woven wool by women; The Delacus concert venue is filled with cold metallic silver and power gold, a contrast of colors suggesting the inclusiveness of the female emotional space and the exclusivity of the male power space [8]. Even more exquisite is the color design of Coco’s room - in the dim space with curtains drawn all year round, the only bright color comes from her colorful headband from her youth, a color treatment that both represents her forgotten situation and implies the unextinguished brilliance of life in women’s memories. As Mig awakens her memory with a guitar, the light in the room gradually brightens and the saturation of the colors increases, completing the visual metaphor of

the female memory’s transition from suppression to release.

### **7.2 The Female Rhythm of Narrative Rhythm**

The narrative rhythm of the film implies a “woven rhythm” characteristic of women. Beyond Mig’s adventure line, there is always a secondary line of female memory - slow-motion shots of Imelda sorting through the family album, close-ups of Coco touching photo fragments, and Socoro’s contemplation in front of the sewing machine - these “non-narrative” segments seem to interrupt the main line but actually form the emotional foundation of the film [12]. Narratologists point out that this “woven narrative” mimics the rhythm of women’s hand weaving - seemingly repetitive actions contain emotional progression, contrasting with the “linear advancement” of male adventure stories [6] [7]. When the two narrative lines converge in the melody of “Remember Me”, the male “goal-oriented” rhythm harmonizes with the female “emotional loop” rhythm, creating new possibilities for gender-transcending narratives [11].

## **8. Contemporary Sexual Revelations: Female Memory as a Weapon Against Digital Forgetting**

### **8.1 The Declaration of Manual Memory in the Age of Algorithms**

In today’s era dominated by big data for memory production, Coco’s narrative of female memory holds particular cautionary significance. Imelda preserves her memory through shoemaking skills, and Grandma Coco resists forgetting with her physical senses. This “embodied memory” approach contrasts sharply with the “data memory” of the social media era [4,7]. Feminist media theory points out that contemporary women are still continuing the memory strategy shown in the film - building alternative memory banks against algorithmic homogenization through “low-tech” practices such as cooking and weaving [14]. While we are rapidly swiping through short video platforms, we are actually participating in the male-dominated “efficient memory” system, the film reminds us that the feminine “slow

memory” - like Coco rubbing an old photo over and over again, like Imelda passing down a craft from generation to generation - is the effective weapon against digital forgetting [10].

## **8.2 Poetics of Women’s Lives in a Cross-Cultural Context**

Coco’s female narrative transcends Mexican cultural boundaries and offers a universal poetics of life. Imelda reconstructs meaning at the fracture and Coco preserves the essence in oblivion. This attitude towards life’s predicaments offers insights for contemporary women dealing with multiple identity conflicts: true power lies not in maintaining a perfect appearance, but in storing water in drought and growing new roots at the fracture like agave in the Mexican desert. This life poetics is especially precious in the post-pandemic era when there are huge breaks in collective memory, the female characters in the film show how to mend wounds with everyday practice and rebuild meaning with emotional connections [14]. As Mexican female artist Frida puts it: “We have the blood of our ancestors flowing in our bodies, and every scar is a tattoo of memory.” This body narrative is the ultimate revelation that Coco conveys through a female perspective [14].

## **9. Conclusion**

In summary, Coco employs the Mexican Day of the Dead to unpack how female figures like Imelda and Coco subvert patriarchal norms via memory and ritual. Through symbols like shoemaking tools, aging bodies, and sewing machines, the film reveals women as active rewriters of family history, challenging male-centric memory politics. Spatial metaphors (marigold bridge, altar configurations) and cinematic language (color, rhythm) embody a feminist cosmology, while the narrative critiques digital amnesia by advocating embodied, communal remembrance. Ultimately, Coco positions women’s daily practices as powerful acts of resistance and resilience, offering a universal poetics of memory in the modern era.

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