

# **The women reborn: A feminist revamping of Sleeping Beauty into Maleficient**

***Wafa Iqbal***

*Lecturer, The Women University, Multan*

***Faheem Abbas***

*PhD scholar, Riphia International University, Islamabad*

***Sahar Iqbal***

*M. Phil scholar, Bahaudin Zakariya University, Multan*

## ***Abstract***

Seeing a single side of a picture, voicing single view, constructing reality in your favor, generalizing your opinions universally, painting the world in mind as you want in short male norm is fading away. Now the world and word can be read from a subjective as opposed to exploiting and stereotypically oppressing male objective point of view. The text which was previously read as men (Culler, 2001) aping men to become anonymous and pseudonymous reader but now women have started 'refusing to be stamped and stereotyped' (Woolf, 1929) and stop men from 'exploitation and manipulation of female audience' (Showalter, 1941). This research studies 'Maleficient', a movie released in 2014, based on a famous Disney character of sleeping beauty. Woman who was 'mythicized' (Cixous, 1983) as horrifying and deadly creature is now 'demythicized' and 'remythicized' in the powerful and neglected constitution of Maleficient, story of each woman, a creature who places her faith in transforming power of love who can restore peace with her 'true love kiss' the power possessed by each woman. The aim of this paper is to symbolically read an apparently stereotypical story of gender actively and construct a positive interpretation of female characters specially the protagonist Maleficient.

**Keywords:** *feminism, critical theory, gender, sex, stereotypical and marginalized role.*

### Introduction

Women writers were marginalized in the literary cannon. Male writers did talk about women but by the very act of giving them voice not only silenced them but by taking charge of seeing their experience as a mere deviation. As Cixous (1976) says in *The Laugh of the Medusa* “a woman has to integrate herself via her own movement into the text, the world, and history”. She (1983) while analyzing the angle of Freudian psychoanalytical theory says “the difference between having or not having the phallus” and she very rightly concludes that history through different theories had “implicitly supported phallocentrism’s position of power”. Upon such discovery that logocentrism had been phallocentric would call for retelling of all the stories. . Ask (2023) while suggesting solution to the absence of women from history and literature cites Duffy and Cixous; According to her, Duffy gives women a voice, and power in their bodies and actions, thereby criticizing the patriarchal and phallocentric traditions while Cixous says that women must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal.

It is only in the late 1960s when existence of separate women experience got its recognition. “There is no place for women either the woman is passive or she does not exist and if you see the literary history, it’s the same. (Cixous)”. Printing presses like Virago got established for women’s writing in 1970s so as to establish women literary tradition by discovery unpublished works of women in the past. Women writers found their experience difficult to be voiced through language and literary genre that is male centric hence instead of trying to fit in the already existent literary traditions they challenged by experimenting hence establishing their own cannon through appropriation and abrogation. Women instead of lamenting celebrate their “otherness” and mocked the stereotyping social and cultural authorities by putting the particular female experience in the centre of male dominated literary forms.

According to feminist theorists representation of women in literature was derogatory, marginalized or stereotypical in the past. Feminist devised ways to deal with such texts for example by developing a reading methodology called reading as woman. Not only writing can be and must be as a woman but also reading as it is equally an active process of constructing meanings. Maleficent apparently might be seen partly as a text constructing stereotypical gender roles and partly assigning some new meanings as well. Keeping in mind feminists belief of ‘subjectivity’, and ‘reality’ as a mere ‘construction’

following feminist conventions I will construct meanings and interpret text giving female characters a positive and central position e.g. character of maleficent.

Writers have prominently addressed women's difficulties and problems in literature, emphasizing characterization from various viewpoints and points of view. They have always been sensitive to women's issues and their place in society with their creative sensitivity. According to Sinha and Mishra (2019) in literature, women are frequently represented as untamed, passive entities, commodities, susceptible to corruption, defenseless, sensual, illogical, emotional, etc. Patriarchs disseminated these myths and ideas from generation to generation, giving them a form and perspective. Maleficent (2014), directed by Robert Stromberg, depicts women who defy traditional gender norms and expectations as wicked, evil beings. The Sleeping Beauty fairy tale by French author Charles Perrault was repeated in the film Maleficent, with a twist at the conclusion where Maleficent kisses the sleeping princess to save her life rather than prince Philip.

