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Thalia Shelyndra Wendranirsa

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## MAGIC AS A FORM OF OPPRESSION TOWARDS WOMEN: GENDER IDEOLOGY IN MALEFICENT (2014)<sup>1</sup>

Thalia Shelyndra Wendranirsa

### Abstract

Previous studies propose that female protagonists in Disney movies are represented based on gender construction that causes oppression towards women, but in 2014, Disney produces *Maleficent* which offers different characterization and theme opposing the aforementioned gender construction. By focusing on its different female main character and theme, this paper aims to see what kind of oppression occurs and how Disney presents their gender ideology in the movie. The findings reveal that even though Maleficent is portrayed as a powerful woman, she is also oppressed. Her magical power becomes a trigger of her oppression since men consider Maleficent's power as a threat for their domination. This research gives an insight to see gender ideology in Disney movies which is still considered as an arguable issue among the society.

### Keywords

Disney Villain, Women, Oppression, Magic, Gender, Ideology.

### INTRODUCTION

Whether we realize it or not, gender construction influences almost every aspect in our live. It can even be found in fairy tale movies that are familiar with us since we were kids. Gender construction is the classification that is constructed by social and cultural values in the society and disadvantages women's position (Fakih, 2013, p. 8), so they tend to get oppressed (dominated or controlled) because of their lower position compared to men in the patriarchal society. Moreover, if women do not behave properly according to the patriarchal values, they will be alienated or even murdered (Lopez, 2010, p.7). These constructions can be seen in fairy tales movies where patriarchal society dominates and controls women, so female-protagonists or heroines in the movies are shaped to be obedient and passive.

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<sup>1</sup> The theme of this journal is a part of the author's undergraduate thesis titled "Analisis Tokoh Maleficent dalam Memperoleh Subjektivitasnya Pada Film Maleficent (2014)" which was defended on January 2015. The full version of this undergraduate thesis is available on [www.lib.ui.ac.id](http://www.lib.ui.ac.id).

Previously, a number of researchers conclude how this gender construction has affected the story and characterization in fairy tales movies. Sims (n.d) states that many previous researches about gender role in movies have not uncovered gender stereotypes that are represented in the movies, such as the stereotype of being excessively submissive (p. 1). This kind of characterization will disadvantage and discriminate the female characters. For example, Belle, the main female character in *Beauty and the Beast*<sup>2</sup>, lives under The Beast's control rather than living her life freely. Other early researches also criticize and analyze women and gender representation in fairy tales movies, such as how the typical protagonists with their passive and submissive attitudes get oppressed by the patriarchal society. In the end of those movies they are saved by a brave prince or a man. Rahmalah (2008) in her thesis analyzes the female protagonists from *Sleeping Beauty*<sup>3</sup> and *Enchanted*<sup>4</sup>. In her conclusion, she finds that the protagonists fail to fight the oppression from the society and are still trapped in the traditional gender constructions which make them depend on men (p.75).

However, there have been some changes in how fairy tale movies are formulated, especially in Disney movies. One of these newly formulated movies is *Maleficent* (2014). The female protagonist or antagonist<sup>5</sup> is described as a powerful woman, a fairy that is famous for her magical power and bravery. Her surroundings consider her as the guardian of the land. These characterizations are different from prior typical protagonist characters from Disney movies. In this research paper, I will analyze what kind of oppression the main character experiences, why she gets oppressed, how she fights back the oppression, and what kind of gender ideology is represented in the movie. Purposely, these questions could reevaluate previous researches about women and gender ideology in fairy tales movies, specifically Disney movies.

## ANALYSIS

*Maleficent* was first released in May 2014, and it was produced by Walt Disney Pictures. The director is Robert Stromberg and the screenwriter is Linda Woolverton. This movie tells about *Maleficent*, a character who, after a long time since her first appearance in *Sleeping Beauty* (1956), is notorious for her evilness. However, this movie suddenly

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<sup>2</sup> *Beauty and the Beast* is a Disney Movie that firstly aired in 1991. The story is about a girl who lives with a beast that in the end turns into a charming prince because of their true love. (Imdb.com).

