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Maleficent as an Ecofeminist Protagonist: A Holistic Vision

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Abstract:

Malevolence and benevolence are the part and parcel of a human soul, though what makes you great is the invocation of the right spirit at the right time. Maleficent has been a villain in Disney's Sleeping Beauty film though the revamped version of her in 2014 put forth a magnanimous protagonist. This paper attempts to analyse Maleficent as an ecofeminist protagonist. Any discussion of ecology is never complete without the holistic view of mother Earth as a whole. Thus, this paper also tries to highlight the 'Gaia Hypothesis' as a visionary for the society as a whole.

Keywords: Maleficent, Gaia hypothesis, ecofeminism, movie, malevolence, benevolence.

Introduction

Humans are accustomed to treat the earth as an assemblage of consumable resources but when the tirade comes to women it becomes even more brutal. Creating an agency of our own on the notion of our own coercive authority is what human kind is supposedly doing at present time. In the modern world, apart from women, Nature has also become a subject of patriarchal exploitation and need to be saved from mankind. The story in Mahabharata begins with King Dushyant, a powerful virtuous King lost in a dense forest while hunting; he witnesses a picturesque hermitage and is greeted by a back-eyed girl, with flawless beauty. With these assumed rights when we treat nature as the gamut of possibilities and human being as the solicit benefactor of all its felicities. The mechanization of the world can only be balanced by the healing power of nature, where human may allow his emotions to rule over reason as described in lines below:

*Away, away, from men and towns,
To the wild wood and the downs,
To the silent wilderness,
Where the soul need not repress its music."*

— *To Jane: The Invitation* by Percy Bysshe Shelley

For ages, representation of the environment as 'Mother Nature' implicitly understood as an entity with no consciousness which provides life through resources. Images like 'Mother Nature' emphasizes on the two nuances of the depiction i.e., naturalization of women and feminization of nature. Raymond Williams in one of his writing's foregrounds that in the prevalent western assumptions and literature, nature and culture has always been considered as binaries that carry gendered values (i.e., Nature as feminine and culture as masculine). Nature is often envisioned as a woman whose basic charge is to nurture and reproduce. Hence, women's tasks of nurturing and reproducing are considered as 'natural' to her, as a result, exploited by patricentric society.

Ecofeminism, also called ecological feminism, was started as an activist and academic movement (later developed as the concept) that analyses how both women and nature are interlinked/connected and oppressed. Francoise d' Eaubonne, in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, had coined the term in 1974. She used slogan '*Feminism or Death*', to urge women to bring about the ecological uprising. She proclaimed that phallic order has exploited the reproductive power of women and concurrently the natural resources to increase the productivity. Feminism is a critical social movement that challenges, and ultimately aims to breakdown, the patriarchal structures of a society (Mishra, 2018). Further in 1976, the concept of ecofeminism was developed by Ynestra King. Ecofeminism is borne out of the Third-wave of Feminism, where the key focus was on the relationship of women with her surroundings rather than her gender and sexuality. Like feminists, ecofeminists argue that misogynist social norms and values had resulted in the oppression of women as well as nature by ignoring her work, knowledge and 'situatedness'.

In literatures, the writers have conspicuously taken up the issues and problems of women focusing on delineation from different perspectives and points of view. Their creative sensibility has always been responsive to the problems of women and her position in society and culture (Sinha & Mishra 2019). Often, nature and women are portrayed in literature as wild and passive beings, commodities, easily corrupted no consciousness, helpless, sensuous,

irrational, emotional, etc. These misconceptions and beliefs were spread by patriarch from generation to generation, giving it a shape of worldview. Women acting against their confined gender roles/conceptions were regarded as evil and villainous creatures, filmed in Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent* (2014). The movie *Maleficent* retold the story of Charles Perrault's (French author) fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* by giving it a twiddle at the end i.e., instead of prince Philip, Maleficent saves the sleeping princess's life by kissing her.

