

MODIFYING THE TIMELESS: “SLEEPING BEAUTY”, MALEFICENT & ECOFEMINISM

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Abstract

Gender portrayal in Disney films is not a recent phenomenon. However, problematic gender roles which mirror cultural-political power is newsworthy. Though adaptability is one of the fairy tale's secrets of survival as they originally started off as oral folk tales, it is refreshing to see them used as a jumping off point for new stories. Not only does the 2014 movie Maleficent address cultural-gender questions, it collates the same with 'green' issues. Cultural studies theory appreciates civilizational language in all its complex forms and analyses the social context in which culture expresses itself. It also exposes and resolves data allied with nature. Such cross-fertilization has given birth to ecofeminism. The female has been illustrated as familiar with nature through societal responsibilities. Maleficent as an acclimatisation illustrates how social views about/of women have shifted because of polarities being challenged by women. The 'Angel in the House' has stepped outside and advanced to an unrestrictive zone, yet maintained her image of protecting and caring for those around her. This paper will attempt to venture into the feminist ecofilm theory of how Maleficent re-writes an old folk tale plus embeds nature as a feminist issue.

Keywords: Gender, Adaptation, Ecofeminist, Cultural Studies, Movie

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As far as feminism is concerned (with respect to America for this thesis's purposes), it has always been about equality for all. However, recent events say otherwise. “For the American women who believed the future was imminently female, Donald Trump’s inauguration Friday marks the end of mourning and the beginning of resistance... A lot of women are going to literally die because of this administration... feminists fight to preserve the law that made it impossible for women to be denied coverage because of their gender (*USAToday*).”

Informed by ecocriticism plus feminism, this paper conducts an examination of a semi-animated children’s film *Maleficent* (2014). While it advocates for the prevention of deforestation, it is affable to feminism. The characters accept the principles of deep ecology in fixing responsibility for environmental destruction on to ‘supernatural’ forces and exhibit anthropocentric concern for the survival of humans. It constitutes of analogous methodological approaches for environmental consciousness-raising not only for women, but also for children’s entertainment. Though Hollywood’s production demonstrates marked conservatism in its depiction of identity politics and feminization of nature, it also renders nature sublime and invokes complex gender-socio-cultural constancies. In the face of global environmental degradation, many cultures are focussed on inducting children into an activist mindset with the idea that the next generation represents our hope for the future. Environmentalism has increased in educational programs in schools with a similar level of zeal to that with which AIDS education was promoted in the 1980s, or the distrust of communism was presented during The Cold War.

Environmental issues have usually been inter-related with gender. The latter begs to differ with human kind’s knowledge about ecology. “There is something very powerful about wilderness”, opines Catherine M. Roach. The concern which people have for the natural environment is archetypally been feminist.

Neither the idea of passing on the baton of consciousness about ecological responsibility to the next generation, nor the acceptance of adaptation to safeguarding nature is agreeable to the human species today. Thus, the politics of this agenda has made an entry into entertainment for children; the logic being that they will reciprocate (An example being school students in India, who are made to undertake an oath against the burning of crackers, which has a fantastic effect on the children's minds and makes them refuse lighting up fireworks). Critics such as Michelle Smith and Elizabeth Parsons disagree on the same; believing that "prevailing ideas in the west around childhood as a place for innocence and one that celebrates the solipsistic goal of 'having fun' as an end in itself would seem antithetical to learning about environmental dangers, and, in particular, to taking up beliefs that require a selfless commitment to politics rather than play".

To interrogate environmental logic in children's animated films poses a range of questions about the ways in which adult writers, producers and directors can shift the ideological ground for children in the process of forming their beliefs and values about the world, and in particular the environment. The message is necessarily fraught given that, in Hollywood at least, there is a long-held opposition between nature and culture in which nature has been employed as been a core commodity in the equally pervasive ideology that underscores the myth of progress. In order to both nuance and answer questions about the ideological landscape of environmental issues in entertainment, this attempt offers a study of *Maleficent* about saving not only the forest, which is home to living beings, but also about the female being the saviour.

In *Maleficent* (re-telling of the time-honoured classic *Sleeping Beauty* tale), the Moors represent a natural conventional feminine space. Positive characteristics such as trust, kindness, and reciprocity are attributed to the creatures of the Moors throughout the film, the imagery being very colourful and the inhabitants portrayed as cordial. The kingdom on the other hand, is ruled by a human monarch and is a male-controlled realm. It is controlled by an aggressive, restless, and spiteful atmosphere. The producer of the movie, Disney, has a reputation of supporting nature, albeit in human-centric, problematic ways. The countryside automatically associates itself with the feminine. For instance, physical landscapes (nature's association with women and vice versa) and social constructions play a role in perpetuating gender within the film, associating creatures of the Moors —including Maleficent — with femininity. When first shown in the film "in a great tree on a great cliff in the Moors," Maleficent stops playing with

what appear to be a boy and girl doll dancing together (foreshadowing an interest in romance) and heals a broken tree branch with her magical power. She watches over the forest like a lioness protecting her cubs; she knows them all by name. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that her position as a leader is a rare phenomenon in literature:

“While it is true that women are found at all levels of the social space, their chances of access (and rate of representation) decline as one moves towards the... . . . most sought-after positions.”