Maleficent is an evil character of the famous story 'sleeping Beauty'; she is the antagonist as the name suggests that she is harmful who curses innocent child princess. The story shows her as an evil fairy that plays villainous and cruel role in the lives of innocent characters. Hence the story reinforces the negative and evil stereotyping against women. The same Maleficent is though named as 'Maleficent' only to play role of Beneficent who through her true love restores the world of beauty, happiness, peace and life. The idea that women's happiness is man's burden is changed and so is the idea of love. Love is delimited by showing the power of motherly love. So the roles are turned, the men are actual Maleficent whereas women, Beneficent. She is 'reportrayed' in the movie: Maleficent, not as an antagonist rather as a savior who is taken as evil and harmful person by other characters who are actually evil. So the character which was shown from male chauvinistic point of view is represented from a feminist perspective. The study of the text is done on symbolic level where text in a very subtle way (feminist ideology) suggests much more which might be lost during apparent reading (watching). Some of the research questions that provide me base for my study are the following:

- Does the text portray women positively?
- Does the text, if taken as blue print, gives some space to the feminist reader?
- Is the portrayal of women marginal in the Maleficent?

### **Literature review**

Feminism is a movement which talks about equality between two genders which includes social, political and economical equality for women in a patriarchal society. Victoria (2023) calls feminism a belief that women should have the same rights have more authority and opportunities than men, equal treatment and scope of activities.

Feminism raises voice against all the acts that oppress and suppress women or any kind of discrimination that is held against someone because of one's gender. The patriarchal nature of a society favors men over women especially when it comes to earning money and experiencing power over others. This patriarchy is steeped so much deep that there is no way out and away from it. Hence the aim of the feminism is to propagate gender equality in a society, to bring about a transformation that offers equal rights to women so that to make its structure less oppressive to women (Mills, 1959).

Majority of celebrated literatures are 'male' or at least male names opted by though marginalized out cast women so the voice of a woman was missing. The angle to see the world and make sense of it was male altogether so the absolute silence and absence was not opted by women rather was imposed upon them. According to Woolf 'chastity' prized as an important religious demand was one such way to hinder women's progress. Literature is one way to construct and disseminate certain gender ideologies. Hence feminism uses literature to 'struggle against' favoring ideology. Feminism also aims to find out women contribution to the overall field of knowledge in general and religion in particular. Feminism is related to literature as well as criticism as far as gender representation is concerned, as Millet talks about literature as suffused with sexual meanings.

Usually the process of reading assumes a male reader who comprehends and dissects a piece of literature from a male perspective. Hence one of the task of a feminist is to record literature and develop a female reading experience which question the objective and universal gender reading of a piece. The process of reading is not confined to reading of "word" (discourse) only but also extends to the reading and understanding of the world which means looking at the world from the angle which is subjective, individual and feminine. Mills calls this mainstream patriarchy as "malestream". Different literary theories to analyze literary texts are good evidence of such patriarchal biases while evaluating literature and portraying women in literature.

According to feminist criticism women are either absent from the discourse or they are given negative or at least passive roles. They are shown as men's eye