<sup>3</sup> *Sleeping Beauty* is a Disney Movie that tells about a story of a beautiful princess who gets cursed by a wicked-witch and later be saved by a handsome prince. (Imdb.com)

<sup>4</sup> *Enchanted* is a Disney Movie about a princess who lost in real world and gets cursed tries to find her true love to break the curse. (Imdb.com)

<sup>5</sup> In the movie, *Maleficent* is considered as both the hero and the villain, which can be concluded from this quotation from the movie: "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 (01:28:00-01:28:11).

offers Maleficent's background that people never heard of. In this movie, Maleficent was fairy, not a witch. She was a cheerful yet powerful fairy in a magical land called Moors. In fact, she was the guardian of the Moors because of her bravery and magical power as she was the strongest among all creatures. However, the turning point of her life began when a human kingdom located next to the Moors wanted to occupy it. King Henry from the human kingdom considered Maleficent with her bravery and power as a threat for his authority, so he wanted to defeat her. King Henry ordered his successors to hunt for Maleficent and kill her. Maleficent was not killed, but her powerful wings were taken out from her. She was changed into an evil fairy because of her grudge. She cursed Aurora, the sleeping beauty and then her relationship with Aurora became a way out for her. This makes the ending is different from the previous stories. Maleficent's character development and relationship with her surroundings become the main focus of this analysis to see how a powerful woman gets oppressed by male domination and what gender ideology is being exposed in the movie.

Before going into the analysis, I would start to explain about the concept of gender construction and oppression. Gender construction is basically a concept where gender becomes the signifier of an individual (Fakih, 2010, p. 11). Gender is attributed and constructed within oneself as if it is a biological sign like sex (penis or vagina). This construction is interchangeable, so people should behave based on their gender. Bradley (2007) also stated, "Gender affects every aspect of our personal lives. Whether we identify as a man or a woman determines how we look, how we talk, what we eat and drink, what we wear, our leisure activities, what jobs we do, how our time is deployed, how other people related to us" (p. 6). This explains how gender construction would determine people's attitudes, appearances, and even professions. However, this construction results in discrimination between men and women. Women's positions are considered lower than men because they are constructed to be inferior and passive. Oppression itself means a structure of limitation and forces that tend to make someone or certain group immobilizes (as cited in Minas, 2000, p. 10). These construction and oppression become the key points in analyzing Maleficent's characteristics from Maleficent movies.

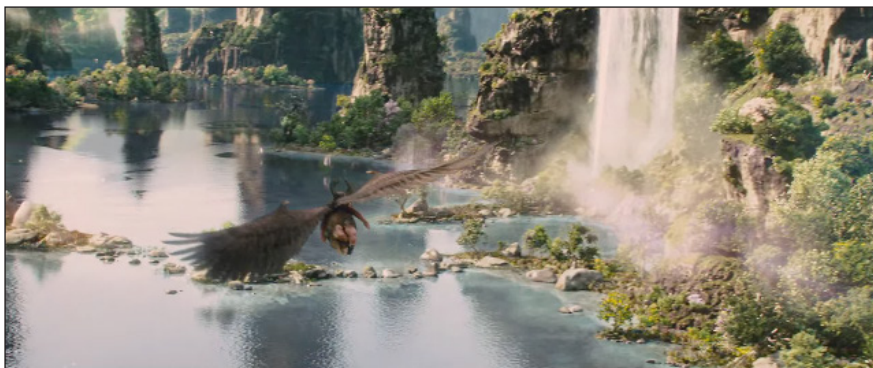
#### **OPPRESSION TOWARDS MALEFICENT**

First, it is important to find out the source of Maleficent's oppression. Maleficent's was described as a powerful and kind character. It is different from the typical heroines in previous Disney movies. Most of them were portrayed as a kind, passive, and obedient (Sims, n.d, p. 1). They basically show their dependency towards their surroundings, especially men. Maleficent, on the other hand, has a magical power and also a pair of strong wings as it can be seen in picture 1. She often flew around to watch over Moors since the creatures there considered her as the guardian of Moors (in picture 2). The

