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Of Slumber, Revenge and Kiss: An exploration of the possible alternate histories of the wicked fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty*

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Abstract

*The history of fairytale affirms its existence since the earliest of civilizations. However, it has been articulated by certain theorists such as Vladimir Propp that the fairytales can be categorically divided into fixed functions and thus can be understood accordingly. But modern representations of classic fairytales often transcend such reflections in various ways both in covert and overt manners. The classic fairytale *The Sleeping Beauty* which has been attributed to multiple authors till date ranging from Brothers Grimm to Charles Perrault and a few others is reinterpreted in *Maleficent*, apparently its cinematic representation. The new appropriation of the text has promptly opened up a series of possible interpretations of both the texts.*

This paper shall attempt to negotiate between the two different texts categorised into separate genres and explore the knots of similarities, differences and fissures within the structures and content, leaving ample orbit for future re-exploration of both the texts.

Identifying the basic structures and the functions of folk tales or fairy tales, as observed by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of Folktales* does not really mean that all the complexities associated with them are reduced. Rather it lays threadbare a fresh series of complications. Propp thoroughly estimated many of the Russian folk tales and discovered certain common themes in them. He segmented the tales or stories into morphemes and marked thirty one narratemes or narrative units which constructed or composed the structure of the tales. As a much popular genre, folk stories strongly share a prominent connection, playing with similar kinds of trope all around the world. The stories analysed by Propp have also formed the basis of understanding not only the Russian folk tales in particular but several other stories sharing similar features. Vladimir Propp

has not just only been praised for his application of the structural approach but has also been criticized for his lack of sensitiveness towards particular factors essential for the narrative structure such as mood and underlying context. Propp proposed that there exists five categories of elements which effectively defines not just the construction of a story, but the story as a whole. The five elements as identified by him are, functions of dramatis personae, conjunctive elements (deus ex machine, announcement of misfortune etc), motivations (reasons and goals of the protagonist), forms of appearance of dramatic personae and attributive elements or accessories. While not every piece of tale contains all the narratemes as provided by Propp, it is indeed quite rare to find tales that does not contain even one of them.

The Sleeping Beauty has always been considered to be an example of a classic fairy tale composed by Charles Perrault. A not so alternate version of it names Little Briar Rose has been attributed to the collection of Brothers Grimm. The basic plot line involves a lovely looking princess, a sleeping enchantment and a handsome prince only capable of breaking the enchantment and set the heroine free. An interesting history has always followed the particular tale. It has been found that the particular version that has been attributed to the Brothers Grimm was actually an oral version of the original story penned by Charles Perrault in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* in the year of 1697. It was further complicated with the discovery of the fact that Perrault's narrative was based on Sun, Moon and Talia by the Italian Renaissance poet Giambattista Basile, posthumously published in 1634 which in turn was also based on multiple other tales employing similar tropes. The earliest version of the story as found out is Perceforest, which has probably been composed between 1330 and 1344 and was printed in 1528. The chronological, historical as well as the authorial complication involving the story once again opens the idea proposed by Vladimir Propp, that fairy tales are a part of a large working literary web and often has been seen to share many things ranging from story lines to style and pattern.

The Sleeping Beauty has a linear story line which quite predictably proceeds towards a happy ending leading to marriage, a favourite conclusion for most of the fairy tales. The plot primarily introduces the king and his queen celebrating the christening of their long desired daughter into which seven good fairies are invited to be her godmother. However they forget to invite the eighth fairy who has been overlooked because she had been believed to be dead. While six of the seven fairies shower upon the princess the gifts of beauty, wit, grace, dance, song and music, the

eighth fairy in fury as her gift curses the princess so that she will inevitably prick her hand on a spindle of a spinning wheel and die. The last good fairy however tries to make the situation a little better by giving her the last gift that instead of dying the princess shall fall into a deep slumber for hundred years and shall be awakened by a kiss from a prince. The plot follows the king stopping every working spindle in the kingdom but nothing can be done to reverse the curse. So the inevitable happens and it is years later that a prince fights through the way to reach the princess only to save her by kissing her. The story ends with their unification and marriage. This is the version mostly followed by Perrault, Brothers Grimm and Basil with certain variations such as the name of the characters, the setting and other minor alterations keeping the main plot line much identical aptly needed to shape a highly successful fairy tale.