see them or wants to see them (Cixous, 1975). He considers psychoanalytical theory as phallogocentric. Hence feminist criticism is not confined to just creating feminine voices within literary text but also creating feminine understanding while reading and deciphering literary texts. Hence literary texts are not confined to mere graphemes on a piece of paper rather have implication much beyond than just textual effects. These literary texts or others of such kinds reveal social structures and patterns of a society and its practices “Discourse analysis should...be concerned not simply with micro-contexts of the effects of words across sentences or conversational turns but also with the macro-contexts of larger social patterns” (Carter & Simpson, 1989, p. 16). Hence feminist criticism connect the mere textual with that of larger and broader practices as well theoretical concerns that build up the basic patterns and structures of a society. Feminism of the view that discourses are never neutral, objective and universal rather are always gendered (Foucault, 1971). The gendered discourses produce further gendered stereotypical collective social notions are quite active and involved as far the language is concerned while describing a female character in fiction while assigning roles to female characters and describing its relationships with respect to male characters. Culler (1973) considers that learning to read a piece as literature actually learning a particular kind of conventions which he calls “literary competence”. Hence our reading is always predictable as it is result of training of how to read a literary piece.

### **Rereading of *Maleficent***

‘Once upon a time’----- a long tradition which kept on producing stereotypical images and gender roles is retold in maleficent. The story of sleeping beauty is ‘remythefied’ and love and sexuality get very different meanings in this story. The reader is introduced to the ‘powerful, beautiful and lost motherland’, a land of women as opposed to that of men who are ‘greedy’ and ‘discontented’ ‘ruled by’ a vain king whereas the Moors needed no king or queen and trusted in one another. Moors refers to the idealized female world of equality opposed to world of men the world which is categorized and divided where power structures exist.

There is a vast discord between them which reinforce the differences between men and women which is vast hence obvious who could only be brought ‘together by a great hero or terrible a villain’. Men and women are binary opposition ‘neighbors’ yet ‘worst’ neighbors. Men were envious of the beauty and wealth of Moors which symbolically refers to the female world of which men are always jealous. The narrator uses the adjectives ‘strange’ and

## **The women reborn: A feminist revamping of Sleeping Beauty into Maleficent**

---

‘wonderful’ for Moors; strange was previously related to women as by Freud a dark continent pregnant with mystery but here it gets a positive connotations as the word wonderful is used along with strange. ‘In a great tree on a great cliff lived one such spirit’ this description for maleficent sets the greatness of not only maleficent and extension for all women which has to be proved by the end of the story. ‘you might take her as girl’ here ‘you’ refers to male addressee and how men see a fairy(which she actually is) as a girl which symbolically refers to the stereotypical presentation of women in men’s mind but the narrators negates that presentation by saying she was not just any girl. So it a woman is a fairy having magical powers but these powers are suppressed and she is reduced to a mere girl.

A smiling face playing with puppets that’s the first look we are offered of a female figure. Puppets are two figures a male and a female who are made to hold hands and dance by maleficent; these puppets establish the power a female has to do whatever she wants. This is a kind of foretelling because at the maleficent restores peace and happiness through her true and sincere love. Next we find her healing a broken branch of a tree (which symbolizes nature) using her feminine power she is protecting nature and as she does so she is shown as a saint like religious figure busy in her spiritual task .This can be concluded hence that women who are saving nature as opposed to men who are destroying nature which we latter see when Stephan steals from nature which she delivers back but for him it was throwing away. She no doubt proves a savior afterwards also of everything, her wings, Moors, aurora etc.

Maleficent greets everyone, spreads love, plays with other creatures which is opposite to the castle story where men believe more in hatred than love hence we find the love kingdom lived mostly by female characters and hatred kingdom lived mostly by men at war with each other; one where even a friend can be harmed just to get power and the other where there is love and trusts that rules.

In the initial scenes Moors is introduced as something heavenly where there is no jealousy, where there is nothing imposed, no one exploited where many female figures are busy in plantation, watering, blooming flower etc in short close to nature whereas men are introduced with arms in hands wearing iron ready to inflict happiness with their disease of revenge and hatred; iron is a symbol which refers to the time when tools of metals were introduced by men and that is the time according to some feminists when women were left behind in terms of earning etc. iron and arms of men as opposed to plantation ad flowers of women.