use of extreme long shot<sup>6</sup> in picture 2 depicts Maleficent as the guardian of the place. Moreover, when someone stole a stone from Moors, the creatures in Moors reported it to Maleficent, and then she directly confronted the thief (in picture 3). She was a brave woman, so she did not fear to face the thief. Her bravery can be seen in the dialog when Moors' creatures asked her whether she was afraid or not. She answered confidently, "I'm not afraid" (00:03:55), emphasizing Maleficent as a brave woman.



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Even though she was brave and powerful, she also showed her kindness towards others. After she confronted the thief, Stefan, who later became her lover, Maleficent did not give Stefan punishments. Surprisingly, she took Stefan to his home, the human land (in picture 4). She forgave Stefan and became his friend. It shows that even though

<sup>6</sup> In extreme long shot, "Actors are made very small compared to their surroundings, but this is where you establish the scene and its elements. It is also where you can express yourself visually in the patterns in scenery and shadows that you are afforded at this range" (Heiderich, n.d, p. 6).

she was strong and brave, she was also a kind woman. However, strong and brave are uncommon for women, based on gender construction in movies. Lopez (2010) on her thesis argues that in contemporary movies, women are still depicted as passive and dependent, whereas men are depicted powerful and active (p. 24). It shows that Maleficent's portrayal oppose the gender construction in society.

Nevertheless, a powerful and brave woman like Maleficent still could not escape from the oppression when she entered the patriarchal society. Kristeva in her work stated that an individual is always in crisis when she or he enters the symbolic<sup>7</sup> stage (Walker, 1998, p. 105). Symbolic according to Kristeva means a stage where an individual internalizes the domain of law and order; one of them is gender construction. Symbolic stage as the depiction of patriarchal society is represented by the human kingdom in the movie. Women in symbolic stage are likely to be discriminated by the patriarchal society because they are considered to have lower position than men in the society and different from men. Maleficent also experiences crisis in symbolic stage which is in form of oppression.

However, she was oppressed not because she was weak and submissive. In fact, men saw Maleficent as a threat for their domination. Lury stated that there is a tendency that men are afraid to be castrated by women (as cited in Handayani, 2010, p. 121). Women with power are also claimed as negative (Tonn, 2008, p.12). Power and women become two separated things. It shows how the patriarchal society will position women lower and weaker than men. The oppression towards women in Maleficent can be found when King Henry wanted to defeat Maleficent. He realized that Maleficent and her power were a threat for him. In picture 5, the low-angle<sup>8</sup> shots show Maleficent's power and domination, whereas in picture 6, the king is captured in a normal angle. This angle reflects how Maleficent is the dominant and powerful one while King Henry is lower than her. Furthermore, in this dialog, "You are no king to me" (00:10:56-00:10:59), Maleficent stated that she would not obey the rule of the king.

King Henry wanted to defeat Maleficent, so he ordered his successor to kill Maleficent. It can be seen in this dialog, "Kill the winged creature. Avenge me, and upon my death, you will take the crown" (00:15:02-00:15:05). The king even promised to give his legacy to the one who succeed. Finally, Maleficent got her wings cut by Stefan, who was the King's successor and also her own lover. It represents how Stefan takes by force Maleficent's power. Maleficent lost one of her sources of power. In the picture 4 and 5, Maleficent expressed her depression and agony because she lost her wings. Her wings

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva considers there are two stages in an individual development. There are semiotic and symbolic. Semiotic relates with heterogeneity and basic impulse (Moi, 1986, p. 12) and symbolic as a stage where an individual starts to differentiate and internalize law and order (Walker, 1998, p. 105).