Quite unlike the different versions of the same story, the cinematic production of an alternative narrative of *The Sleeping Beauty* is *Maleficent*, a much different remake of the first production of the story that followed the traditional story line generously. But as Disney presented in front of its viewers the narrative of not the docile princess, but of the wicked fairy (here played by Angelina Jolie) who was not so wicked before her ruin caused by the man named Stephan who lusted for nothing but the power of kingship and thus sacrificed his friendship with the fairy by chopping of her wings, the source of her powers. The spectators might be able to find from the early part of the cinematic representation of *Maleficent* that the self-confident woman (the identity of a woman being prioritised here) is betrayed by a man with whom she is in love with, who further mutilates her to destroy her completely. The image of a limping, mutilated female body bursting in shrill outcry shatters the constructs of the traditional narratives where the wicked fairy is said to be wicked but nobody enquires about the history behind her wickedness. What is very interesting to observe is that the image of the physically distorted and violated character which is usually presented as the subject of sympathy in several films depicting violation of women's bodies is questioned here. The subject, Maleficent instead of accepting her fate strikes hard, so hard that it makes the new King Stephan's life a misery. On his daughter's christening, the wicked fairy (although in the film she is the protector of the moors) visits the court to bestow upon the child the gift of eternal slumber. Only when she makes the king beg for the life of his daughter that she partially changes the gift by adding that she can only be awakened by true love's kiss, an ironical thing as King Stephan had proved already. The story follows the traditional plot for a little time after the curse is being generated by Maleficent. The king gives

the three fairies (the number reduced from seven to three) the responsibility of Aurora, the princess to take care of her till she becomes sixteen and to keep her away from every kind of spindles. The three fairies fight among each other jovially forgetting the baby princess which however makes Maleficent the true godmother of her for without her assistance the child would probably have starved to death. The magnificent twist that turns the plot upside down is that Aurora happens to befriend Maleficent, which would be probably a complete turn off for the early renaissance fairy tale writers. To add on, when the inevitable disaster takes place despite Maleficent's repeated attempts of withdrawing the curse then she is left with no choice but to risk her life to bring the possible true love of Aurora into the palace to kiss her in order to awaken her from her deep slumber. The palace proves to be a trap for Maleficent because King Stephan had planned every possible measure to imprison her and eventually kill her. But ironically Aurora awakens from her sleep by the kiss of Maleficent herself, proving that true love is not merely to be observed within fixed boundaries of norms and conventions. However this trope of the story of *Maleficent* inverts the plot line of *The Sleeping Beauty* quite powerfully. It is the core point of difference that provides the spectators a new reading or interpretation of the story. As Propp had suggested, it can be observed that both the tales share various necessary knots essential for shaping the story but they also manifests visible differences challenging existing social, cultural and political order. Firstly, the story presents the human society as destructive and lusty for despite their vast kingdom and order they attempt to wreck the peace of the magical moors for what is not theirs they demand to possess or demolish. The world of Maleficent was shown to be the ideal world, a perfect counter to the mortal world which gets corrupted and dark with Stephan's entry into Maleficent's life and his eventual betrayal which transforms the beautiful fairy into the authoritarian and powerful destructor. Most importantly, what the film offers the viewers as its underlying structure is that, the mutilated woman is not essentially just the revenge seeker causing piles of destruction but it also allows them to explore another potential possibility of a forgiver in the character who evolves much above the level of mortal emotions such as jealousy, vindictiveness and anger. It is through her kiss which awakens Aurora that Maleficent completes her circle of realisation that she is much above the meager and corrupted mortal world, incapable of loving and honouring promises made to each other.