Maleficent as a Supernatural Being

The tale of Maleficent, a dark fey, anguish, fond disposition and power to demolish and regenerate all in one and at the same time, a villainess heroine of the movie is the epitomic sculpture of nature's blend with humanity. From a symbolically assumed villain to a compassionate fairy, Maleficent is the amalgamation of nature with humanity. Similar to this villainous fairy there is a Greek goddess called Nike who was the daughter of Pallas (Titan) and Styx (the river that separated planet earth from the gates of hell). Having born from the God and the river renders her with the elements of both the Goddess and nature, felicitating her with powers of regeneration and protection. However, if we see her on statues with male Gods, she is wingless whereas when she's sculpted alone there, she holds a palm leaf in her right hand sporting her wings. Symbolizing peace the strand of nature rests in her hand and the authoritative power with the wings. Maleficent is the ideological reflection of the Goddess Nike as the fairy with horns incorporating the tenderness and power all at once. Being vengeful and kind is a matter of treatment that Maleficent portrayed as a fairy with unusually unfairly like appearance and with drifting motifs from callousness to compassion. Gilbert and Gubar corresponds, "*It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters*" (Gilbert; Gubar53) Segregating women' in categorical terms of being either the Angel or the Monster have been the trend of the times confirming to each category women need to show assertive traits of either a passive or a maligning soul. These notions of conformity had been placed over Disney's female characters where Maleficent came out to be an exception an exemplified figure of supernaturality that presupposes elements of nature and a fairy, a dark fey giving her access to be both a destroyer and a procurer in the way the Mother nature does.

Maleficent's character has shown the heteronormativity as being the protector of the Moors she was somehow an inseparable part of nature.

"Conall: in your hands you, hold the power of life and death,

Destruction and rebirth.

But nature's greatest power is the power of true transformation."

Holding the power to transform and destruct Maleficent was dormant till the time the "human king has heard of a growing power in the moors and he sought to strike it down"(Maleficent).In their lust for power humans at times project their wicked attitude to curb nature, which is where we are at our most mercenary ignorant phase just like the king Henry, when he says,

"King: there they are, the mysterious moors where no one dares to venture,

For the fear of magical creature that lurk within.

Well! I say crush them."

Then and there evoking the power of nature Maleficent ask the woods, trees and all creature of the moors to "*arise and stand with me*". There humanly vengeance first encounter the power of nature in the form of maleficent. However, there still are ways to devastate and humankind is a champion of it when it comes to having their way with nature. As they did with Maleficent, being averse of iron she was wounded by it yet the heart of Maleficent wasn't maligned until the only love of her life Stefan betrayed her for the very lust and envy of the throne by robbing her of her wings. From there on Maleficent was transformed from a fairy to a dark fey, who's full of malevolence against the race of humans as they are corruptible. Although, she was the protector of the Moors, she never forthrightly declared herself as the Queen of the Moors, imposing the creatures to bow in front of her. In sync with Maleficent nature also closed all its doors for the human visitors in the moors by enforcing a wall of thorns. "*As she reveled in sorrow and the moors had never had to bear the touch of human again*". The stringent oppression of the king and Stefan on both nature and Maleficent ripped of her altruism.

Adapting old tales to relive the old characters acquaint the audience in advance with the piquant flavor of the changed scenario. Here, Maleficent as a woman of natural origin is not only stumped by humankind but also patriarchy twice. The tender feelings of motherhood and love are predominant in women kind, personified by Maleficent from the start when she met Stefan for the very first time:

"Aww!

Stefan: what happened?

Maleficent: your ring, iron burns fairies.

Stefan: I'm sorry. I like your wings.

Narrator: Maleficent thought how Stefan cast away his ring, one who has so little in this world.

So that their hands might touch again, and heart was moved.

Thus, did the young thief who had hoped to steal a jewel.... steal something. far more precious."

Embracing all the loneliness that comes afterward she persistently waited for Stefan and he did show up but the happiness was short-lived. Despite the fact of Stefan' acquisitive nature she trusted him; however, he took it to be a chance to exploit her femininity and love and robbed her of the most precious possession of her wings. During an interview on BBC radio, Angelina Jolie (the actress who played Maleficent) elucidates this allegorical situation:

"We were very conscious, the writer and I, that it was a metaphor for rape. This would be the thing that would make her lose sight... The core of [the movie] is abuse, and how the abused have a choice of abusing others or overcoming and remaining loving, open people. The question was asked, 'What could make a woman become so dark? To lose all sense of her maternity, her womanhood, and her softness?'" (Holmes, 2014).

