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**CINEMATIC IMAGINATION: NEGOTIATING GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

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Indu Balachandran

Assistant Professor, Department of English

SN College

Cherthala, India

indub284@gmail.com

### Screening the Evil Fairy: Revisiting the Fairy Tale in *Maleficent*

#### Abstract

Fairy tales are often projected as innocent tales on magical lands, beautiful princesses and brave princes. These tales with elements of fantasy, enchantment and ‘happily ever-afters’ are usually meant to entertain children. They are also used in a didactic sense in order to instill certain values in young minds. However they are often a rich treasure trove of gender stereotypes and androcentric themes. The women in fairy tales are often relegated to the roles of damsel in distress, kind and loving mother figure or the bad woman. Many literary works and films have come up to rewrite these tales, providing alternative versions to the existing tales. *Maleficent* (2014) directed by Robert Stromberg and following the screen play of Linda Woolverton is one such attempt. It tries to rewrite the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* and projects the evil fairy Maleficent as the central character. This paper Screening the Evil Fairy: Revisiting the Fairy Tale in *Maleficent* attempts to study how the film focuses on a previously sidelined character and helps her to record her story, thereby unveiling the different viewpoints and unseen faces of many other characters. The paper explores how the hitherto wicked female character gets an opportunity to deconstruct the androcentric narrative which has been presented before generations of children. The paper also focuses on the ecofeminist streaks that were unveiled during the movie analysis.

Generations of children across the world grew up listening to fairy tales. These tales often feature a magical setting and have supernatural elements in the forms of fairies, witches, gnomes, goblins and the like. The aura of enchantment and fantasy is often highlighted through the valourous deeds of the human characters. Most of these tales have no known authors and are often passed on from one generation to another. Many of them undergo various changes as they are retold by different people. These stories are aimed at delighting the young minds and stimulate their imagination. These stories take them on an adventure ride with its share of magic, happiness and excitement. They also instill a value system within the young minds through their good versus bad conflicts. These stories became even more popular with the coming of Walt Disney era. Many of these tales were adapted to silver screen with a happily ever after plot.

However, these stories also came under great criticism for the kind of characters, motifs and values they presented. Though many of the stories were suitably modified to suit the children; many writers, critics and theoreticians pointed out that these tales with their beautiful but powerless princesses, valorous princes, evil stepmothers can influence how children view themselves and members of opposite sex, their concept of gender roles and can trigger low self-esteem, especially among girls. In fact some of these narratives will even compel them to adopt the stereotypical role and prevent them from making use of their full potential. Popular tales like *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Rapunzel* and *Cinderella* were all subjected to criticism because of their stereotypical plots and characters. Many of the popular films based on these tales also followed the same stereotypical images. As Claire Johnston says: “In general, the myths governing the cinema are not different from those governing other cultural products: they relate to a standard value system informing all cultural systems in a given society” (25). While many of the male characters are strong and powerful, the women characters are often given the roles of damsels

in distress, or the relatively insignificant roles of loving mother, the evil stepmother or the wicked witch. Thus women are reduced to two dimensional images of good/evil, beautiful/ugly, obedient/wild and innocent/ cunning. Such stereotypical gender images and andro centric narratives can influence a child's perception of social reality. As Andrea Dworkin says:

We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity. . . . At some point, the Great Divide took place: they (the boys) dreamed of mounting the Great Steed and buying Snow-white from the dwarfs; (the girls) aspired to become that object of every necrophiliac's lust - the innocent, *victimized* Sleeping Beauty, beautiful lump of ultimate, sleeping good. Despite ourselves, sometimes unknowing, sometimes knowing, unwilling, unable to do otherwise, we act out the roles we were taught. (32-33)

Modern age witnessed writers revisiting and revising these fairy tales in order to empower the silenced and sidelined characters. Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, published in 1979 is one such attempt. Other writers like Emma Donoghue, Francesca Lia Block have also come up with similar works. Many cinematic versions of fairytales have also come up, often differing drastically from the traditional narrative. Films like *Frozen* (2013), *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Brave* (2012) etc. belong to this category. *Maleficent* (2014) directed by Robert Stromberg is a loosely based cinematic adaptation of the original fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* penned by Charles Perrault. Though produced by Walt Disney Pictures, it differs considerably from Disney's own 1959 film *Sleeping Beauty*.

The traditional narrative of *Sleeping Beauty* tells the story of a young princess, Aurora, who is cursed by an evil fairy Maleficent, merely because the royals forgot to invite her to the baby's christening. She curses that the baby will one day prick her finger on a

spindle of a spinning wheel and die. The curse is later altered by another fairy who changes it into a deep sleep for 100 years which is to be broken by the kiss of true love. The king destroys all the spindles and spinning wheels in his kingdom to save the princess. But when the princess becomes about 16 years old, she wanders through the palace rooms only to find an old lady with a spinning wheel. The princess attempts to try the spinning wheel, pricks her finger on the spindle and instantly falls into a deep sleep. The good fairy is summoned. She puts everyone to sleep and surrounds the palace with brambles and thorns. Hundred years later, a prince manages to enter the palace and wakes up the princess with his kiss. In the Brothers Grimm version of *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent as a character is not given much space. The Disney movie *Sleeping Beauty* turns her into an incarnation of evil without revealing her motives for being evil.