It is this healing power, or the ability to forgive the past and look towards a fruitful future that Alice Walker talks about in her much acclaimed narrative *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* while mentioning her mother and the other ancestors of her, essentially the oppressed Black women. The history of torture both physical and psychological could have given birth to more venomous reactions and reflections, but Walker argues that it has made them stronger and full of wisdom with which they have tried to shape not only their own lives but also the lives of those surrounding them with equal passion and care. Black Feminism or nearly identical to it the concept of Womanism as Walker acknowledges it in its truer sense celebrates the difference of experience by boldly accepting the divergences. Walker posits it in a very competent manner that the women bearing the legacy of the long oppression or the experience of individual trauma, pain and subjugation transforms into different individuals, who are tremendously powerful, essentially caring and full of wisdom that breeds not just future generations of beings, but sincere production of art as well. They direct their wisdom to a completely new area, free from the borders of heteropatriarchal constructs. For Walker, the new areas explored by the oppressed women are those of bakery or gardening or quilt making as a window to vent their emotion and wisdom. But as feminism has ceased to define itself within strict borders covering female experiences, so an argument can be made in order to interpret the experience of the dark fairy Maleficent in terms of it. Injured and devastated, ripped of her wings and her aviating powers, the once innocent fairy transcends her former identity and becomes something completely different, alienated from her former self. But within the awakening consciousness of her remains the goodness of humanity that has not died even at the face of the terrible blow of human betrayal. Rather it has made her a stronger and composed person who not only becomes the protector of the Moors, but also becomes the god mother of Aurora, without even knowing that herself. With her physical destruction or rather distortion she transcends her former limitations of the self and becomes a totally different person capable of retaining not just the role of the warrior and protector but also the lovable and kind being who dares not only to bring the little girl cursed by her into the kingdom of the Moors, but also break her own curse by kissing her proving to be her only true love. So, a potential analysis of the film Maleficent can be asserted from the angle of womanism, without strictly conforming to its ideals associated with the Black or coloured community but ironically very much imbibing its spirit that accepts the inherent potential in every woman who has been through the experiences of bodily or emotional exploitation to convert themselves into individuals rich in inner beauty, spirituality and wisdom

who are further capable of effecting the lives of others and enrich their surroundings or the community at large in their venture towards positivism, truth and humanity. One more thing that is particularly celebrated by the womanists is the ideal of motherhood, for they respect in the lineage of maternity that empowers a woman internally making her a better person who is capable of affirming a sense of creativity into her children. As Walker writes,

“Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for the strength-in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own. And perhaps in Africa over two hundred years ago, there was just such a mother; perhaps she painted vivid and daring decorations on oranges and yellows and greens on the walls of her hut; perhaps she sang-in a voice like Roberta Flack’s sweetly over the compounds of her village; perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village storytellers. Perhaps she was herself a poet though only her daughter’s name is signed to the poems that we know. Perhaps Phillis Wheatley’s mother was also an artist. Perhaps in more than Phillis Wheatley’s biological life is her mother’s signature made clear.”

[In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens]

The celebration of motherhood also advances to assert the visible betterment which would be visible in their daughters. Maleficent’s venture takes an absolutely different turn with the death of Stephan when she crowns Aurora, the daughter of her former beau turned into the horrendous enemy as the new Queen of the conjoined empires of the Moors and the Human beings and thus, extending to the readers a hope of a possible unification between the two absolutely different communities whose saga must be carried forward by the human child who is pure at heart under the experienced guidance of her foster mother who eventually transforms into the role of her real mother.

The portrayal of Maleficent as the protector of the Moors can also be challenged on the basis of the arguments about the rise of mass culture in its presentation of the ‘woman’ that reached a crisis point. It instigated cultural debates involving the credits of romance and realism tried to annex both the models of fiction into something confirming to a masculine aesthetic which polarised female prototypes. This representational feature has also been found in several films screened in 20th and 21st century and *Maleficent* can be viewed as one of them to a large extent. Maleficent has been portrayed as a magnificent and magical creature primarily full of softness

and warmth initially. But it is only when she is betrayed that she negotiates with her new masculine avatar celebrating essential qualities attributed to men such as vigour, zest and a terrible urge for revenge. It is only when her cycle of revenge is complete that she resumes her newly evolved role of a mother. So, there is a suggestion within the film that plays around the trope of positioning of women at two distinctively different poles. It is as if she is incapable of balancing her existence in both the worlds and that once her masculine task is over, she must resume to her former sphere of femininity.

Therefore, it can be concluded that *Maleficent* is a direct challenge to everything that a classic fairytale like *The Sleeping Beauty* stands for. It vehemently rules out the conventional protagonist which is the princess and the rescuer prince and instead of them chooses the dark or wicked fairy to be the true protagonist of the narrative. A counter history of the wicked fairy allows the readers to indulge themselves into an alternate reading of the Grimm's tale. The alternate narrative of the wicked fairy nonetheless appeals to us for she stands for a different world order that we are yet to achieve. By breaking down all the shackles of conformism and socio-cultural order, *Maleficent* stands a class apart among the series of umpteen cine-representations of fairytales. It is for its powerful journey towards the exploration of the unknown that resides within every existing narrative that *Maleficent* earns the status of a fairytale that not only accommodates differences but also celebrates its uniqueness throughout.

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