<sup>8</sup> "This shows the subject from below, giving them the impression of being more powerful or dominant" (Mediacollege.com).

were the source of her power and it was also one of her identities. She also felt lost and weak and even she could not identify herself. The tight framing<sup>9</sup> in these pictures (6 and 7) represent oppression and limitation of her world. The action of cutting Maleficent's wings as an attempt to take control of her reflects how gender construction which disadvantages women, results in gender-related violence; in this case harassments towards women (Fakih, 2010, p. 20).



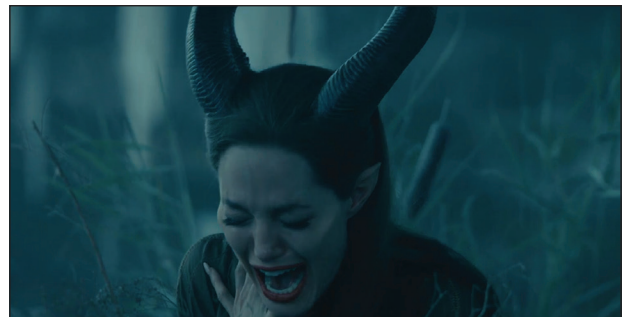
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Hunting and harassment towards women also happened in another context. In 1692, there was a women hunting in New England (United States) which is notoriously called witch trial in Salem. It began with a group of young girls that were accused and executed because of strange attitudes, such as predicting future or hypnotizing. "When the afflicted girls were examined by a local doctor, no physical attitude and beliefs of period, the logical conclusion was that there must have been some interference on the part of Satan" (Kocic, 2010, p.2). Women are considered close with Satan. Reis in Kocuc (2010) also claims that people in New England which are affected by Puritan Theology think that women's soul are vulnerable, so women are easier to get interrupted by Satan (p.2). It results many dead in Salem in that particular era. However, this assassination also shows how the male domination could not accept the existence of powerful women. Karlson on her work states that "those women were particularly the ones who

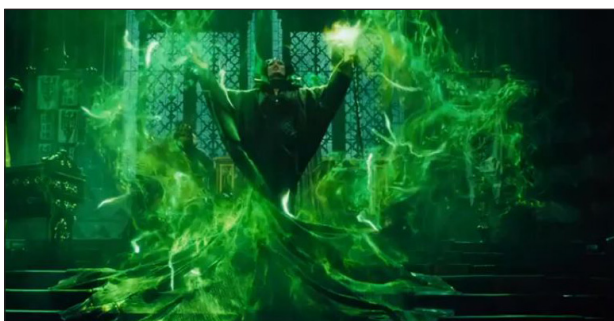
<sup>9</sup> "This shows the subject from below, giving them the impression of being more powerful or dominant" (Mediacollege.com).

did not fit into the typical Puritan framework of a good, obedient wife, the one who is supposed to help reinforce the male-dominated hierarchical structure of the society” (as cited in Kocuc, 2010, p.4). Men are afraid of losing their higher position, so the killing act as oppression “tools” were used by them in that particular time to maintain their domination.

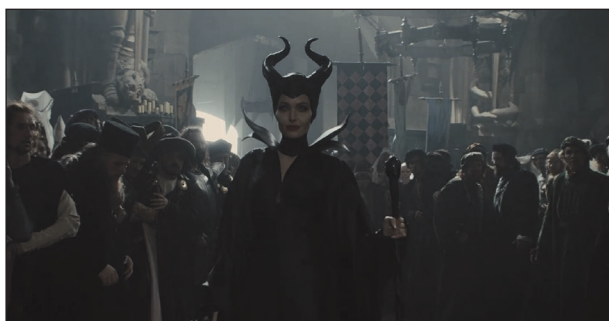
Even though Maleficent shows different attitudes and characteristics, she was not free from the men’s oppression. While other protagonists from previous Disney movies got oppressed because they were basically weak and passive so men could control them easily, Maleficent got oppressed because of her bravery and magical power. These two aspects became threats for men, as they were afraid of losing their authorities. Maleficent’s oppression is not in a form of curse or assassination, but power dispossessed. It shows how women, even the strong ones, will always get oppressed.