The movie *Maleficent* differs from the original narrative on many accounts and tries to fill in the crevices found in the traditional narratives. The story is narrated by a female narrator and focuses on Maleficent and her tale. The movie begins with the lines: "Let us tell an old story you know. And we will see how well you know it" (*Maleficent*). Thus the movie prepares the audience for some significant changes from the popular narratives and provides Maleficent with an opportunity to reclaim her tale. The movie opens with an exploration into the childhood of Maleficent which is ignored in the traditional texts. Maleficent is presented as an innocent representative of the elemental forces and is always in touch with the natural world around her. She commands natural forces and magical creatures. She is presented as the guardian of the Moors, making sure that the natural resources are properly conserved. The cinematography revels in portraying beautiful nature imagery and shows Maleficent to be constantly healing and mending the injured trees and plants. Maleficent as a child is quite different from the evil fairy she later turns out to be. Instead of presenting a one dimensional image of Maleficent and making people accept it without questioning, as in the traditional

narratives, the movie gives a gentle nudge to the audience to be curious about the transformation of Maleficent.

It is her friendship with the young boy Stefan that turns out to be a turning point in the story. This friendship can be interpreted as a link between the natural and human world. However Stefan in his greed for power exploits this innocent friendship and betrays Maleficent. In order to please the ruler of the kingdom, he drugs Maleficent and cuts off her wings, her pride, glory and power and presents it to the king. In an apparent show of affection towards her, he doesn't kill her. But this act of stealing the wings proves to be devastating for Maleficent. She feels incomplete and powerless. The kind hearted young Maleficent is filled with hatred and despair. Her once idyllic kingdom where strange and wonderful creatures coexisted, trusting each other no longer remains so. Maleficent's fury at being betrayed drains out the vitality from the Moors and turns the vibrant Moors into a dark kingdom, wilted, lifeless and devoid of greenery. On an ecocritical note, this change in setting can be interpreted as consequences of man's over exploitation of nature and nature's retaliation. These scenes are some of the most powerful scenes in the movie. Thus the revisionist narrative provides a reason for Maleficent's transformation into the angry fairy.

The act of betrayal can be interpreted as a violation of Maleficent's body and her dignity. According to Dodai Stewarts, "The man she thought was her friend drugs her, and while she is unconscious, he saws off her wings. She wakes up bleeding, in pain, a part of her destroyed. Sobbing. It feels like a sexual assault". Angelina Jolie who played the role of Maleficent says:

We were very conscious, the writer [Linda Woolverton] and I, that it was a metaphor for rape. This would be the thing that would make her lose sight. The core of [the film] is abuse, and how the abused have a choice of abusing others or overcoming and remaining loving, open people". She added: "The question was asked, 'What could

make a woman become so dark? To lose all sense of her maternity, her womanhood, and her softness?" ( Dray).

Thus mutilation of her body and self is portrayed as the reason behind Maleficent's transformation. As Tierny Sneed opines, "The amputation of Maleficent's wings may be a metaphor that soars over the heads of the film's young viewers. But in its lead-up and more importantly, its consequences, the subtext is devastatingly clear". She goes on to say:

"Maleficent waking up to Stefan's assault is perhaps the film's most powerful moment, and – for better or for worse – it drives the changes in tone and theme "Maleficent" takes from the conventional tale. The crucial christening scene in which Maleficent curses (the now King) Stefan's daughter Aurora plays out almost identically in staging and dialogue to Disney's 1959 animated version. But now her curse takes on a new meaning knowing the horrible act that motivated it."

Apart from the plot, movie also has the advantage of lighting, colour tone and background music to further highlight its theme. This is evident in Disney's *Maleficent* as well. The pleasant lighting and color tone in the movie changes after the entry of human army into the Moors, thereby hinting at man's unpleasant intrusion into the natural world. The lighting and colour tone further changes after the violence and mutilation committed on Maleficent. But the film's beauty lies not in the victimization of Maleficent but rather on her ultimate recovery from her trauma. Towards the end of the movie Maleficent fights back against her attacker and manages to get back her wings. The restoration of wings symbolizes Maleficent claiming back her body and her story. Thus the global blockbuster slips in a message that resonates beyond the silver screen.