When we meet first male figure of the story we find him sneaking and stealing. We find him intervening, stealing and hiding himself behind that is not letting the world see his true face which is evil and slave of desires of greed as opposed to female figure who not only protects her own people but also the wrongdoer (Stefan). This hiding can be compared to hiding of maleficent from Aurora. When Aurora insists just like maleficent did to Stephan to come out she says you will be afraid but Aurora saw her as fairy god mother. Hence Stefan's hiding opposed maleficent hiding the former was to hide the sin latter was not to be afraid of the other.

Stefan is described to maleficent and we the readers as human thing and a preface to war so using the word thing is writing men back the way they took women as things. The boarder creatures look like trees hence a symbol of nature and are in clash with a male as they were holding weapons; maleficent reconciles between man and nature which perhaps suggest that women are going to restore peace as well as bring harmony between humans and nature. He is also unable to understand the language of nature and she interprets between Stephan a man and boarder creatures symbolizing nature.

Stefan interprets the scene as throwing away the stone but maleficent takes it as delivering it hence for women maintain nature. This also suggests differences of opinion and thinking between men and women. We also find Stefan quite dissatisfied as he complains about his life for not living in castle whereas maleficent is contented so the loss of desired object is for men as she was managing well without her parents. The difference of appearance between maleficent and Stefan is also worthy of importance as it suggests the physical and bodily difference between the two sexes. 'They are hideous to look' (Stefan) .... 'You are classically handsome' (maleficent), this sets another opposing traits of nature between Stefan a man and maleficent a woman. Woman is loving and mannerly and finds beauty everywhere but men are rude look down upon others. The first hand shake or touch which symbolizes love and friendship hurts a female because of the ring hence this hands touch can symbolically be seen as pain felt by a female during love making (euphemism) hence the bonds of relationship give females pain.

Wings symbolize freedom and liberty of women which has the transforming power and can take her to the heights of sky which a man cannot bear hence whenever a man admires I like your wings it is a hypocritical remark. The apparent love making turns into hideous enactment of biblical scene in which she is deceived and is robbed of her wings, her power and happiness. Just like a serpent he sneaks in the female region and steals her independence and

## **The women reborn: A feminist revamping of Sleeping Beauty into Maleficent**

---

strength. So the same bodily power is turned against her in life so that she cannot rise economically, politically, and socially. 'She never understood the greed and envy of men'---if men claim that they cannot understand women so is with women. So both are different who cannot be compared rather both should be understood relatively in the context of their differences.

The narrator tells us that the king had heard of the growing power in Moors and decided to strike it ----so men cannot bear women developing their own way of doing and seeing things to become independent and successful. Men misjudging and undermining women's power announced to 'crush' the 'mysterious magical creatures' ; the address of king sounds like a (church) father's approval to men of crushing women for being different ('winged') hence inferior('elf') and destined to be dealt in the one and only way that('crush').

The attack of men at Moors is symbolical as it refers to the attack of men at the region of women where she enjoys her liberty and exercises her power. Maleficent is symbolical of the women who dared to come out of the stereotypical boundaries of being shut and mute. 'A king does not take orders from a winged elf'(king)----referring to the stereotypical characteristic of man as good decision maker and the purpose of mentioning the bodily difference of a woman's body is to laugh at them as they are deviation from the norm. In her reply, 'you are no king to me', she symbolizes voice of a rising powerful woman speaking against the common sense and naturalized ideologies where he is a 'king' but she questions and negates his being a king.

Men trap women by making them feel in danger and unprotected hence they have to surrender themselves to one and come under their protection. The same trick is employed by Stefan when he returns after long apparently to revive their love but that deprives her of her wings. 'Though not killing her (life) but killing the soul and beauty of her life'. Cutting of the wings is shutting the door of opportunities of success that might let women rise and become someone. The very inculcator of negativity is he; she who was pure whose heart was bright now had to avenge in other words stand against the cruel system and bring revolution. We find many psychological, emotional and physical changes in her e.g. her hair were not to seen which come back in view after getting her wings back. 'you are not welcomed here' is what men say to women in professional and powerful settings as says Stefan to maleficent.