Though she was still the protector of the Moors, her kind-heartedness has now swept away by the storm of infidelity leaving her inner woman burning in the fire of vengeance. Leading to Stefan's act, Maleficent' wounded self-became fanatical further enraging her to seek her retribution by cursing Aurora, a newly born of Stefan at the christening. Amidst the fact that maleficent cursed her in the way she thought no one could ever be able to save her, still seeing Aurora growing she became fond of her in the heart. Superficially, Maleficent was pretending to be harsh and heartless but somewhere deep down her the motherly love was finding its way for Aurora:

Maleficent: look! The little beast is about to fall off a cliff.

But then she saves Aurora by extending a branch of a tree, which itself says for her being a supernatural being with all attributes of nature and a woman.

Eco- feminism in *Maleficent*

Feminism is used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women (Prakash & Mishra,2015).Ghanaian proverb - “*A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence around it*”, illustrates the prior status of women, which holds the reverential stance in the legends, myths, oral narratives, etc. Women’s creativity and nurturing power were often identified with the ‘*Mother Nature*’. This naturalization of women and feminization of nature one of the major aspects of eco feminism. Another interpretation of this proverb is women are as delicate and wild as a flower, who need men to protect her. A similar idea was prompted through the Disney princess stories, where a prince saves the princess from the wicked witch or villain. Unlike Disney stories, the movie *Maleficent* renders the feministic view of the tale of *The Sleeping Beauty* by giving a twist in the traditional storyline and by making the Maleficent, both curser and protector of the princess, Aurora. In other words, the narrative of *Maleficent* endorses the idea of ‘woman saving woman’.

Initially, the protagonist, Maleficent was the fairy living in the ‘Moors’. Like eco-feminine characters, she was projected as the blend of ‘Nature’ and ‘Female’. Similarly, the etymological meaning of Moors is “*a tract of open uncultivated upland, typically covered with heather*”, which foregrounds the Puritan theological thought connecting nature’s wildness with women’s corrupting nature. Further, giving the reason to the patriarchs, to control and rule them. The patriarchy doesn’t stand the growing power of women in the Puritan era, so spread the misconception like “*women’s souls as vulnerable, so women are easier to get corrupted by Satan*”, to assassinate women in Salem. “*Those women were particularly the ones who did not fit into the typical Puritan framework of a good, obedient wife, the one who is supposed to help reinforce the male-domination, hierarchical structure of the society*” as stated by Karlsen in her work. As the industrialization arrived in England around the 1800s, it resulted in the similar oppression of nature, emphasizing the feminine qualities of nature. Correspondingly, the king Henry raise a war against Moors, since “*the human kind had heard of growing power in the Moors, and he sought to strike it down*” (Maleficent 2014). Firstly, the king tried to oppress the nature by raising war against the fairies, but after he got defected by Maleficent (women) whom he called ‘*winged elf*’, he tried to oppress the woman by asking his men to ‘*kill the winged creature and avenge*’ him. Here, the king symbolizes the rigid chauvinist views, who abhors any power or thing that outstrips

his power, either it is ‘Nature’ or ‘Women’. In 1987, Karren J. Warren criticized the ideologies, perceptions, values and attitudes of the western world for being influenced by the hierarchical patriarchal structure that believes in domination, and subordination specifically of women and nature.

Stefan, only human friend of Maleficent, undertook the task and betrayed her by cutting her wings and avenging the king. His “*ambition pulled him away from Maleficent, and towards the temptations of the human kingdom*” (Maleficent 2014). Stefan’s act of betrayal can be interpreted as an infringement of Maleficent’s dignity and body as Dobai Stewarts proclaimed, “*The man she thought was her friend drugs her, and while she is unconscious, he saw off her wings. She woke up bleeding, in pain, a part of her destroyed. Sobbing. It feels like a sexual assault*”. Her soul was broken and crushed, in the shards and chinks of her ruptured soul, a noxious mortar began to fill the cracks, cementing together a new and gloomy Maleficent. The environmental setting as shown in the movie also mirrored her grief and rage. Her surroundings turn dark and cloudy. Diaval, the raven, whom Maleficent saved, symbolizes her loss and beginning of transmutation. Even, the colour of her supernatural power i.e., her magic, changed from golden to green. Here, the colour of her magic holds great significance. Traditionally, the golden colour symbolizes love, compassion, wisdom, passion, prosperity and illumination whereas green exemplifies the negative emotions like greed, jealousy as well as renewal.

