

Deconstructing Gender Roles in Disney's "Maleficent"

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Abstract:- *Maleficent* (2014) is a postmodern retelling of Disney's well acclaimed *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) based on Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant*. The title of the film represents the evil antagonist of *Sleeping Beauty* as the protagonist. Maleficent's characterisation challenges the existing binaries as she is both innocent and guilty; powerful and vulnerable; revengeful and loving; and good as well as the evil. This paper aims to explore *Maleficent* as a feminist re-visioning of *Sleeping Beauty*. It makes especially use of two frames of reading: postmodernism and feminism. Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision is used to subvert the gender roles and patriarchal norms of the sleeping beauty myth in *Maleficent*.

Keywords:- Deconstruction, Revisioning, Archetypes, Gender Performativity, Subversion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Maleficent (2014) is a postmodern retelling of Disney's well acclaimed *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) based on Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant*. In the original film, Maleficent curses the innocent child for a trivial reason of not being invited to the child's christening. This portrays women "not being simply bad, mean or evil, but also insane" (Davis 233). It is this reason that makes Maleficent the most evil character among the Disney villains. Sleeping beauty myth contributed profoundly to the construction of gender identity based on binary thinking where women are subjugated by the phallogocentric system. Re-visionist mythmaking attempts to counter the gender bias established by reviewing them from a feminist point of view. In the feminist re-visioning of *Maleficent*, romantic archetypes and negative female stereotypes are confronted through Maleficent's positive agency.

In her well known essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision", Adrienne Rich advocated the idea that it is necessary to re-visit known stories from a new critical point of view in order to gain a new understanding of gender and patriarchy. Woolverton has re-visited the film *Sleeping Beauty* to make the antagonist, Maleficent, a protagonist and give agency to the subjugated female character, Princess Aurora, in *Maleficent*. Rich defines re-visioning as, "The act of looking back with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18).

Maleficent begins with the narration, "Let us tell an old story anew. And we will see how well you know it", claiming the essence of re-visioning. There is an alternation of every element in the film, like its point of view, the protagonist, antagonist, motivations and true love's kiss. In an interview, Woolverton posits, "the biggest challenge [making the film] was how to make a villain into a protagonist" (Couch 23). The motivation of Maleficent to curse the child is inadequately pictured in *Sleeping Beauty*. Angelina Jolie, who starred as Maleficent, expressed in an interview "what could make a woman become so dark?" To lose all sense of her maternity, her womanhood, and her softness?" (Couch 24). *Maleficent* answers this question, by offering a new perspective on one of the most criticized antagonists among Disney's fairy tales.

Sleeping Beauty began with the description of the long awaited birth of the child while *Maleficent* begins with the childhood of the innocent, fun loving and powerful fairy Maleficent. Through intertextuality, feminist attempted to decentralize the male narratives which asserted male supremacy through language and literature. Through the subversion of stereotypes in their works, they aimed at achieving an "alternative reading of the tradition, thereby reinterpreting the women characters, motivations and actions in order to challenge the existing sexual ideology" created through the earlier works of men (Robinson 214).

Anthropocentric point of view featured in *Sleeping Beauty* enriches patriarchal hegemony. *Maleficent* deconstructs the anthropocentric point of view as found in the old tale by describing the human kingdom as, "In one kingdom lived folk like you and me with a vain and greedy king to rule over them". While the inhabitants of the Moors are represented as, "For in the other kingdom, the Moors lived And they needed neither king nor queen, but trusted in one another". The "good King Stefan" in *Sleeping Beauty* is described by the guards of the moors as a "thief" in *Maleficent*. This reversal of perspectives is brought out by the narrator Aurora who was only a victim of patriarchal monopoly and the most subdued character in *Sleeping Beauty*. Granting 'the other' of the old version speak, *Maleficent* exposes the gender stereotypes propagated by the fairy tale genre. Towards the end, Maleficent crowns Aurora as the ruler of both the kingdoms, thus heightening her agency.