It is also the ecological space where women befriend women -- Maleficent and Aurora start to bond, which eventually becomes one of love and care; Maleficent later coronates Aurora as the next ruler of the kingdom. The latter puts her trust in Maleficent like Cinderella did with her fairy godmother. Even as a young child, Maleficent tends to identify herself with nature. She watches over the trees and animals, and other residents of the forest. By doing so she understands her responsibility to cultivate, support and look after the environment around her. She remembers the names of all the “strange and wonderful creatures.” The audience can’t help but be impressed by the way in which Maleficent spreads her feathery wings and ascends towards the sky as if it were a part of her being, the wind blowing in her hair and the Sun’s rays lighting up her face with tenderness. From inception, she is depicted as powerful.

Maleficent primarily guards the Moors and serves to shield its landscape from the castle’s army. She doesn’t become suspicious of Stefan, a human boy, when they meet. Even though the kingdoms had had a fierce past due to war, she doesn’t harm him. Her good-heartedness is taken advantage of by Stefan, who first befriends her, romances her, and later cuts off her wings to be announced as the King. Maleficent lashes back at the army when it attacks the Moors. Many creatures from the forest, powerful animals as well as magical walking trees, assist her. Their gargantuan size and huge numbers easily defeats the humans.

‘Distory’ gives no clue about the lineage of Maleficent, whether the forest was handed down to her by her family, or she originated in the Moors and became the ruler thereafter. The narrative’s focus instead is on the heroic traits which Maleficent possesses. She empathises with her fellow creatures and is akin to their mother. She is the fairy-embodiment of the environment. As a contemporary heroine, Maleficent’s matriarchal influence is seen in two ways. First, in her ability to control feminine plus

masculine forms of power. Second, when she announces Aurora as her heir and next nurturer of the Moors.

That the Disney production house has been releasing motion pictures with unconventional themes is not new, yet with respect to *Maleficent*, the environment's pivotal role in the story is innovative. Apart from all the male and female characters, it is nature which is the real protagonist. It takes the story forward and is the domestic carer of even Maleficent. Yet it remains as an unappreciated and devalued commodity. Even a discussion about it is seen as uninspiring and in some cases, repetitive. Combined with feminism to fashion the term ecofeminism and the general public calls it an over stimulated subject. Due to the fact that the Moors reject titles such as "Queen", it is demeaned. The human realm looks at an official designation as a necessity. Correspondingly, the head of the state must be a male figure. As discussed above in *Frozen*, this makes the natural landscape a private space, however it is characterized by an enthusiastic quality of nature. Sarah Crosby states that, "along with being connected to an abundance of life forms, they have their own set of values. For instance, when the young Stefan gives back a jewel he stole from the Moors, he does not understand why Maleficent would "throw it away", but she explains that by dropping the jewel in the river she "delivered it home". Maleficent communicates with various creatures and gives them and the jewel same level of respect, a lesson she tries to teach Stefan."

It is in the deep recesses of nature that Maleficent casts off her anger and aversion for Aurora. Their feminine bond which develops over time helps Maleficent to heal as well. Initially when baby Aurora is cursed by Maleficent, she is secretly followed by the latter. Aurora's bungling guardian pixie fairies (Flittle, Knotgrass, and Thistlewit) make one ridiculous mistake after the other; it really falls on Maleficent and her right hand Diaval to take care of the child. Though Maleficent maliciously calls Aurora "beastie" and declares that she hates her and children in general, nevertheless she is always seen near the baby, concerned yet observant about the child's whereabouts. In one of the scenes, Diaval feeds baby Aurora nectar from a flower when she is hungry. In another, Maleficent deftly conjures branches and vines out of thin air when Aurora was about to fall off a cliff.

It is during surveillances such as these when Maleficent observes Aurora's contentment and happiness in the woodland. Eventually Maleficent is convinced that Aurora may be trusted. Maleficent's earlier unhappy experience of hope being shattered by Stefan, had made her doubtful about Stefan's daughter. Yet any misgivings about

Aurora are replaced with responsibility, so much so that Maleficent takes her into the Moors. Both the women are secure in nature's hands where they unearth each other's true selves. Maleficent not only lets Aurora into her home, but also her heart, confiding in her about her life. She reveals the secrets of the forest to someone for the first time, thereby marking Aurora as special. Aurora also senses that Maleficent is special and says "you are my fairy godmother." Maleficent and Aurora display a common love for nature. Aurora exclaims excitedly that she would be happy to live the rest of her life in the Moors. Maleficent reciprocates this happiness with the first (and only) smile for Aurora. Due to their being in an innocuous environment, both the women experience empowerment through unpretentiousness. 'Greening' of this movie is important here – Maleficent is reminded of her true nature which was good and helpful. When the time to rescind her cruel curse comes, Maleficent is left in tears as she doesn't have the power to retract what she had said in anger. Remorse and tenderness fill her heart; the affectionate kiss was one of true love she gives to Aurora which brings the child back to life again.

Maleficent is an active queen figure who enjoys 'green' power. Nature becomes an asset to her special abilities, where she forms relationships that empower her. *Maleficent's* inclusion of such elements reflects an increase in the influence that women have in today's world. The movie concentrates on soliciting the viewer to think compassionately for the marginalized. Scholars in this field, such as like Shiva (1989), argue that the poor, especially women, have the most to lose when nature is destroyed.

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