Ecofeminism is the heuristic approach that explores the overlapping relationship between the environment and women. Ecofeminists study the rationale and tools i.e., hierarchical and dualistic thinking, which culture/men use to oppress and dominate women as well as nature as we discussed above. Nature was often exploited and hegemonized by its binary ‘Culture’, which is always identified as the Mother, whose responsibility is to care. Conventional virtues associated with both mother (women) and nature are gentleness, compassion, feeble, wayward and patience but never harsh or powerful as depicted in Emily Dickinson’s *Nature, the Gentlest Mother*:

*NATURE, the gentlest mother,
 Impatient of no child,
 The feeblest or the waywardest, —
 Her admonition mild*

Ecological feminism critiques this code of conduct by fostering the view ‘women can be a mother and powerful at the same time’ “*You can be an absolute woman, and also be smart and tough and not lose your femininity*”. Similarly, in the movie, Maleficent is portrayed as harsh and gentle simultaneously even after losing her wings which stands for her dignity and power.

“Listen well, all of you. The princess shall indeed grow in grace and beauty, beloved by all who meet her. But, before the sun set on her 16th birthday, she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into a sleep like death, a sleep from which she will never be awoken. The princess can be woken from her death sleep, but only by true love’s kiss. This curse will last till the end of time. No power on Earth can change it.” (Maleficent).

The curse that maleficent cast on infant Aurora manifests that her power above all power on earth except ‘True Love’. Although, she had cursed Arora and calls her ‘Beasty’, she reluctantly takes care of the princess from far away when Pixies are impotent and struggling living as humans. Maleficent found love in mid of her resentment and melancholy in the form of Aurora. Indeed, her curse worked and she fell in love(motherly) with the princess. Aurora’s relationship with Maleficent highlights her close relationship with nature. In the growing years of Aurora, the environment setting in the movie has shown as bright, sunny and greeny around the courage because of love both women share for each other. As Aurora grew physically, Maleficent her fairy God- Mother also grew spiritually. The colour of Maleficent’s magic also started changing from green to golden. Cultural eco-feminism highlights the “*consciousness related to nature i.e., witchcraft, spirituality and goddess worship*”. Cultural ecofeminist believes women are capable of bringing life to earth, which embedded nature within her biology. Due to which they share more intimate and intense with ‘Nature’ both physiologically and psychologically.

As the story progress, Aurora, learned the fact that she was cursed by her fairy God Mother. She felt betrayed and heartbroken and ran away to her father’s palace. The whole climatic settings again turned dark and cloudy, giving the viewer the hint that something dark and wicked was going to happen. Stephen pulled up the iron guards around the kingdom to resist Maleficent entering it. Diaval warned her that “*if we go inside those walls, we’ll never come out alive. Maleficent- Then don’t come. It’s not your fight.*” This incident highlights feminine rejection of patriarchal warning and her powerful character, who is not afraid of dying.

The movie also accentuates the rejection of the male chauvinist idea of true love i.e. *Stefan- True love does not exist*, which was accepted as truth even by the female population in the beginning. However, when Aurora falls into the death sleep, Maleficent realized her love for Aurora. *I was so lost in hatred and revenge. Sweet Aurora, you stole what was left of my heart. And now I have lost you forever (Maleficent)*. She thought she had lost the princess forever but by her kiss she woke up from the death sleep. Finally, she was redeemed by the love she holds for her ‘beasty’. The whole patriarchal conception of true love transpires as false in the end. Firstly, Maleficent fortifying Aurora from the curse, later, Aurora saving Maleficent from her father by liberating her wings is the perfect instance of ‘woman saving woman’. Stephen-Maleficent fight at the ending of the movie, foregrounds the compassion of both women and nature and the destruction caused by the brawl underlines the Françoise d’Eaubonne argument “*that phallic order is causing double threat to the human beings*”.