In *Maleficent*, King Stephen is characterised as a brutal patriarchal figure who wants to possess Maleficent, the crown and the Moors. Stephen exploits the youthful Maleficent first by gaining her trust that he has come to save her, then makes her unconscious and finally steals her wings to become the next king. It is this treason that pushes Maleficent to become a villain in the plot. To bring about an optimistic change in the characterisation of the evil fairy in the sleeping beauty myth, Woolverton attempted “to rewrite the past in a new context” (Hutcheon 118). This additional historical representation of her betrayal in the film, transforms Maleficent from being the antagonist to the protagonist. She curses the king’s child as a result of the betrayal of “true love’s first kiss”. Maleficent’s characterisation is so powerful that King Stephen begs her to break the spell. This is to subvert the power hierarchy in the post-modernist age. In return, she places the clause that the child can be saved only through “true love’s kiss”. This clause is her agency and the reminder for his betrayal towards her and the lack of her faith in the notion of “true love’s kiss”.

The film deconstructs “true love’s kiss”, redefining love not only in terms of romance, but also through the portrayal of strong female bond which was absent previously among Disney films. The thrust of *Maleficent* shifts both from heterosexual romantic love and female passivity to female bonding and female agency. Jonathan Culler highlights, ‘to deconstruct an opposition is to undo and displace it, to situate it differently’ (Culler 150). The expectation of the audience is broken when Aurora is not awakened by the patriarchal power. This reversal of power conferred upon women in giving life to a sleeping princess is a necessary step in a deconstructive reading.

The stealing of the wing can be perceived as an act to disempower Maleficent. She discloses to Aurora, “They were strong. They could carry me above the clouds and into the headwinds. And they never faltered.” Stefan expresses his power over her in their final battle, “How does it feel? To be a fairy creature without wings in a world where you don’t belong?” The stealing of wings can be seen as an attempt to keep her submissive to patriarchal dictates. Derrida insists, ‘to deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment’ (Derrida 41). The breaking of this patriarchal hegemony is through female bonding. Aurora is saved by Maleficent’s true maternal love while Maleficent regains her wings and power with the help of Aurora. This portrayal of female bonding deconstructs the notion that a woman can be saved only by a man.

In “We Should All be Feminists”, Adichie voices, “My own definition of a feminist is a man or a woman who says, yes! There is a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better. All of us women and men should do equally better” (48). In *Maleficent*, while Aurora is under the sleeping curse, Prince Phillip is not comfortable kissing her, telling the three pixies, “I wouldn’t feel right about it. I barely know her. We’ve only met once”. The film is thought-provoking the idea that it is

objectionable to kiss a sleeping or unconscious female without her consent. The glory of “true love’s kiss” of the sleeping beauty myth have been subtly questioned through Prince Phillip’s hesitation. This also highlights the depth of Stephen’s wickedness in de-winging the unconscious Maleficent.

Another aspect of re-visioning that merits careful study is the idea of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is “manufactured through a sustained acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (15). Fairy tales portray princess as passive objects, while the prince as warriors who fight battles to win his love. Re-visioning initiated by women writers aimed at subverting these gender roles forced upon them. Aurora’s narration of Maleficent restoring harmony among the two kingdoms crushes the myth of gender according to which restoration is brought only by men. Aurora affirms in the closing narration states, “In the end, my kingdom was united, not by a hero or a villain, as legend had predicted. But by one who was both hero and villain and her name was Maleficent”. She is described as “both hero and villain”. Her unjust act of cursing the child in *Sleeping Beauty* is justified by Stefan’s betrayal and wickedness in the new version. Maleficent is redeemed by her true contrition and she challenges the binaries of good and evil in the genre of fairy tales. Thus, she possesses both masculine and feminine principles just as her name “Male-ficent”.

It’s very essential to deconstruct gender roles. Patriarchal norms, myths and fairy tales are used to showcase girls and women as inferior and passive. These notions are passed on to the next generation. It’s necessary to break these ideologies. Films and literature should be able to depict women as strong, empowered and courageous. “Maleficent” can be seen as one of the best examples that deconstructs the gender roles.

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