The movie unveils yet another side of Maleficent which is never revealed in the original narrative. Three pixies are given the charge of bringing up little Aurora in the woods. The pixies are so distracted and neglectful that Maleficent is forced to look after Aurora

inspite of the initial dislike for the child. The child is aware of Maleficent's presence and calls her "the fairy god mother". Her love for Aurora makes Maleficent so happy that it is reflected on the natural world around her. Maleficent being a part of natural world, her happiness is also seen among the creatures around her. The lighting, color tone and background music becomes pleasant again. Picturesque shots are portrayed during these scenes. Maleficent's growing attachment to the child becomes evident as she desperately tries to undo the curse. This in turn also hints that though nature reacts violently against human when disturbed, it is also ready to trust and embrace humans as long as they don't exploit it. The growing bond between Aurora and Maleficent becomes evident as the child proclaims her wish to live with Maleficent. However Aurora breaks off this sisterhood as she learns of her past only to be reunited later. The wicked witch, evil fairy, cruel mother are characters found in many fairy tales. They all convey a certain kind of subliminal message. That to be strong, to crave power and to resist will bring about fear, hatred and an unhappy ending. As Dworkin goes on to say:

As we grow up, we forget the terror—the wicked witches and their smothering malice. . . . But the terror remains as the substratum of male-female relation — the terror remains, and we do not ever recover from it or cease to be motivated by it. Grown men are terrified of the wicked witch, internalized in the deepest parts of memory. Women are no less terrified, for we know that not to be passive, innocent, and helpless is to be actively evil. (35)

The movie's portrayal of Maleficent's nurturing side adds multiple layers to her personality and humanizes her. She no longer is a terrifying creature who is hated by all. At the same time she is not afraid of the hatred that is thrown her way. According to Claire Johnston, "New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film" (29). The movie makes creative incisions on traditional

discourse and turns Maleficent into a magnificent being even while retaining her flaws. As Aurora later comments: “In the end, my kingdom was united not by a hero or a villain as legend had predicted, but by the one who was both hero and villain. And her name was Maleficent” (*Maleficent*).

The close association between Maleficent and Aurora is yet another aspect that the movie foregrounds. Absent from the original narrative, it is this female sisterhood that proves to be life saving for Aurora. Though the curse says that the kiss of true love will wake the princess up, Prince Philip who loves her fails to awaken her. In fact Aurora wakes up only when Maleficent kisses her. The movie thus deconstructs the notion of true love as portrayed in the traditional narratives. Rather than equating true love with romantic love, as done in the traditional fairy tale, the movie emphasizes on female sisterhood. It is this female bonding that helps Maleficent to recover her precious wings and become powerful again. It is Aurora who restores Maleficent’s wings to her and brings Maleficent back to her past glory. It is Aurora who retells Maleficent’s story and reveals the injustice that was done to the character of Maleficent. Thus the movie reconstructs the fairy tale in its own terms and in the process of doing so construct rewarding relationships among women. It also emphasizes the power of female sisterhood in gaining strength and overcoming trauma. The movie empowers the female characters to such an extent that Prince Philip who in the traditional narrative was the valorous saviour of Aurora, is reduced to a comical and clumsy figure. The character of Prince Philip is reduced to the mere role of Aurora’s love interest. Aurora’s father gets more space in the cinematic narrative but is exposed as the true villain of the story.

The story of Maleficent foregrounds some of the other sidelined characters as well. The character of Diaval is one such example. Unlike the other popular narratives, Diaval is given more space and voice. The movie also dwells into the history of Diaval. Diaval, the shape shifter, was once a raven. Maleficent rescues him from a manmade trap and in return

Diaval promises to be her wings. Maleficent's rescue of Diaval during her darkest times helps in pointing out her commitment to the natural world. Towards the end of the movie, audience is shown the Moors in their past glory, thus showing the recovery of Maleficent and the natural world from human intrusion. Maleficent's Moors and Aurora's kingdom are shown to exist side by side in an ideal, non-exploitative, symbiotic relationship.

Thus the movie not only empowers female characters but also tries to centre the marginalized characters of the traditional/ popular narratives. As Jolie says, "I hope the girls, especially, will see the importance of having a sense of justice and a sense of what's fair and what's worth fighting for. They'll see that they can be warriors and at the same time soft and feminine and deeply feeling, with all the complexities women have." (Levy). In celebrating female power, it reverses the gender roles found in the traditional fairy tales and obliterates the stereotypical dichotomies propagated by those tales. Conventional texts often defined women's experiences from an andro centric point of view where certain role models are created and idealized to rationalize the inhuman treatment meted out to women. They deny the women voice, visibility and dignity. The movie *Maleficent* does what Adrienne Rich calls as "re-vision", "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction . . . an act of survival" (167). Through this act of revision, the movie which was scripted by a woman writer, brings forth the hitherto suppressed story and redeems Maleficent. The movie offers what Alicia Ostriker calls "corrections . . . retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered . . ." (73).

The movie also celebrates nature, thus inducing an ecofeminist strain to the narrative. Maleficent can be considered as representative of Mother Nature or even Mother Nature herself. Various natural forces are used to depict the changing moods of Maleficent. In the movie, Iron is presented as a lethal metal that burns fairies. Weapons and tools made of Iron are used by the King and his army in their efforts to defeat Maleficent. Thus Iron can be

considered as a metaphor for industrialization and machines which destroyed nature in countless ways. Thus the narrative moves beyond gender politics and strongly presents the urgency of environmental conservation as well.

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