The Gaia hypothesis as the savior in Maleficent

The modern technocratic society fuelled by masculine obsession has rendered the world with rapacious industrialism, leaving us emotionally drained and ecologically poor. *The ‘Gaia hypothesis’, also known as ‘Gaia theory’ or ‘Gaia principle’, proposes that all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating complex system, maintaining the conditions for life on the planet.* Maleficent’ opening scene itself sings for the prediction of the mingling of two kingdoms i.e. human and the moors, “*there were two kingdoms that were the worst of neighbours, so vast the discord between them that it was said only a great hero or a terrible villain might bring them together*”. Whenever humans tend to corrupt nature with his self-serving motives there the frenzy begins, as was in Maleficent the king wants to subjugate nature which holds the very essence of all life forms on earth. The castigation of nature on the moors and Maleficent who is herself a supernatural creature left the kingdom in pieces at last.

A hypothesis provided by Paul R. Ehrlich and his wife Anne H. Ehrlich, aptly compares each and every species as rivet on an aeroplane (symbolic for ecosystem), in which the progressive loss of the rivets symbolises the progressive loss of species after which both the plane and the ecosystem weakens and collapses. Yet another time Stefan tries to captivate Maleficent in his rage of vengeance saying “*how does it feels to be a fairy creature without wings, in a world where you don’t belong?*” existence of any species on this mother earth is not a matter of contest for the human. Despite the fact of coexistence humans time and again

tries to conquer what is not belonging to him which often leads not only to ecological imbalance but also circumscribes us to a loop of being an abuser and then getting abused. No one on this earth is oblivious to the rage of mother earth in the form of cyclone, earthquake or drought yet we estrange our relationship with nature. In the quest for more power Stefan not only betrayed Maleficent but the nature on the moors too by unleashing fire on the woods protecting the moors. Narrator in the beginning elucidates this envy of men, *“in one kingdom live folk like you and me with a vain and greedy king to rule over them, they were forever discontent and envious of the beauty and wealth of their neighbours. For in the other kingdom the Moors, there lived every manner of strange and wonderful creature, and they needed neither king nor queen but trusted in one another.”* Viewing the world from a holistic point gives a much clearer vision to ponder on the signals mother nature often gives us before an outrageous destruction, as when Maleficent told the king Henry who came to destroy the moors, *“You are no king to me”*. Gaia is therefore not only a theory that promotes the holistic view of the world and a unique place of all species existing on mother earth, it also entails a myth in it. In Greek mythology Gaia is Mother Earth from whose womb all forms of life took forms to live in symphony. Further, validated as a concept that promotes an integrated vision of earth in European Geophysical Union meeting collectively signing a declaration that *“The Earth System behaves as a single, self-regulating system with physical, chemical, biological, and human components.”*(*Gaia Hypothesis Wiki, 4*). This notion of unification at last was achieved in Maleficent where the envious and greedy human king receives a befitting reply from a supernatural creature i.e. Maleficent who anchors both the feminine and the natural aspect of the earth. *“The radical form of ecofeminism, is a response to the perception that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in western culture and may be elevated and liberated through direct political action”* (Keller 293; Merchant). A holistic view of the tale was achieved by Maleficent declaring the queen of moors a human who’s Aurora.

Conclusion

Symbiosis is the key factor of the peaceful coexistence of humankind with nature, which if not done correctly is hazardous for all the species. Maleficent by Disney is an impeccable example of both the nurture and rage of nature when fall on mankind then true love and care remain the only assort to us. Metaphoric situations in the cinematic projection render us with the pertinent solutions to all emerging problems in the ecosystem. Though in

literature there are numerous theories to clad any piece of thought yet to absolve the environmental and patriarchal issues seemingly have one option i.e. respect and love for mother nature and woman. Through the concepts of Ecofeminism and Gaia applied to Maleficent is enough to substantiate one point that betrayal done by humans to nature and patriarchy to females had always had its consequences. Either it's Stefan robbing of Maleficent' wings or King Henry's wish to crush the moors. In both the situations a rising of a woman and nature like a phoenix is eminent. As stated in ecofeminism the nurture of nature and women shouldn't be mistaken for her subdued individuality or vulnerability, it's the inner drive of both which when forsaken or exploited is capable of causing thunderous acts. Maleficent's curse is one such example of her rage towards mankind's betrayal not only to her but with the moors too, yet by the time her malevolence turned to benevolence. That's where the postulation of Gaia hypothesis comes to rescue ensuring each and every species an equal pedestal likewise the storyline of Maleficent came at last, as Aurora is named as the queen of the Moors who's a human.

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