### MALEFICENT FIGHTS BACK THE OPPRESSION

After she got her wings cut, her magical power seemed to grow stronger. She used it more often. It also has shape and color as it can be seen in picture 8. Her expressions, attributes, and attitudes are also different. She began to look like a villain with more masculine appearance in black color (in picture 9). Maleficent also struggled with her rage and grudge. She became more silent and unfriendly towards the Moors’ creatures. Tight framing in picture 10 shows that Maleficent shut her surroundings out of her life as she alienated herself. Maleficent even proclaimed herself as the leader, the queen of Moors and covered the Moors with thorns (see picture 10 and 11). By covering the Moors with thorns, it shows that Maleficent tried to protect herself from people outside and she did not want anyone to get into the Moors.



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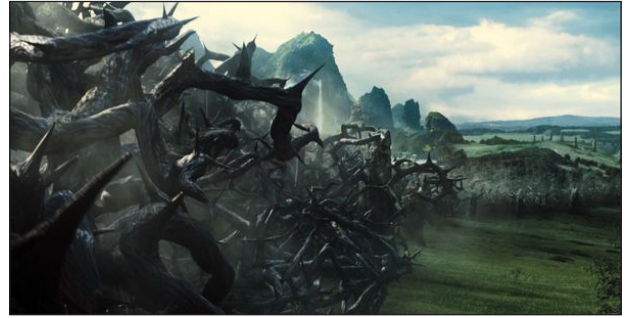


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However, her decision to curse Aurora did not solve her problem and heal her trauma. Rather than doing nothing because of the trauma she got, she took revenge against Stefan by cursing his daughter, Aurora. Nonetheless, her relationship with Aurora becomes a way out and even becomes the solution of her trauma. Aurora reminded her of herself when she was young with cheerful yet active personality. They became close and Aurora even claimed Maleficent as her Fairy Godmother in this dialog,

Aurora : "I know who you are,"

Maleficent : "Do you?"

Aurora : "You are my Fairy Godmother"

Maleficent : "What?"

Aurora : "Fairy Godmother, you have been watching over me my whole life. I have always known you were closed by"

Aurora's attitudes toward her trigger Maleficent to feel the love and affection that she lost back then. Aurora becomes the source of her happiness and love. Maleficent finally realized that her grudge has brought her into a "dark" side. She realized that she made wrong act by cursing Aurora. Maleficent also became the source of love and happiness for Aurora. Maleficent was the one who finally made Aurora awaken from the deep sleep through the love of a mother. It shows that the way out for Maleficent as the protagonist comes from another woman. It opposes the prior claim about female characters in fairy tales and movies that they compete each other rather than be united (Lopez, 2010, p. 22). In addition, it also opposes gender construction where Maleficent could be a "mother" without being the biological mother of Aurora. Kristeva also claimed that a mother's function does not need to be fulfilled by a biological mother; it could be other women or even men (Handayani, p. 16). Maleficent's relationship with Aurora represents how Maleficent could fulfill the function of a mother without being the biological mother.

Maleficent's efforts to fight back the oppression she got are different from other protagonists in previous fairy tales movies. Most of them will wait patiently for their prince to come and save them. Rahmallah (2008) states that even in more modern movies, such as *Enchanted* (2007), the protagonist is still portrayed as a dependent

character who needs help from men to solve her problems. Maleficent tried to overcome her oppression by putting a curse on the relative of the oppressors (Stefan). She did not just mourn and did nothing. In the end, she also did not need men to overcome her trauma and oppression; instead she got “help” from another woman. Maleficent finally got herself free from her trauma by embracing and accepting Aurora.