To become a man complete and successful man Stephan like other men had to sneak in female's 'room of their own' to get control of her and cut her wings and to keep them from her.



Diaval symbolizes male victims exploited by powerful men he who is saved by maleficent hence it suggests that equality is to be established for the benefit of all. This can also be the symbol of men who acknowledge power of women and believe in equality. Three fairies represent conformists who restore patriarchal system as can be seen from their presence at the merry making scene and even their remarks about her wings 'she is always in a hurry with her big wings'.

When maleficent leaves castle people fall and cry this symbolizes cost of a revolution. The walls maleficent builds are highly significant because until and unless a woman does not establish her own distinct identity and private room she can never get her rights. The wall was indestructible for men and Stefan slaps men for not able to take control of women and their power in short society punishes men for not destroying their 'room'. Maleficent watches over the child, feeds her hence kind of raising her whom Stefan has send the child for fear of Maleficent's harm was brought up by her and she proved herself a mother who stood against the odds done to her by men as aurora calls her fairy god mother.

The trivial tricks done to three fairies can be taken as symbolical of troubles faced by conformists who accept patriarchal system as just .Stefan suffers in paranoia and burns in revenge whereas maleficent watches over the kid laughs at her tricks etc and at the end with gets back her wings and he falls in the ditch he dug for himself.

Was the presence of Princess Aurora was of any importance for Stefan did he want to love her spend some happy moments with her no rather he was excited to hunt maleficent down and she the savior risked her life to save and liberate Princess Aurora since she was a victim not of the curse only but also of the imprisonment by her father. And maleficent with her power of love restored peace, goodness and happiness. In short a woman had the power to revoke the wrong done by her. This changed the meaning of love; it is not a sexual relationship rather a true, sincere and pure bond. Maleficent sneaked in men's region but unlike Stefan who stole she fixed the mess. The union of aurora and maleficent helped them get back what was stolen of them. Aurora smiling with maleficent was not bearable in spite of his daughter's well being his revenge could not be lowered. Only his death could end the burden of his negativity. And at the end we see equality, unity, love, happiness established the aftermath of revolution.

## **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that this work based on a very celebrated negative female character of Disneyland has given new meanings to love, sexuality and women. As Arora and Yadav (2020) call this transformation “From a symbolically assumed villain to a compassionate fairy”. The connotation of a long time fairytale (sleeping beauty) which was a nightmare of females had been turned into a utopian dream of women where women have their 'own room' (Moors) in this retold story of maleficent the feminist stance in this was more subtle and symbolic which is pin pointed through reading of text from a woman's point of view (feminist reading).

## **References**

- Arora, P. & Yadav, M. (2020). Maleficent as an Ecofeminist Protagonist: A Holistic Vision. *International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 11, 200-2013.
- Ask, S. (2023). Criticizing patriarchal traditions through alternative history in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*. Linköping University.
- Butler, J. (2007) “Bodies and Power Revisited”, In Taylor, D. and Vintges, K. (Eds.), *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (pp. 183-194). University of Illinois Press.
- Carter, R. and Simpson, P. (1989). *Language, Discourse and Literature*. Unwin Hyman.
- Cixous H. (1983) .The laugh of Medusa.
- Beavoir D, S. (1949). *The second sex*.
- Jennifer S. (2003). *Feminism-issues and arguments*.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Mills S. (1997). *Discourse, the new critical idiom*.
- Sinha, A. & Mishra, P. (2019) Love, Desire and Ecstasy in Kalidasa's Play *Malvikagnimitram*. *Think India Journal*, 22(14), 16664-16672. Retrieved from <https://journals.eduindex.org/index.php/think-india/article/view/18058>.
- Showalter, E. (1979). *Towards a feminist poetics*.**
- Showalter E. (1941). *A literature of their own*.
- Victoria Mercy, J. (2023). Feminism in English Literature of 20th Century. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*. 5(5).
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*.