## GENDER IDEOLOGY IN MALEFICENT

Maleficent’s characteristics distinguish her from other protagonists in Disney fairy tale movies. Her characterization shows the shifting of gender ideology in these movies. It can be seen from her brave, powerful, and active characteristics which are different from Disney’s typical protagonists in Disney movies which are likely depicted as weak, passive, and dependent characters. Besides the main character itself, some other characters in the movies also show the shifting of gender ideology in Disney movies, such as the Moors creatures. They do not internalize gender construction in their lives. Moors creatures show no regeneration or family organization (exclusive relationship). They tend to do parenting in a communal way rather than individually. This condition is supported by Piercy who claims that parenting is not a duty for certain person. A child is a treasure for the community (as cited in Tong, 2009, p. 77). Moors creatures’ colors also do not emphasize certain stereotype. For example, in picture 12 and 13, blue does not necessarily represent men and masculinity and pink does not represent women and femininity.

There are no law and order in Moors society, so it emphasizes that Moors is free from any social construction. *“For in other kingdom, the Moors lived every manner of strange and beautiful creature. They needed neither king nor queen”* (00:01:06-00:01:07). It is a different situation with the society that will choose men to be the leader because women are considered irrational and emotional, so they cannot become a leader (Fakih, 2013, p. 15). In Moors, they do not even need a leader. They can live liberally and peacefully. This movie somehow celebrates the “genderless” Moors. It is unusual for Disney to make characterization and situation that contest gender construction.

However, I also find some ambivalences in analyzing the shifting of gender ideology in Maleficent. Even though the characterization of Maleficent is different from other Disney fairy tale movies; the dichotomy between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ still appears. It can be seen when Maleficent is firstly described as a good person then changed into a bad person. The classification of “good” and “bad” represents the gender construction in patriarchal society. Dichotomy of what is “good” for women or what is “bad” for women is a construction of how society sees and judges women generally. Another thing I find is even though Moors is celebrated; there is also a binary opposition. According to Anderson, women are related to body, nature, emotion, subjective, and soft-hearted while men are related with mind, culture, reason, objective,

and tough-minded (as cited in Dewayanti, 2013, p. 16). This binary opposition still can be found as Moors is still related with nature and mystery while the human kingdom is related with culture and reality. These oppositions represent women and men.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Maleficent* (2014) offers different gender ideology through the movie. It can be seen in Maleficent's characterization and the creatures in Moors. Maleficent is not depicted as a passive, dependent, submissive, and weak woman; instead she represents a different characterization compared to previous Disney heroines. She is a depiction of a strong and courageous woman; however, she is still oppressed by society, ironically because of her magical power that becomes a threat for men. One form of her oppression is power dispossessed, which shows how women, even the powerful one, are likely get oppressed and dominated by men. Besides the main female character, creatures in Moors also show the transformation of gender ideology. Creatures in Moors are free from any social construction, especially gender construction. They live freely and peacefully. Those shifts in the movie show there are some changes in how Disney portrays gender ideology.

Even though there are some changes in the characterization and gender ideology that Disney offers to the audience, there are still ambivalences in the movie. Despite Maleficent's portrayal as a brave and powerful woman, her role is still being positioned by the society. There is still a dichotomy of "good" and "bad" women which is constructed among society. In addition, there is also a dichotomy between women and men, where women are related to nature and men are related to culture and society. Maleficent and Moors represent nature and motherhood, whereas the human kingdom represents culture and civilized community. I assume that this movie is only the beginning of Disney transformations. It represents Disney negotiation on characterizing villains and women. On the other hand, it reflects how the society sees the issues of villains, women, and gender construction. Those are still debatable issues in the society who are the target market or audience of Disney movies. Thus, Disney does not formulate their movies drastically because to gain profit from the target market or audience.

This paper could be a new entry point to see how Disney villains, women, and gender ideology are portrayed in recent Disney movies. It shows the transformation of Disney characterization and theme compared to prior fairy tale movies. Further researchers can look further on the issues of villain and women. They could compare a variety of villain characters to see how the issues are represented. Moreover, they could also try to compare one movie with another one with the same theme and target market.

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