

# **A STUDY ON FEMINISNEY: WHEN DISNEY MEETS FEMINISM**

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recognition of the requirements for the award of the Degree of

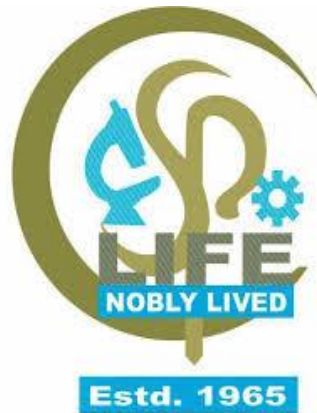
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## **Declaration**

I do hereby declare that the project A study on **“Feminisney: When Disney Meets Feminism”** is the record of genuine research work done by me under the guidance of Ms. Lima Sunny, Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Paul’s College, Kalamassery.

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# **Certificate**

This is to certify that the project work **A study on Feminisney: When Disney Meets Feminism** is a record of the original work carried out by Aleena Sebastian under the supervision and guidance of Ms. Lima Sunny, Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Paul's College, Kalamassery.

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## INTRODUCTION

“To terrify children with the image of hell, to consider women an inferior creation—is that good for the world?”

— Christopher Hitchens

The word ‘feminism’ can be a scary and confusing word to some. Many people believe that feminism means hating men or wanting women to rule over everything— this could not be further from the truth chomas! Feminism simply means believing that men and women are equal, neither is better than the other and neither should be treated with more respect than the other – everyone should be equal on all levels, simple as that. While feminism is about achieving equal rights for both men and women, we still need to remember that women face more inequalities than men. For many years women have been seen as being less than or weaker than men.

You may have even seen for yourself situations where men or boys are chosen as leaders and are given better treatment at school, work and even at home. Also think about the fact that women and girls are more in danger when they go out than men are, because women and girls are more vulnerable to harassment, rape and abuse. Women and girls are the most vulnerable when it comes to rape. It’s gotten to a point where it’s even expected that a woman walking alone at night might get raped and in many parts of the world rape is not even seen as a serious crime. When a woman has been raped, how many times have we heard the blame being put on the victim and not the perpetrator? Women are asked what they wearing or if they were drinking at the time of the rape. It’s never the rape victim’s fault chomas!

Feminism is about protecting everyone’s right to not have their bodies violated. Feminism is about teaching others not to rape and not blaming people for being raped. Feminism is about ending rape culture and striving for a world where no one has to fear being sexually assaulted. One arena in which women have long been oppressed is with regard to sexuality, which includes behavior, interactions with men, posture, and exposure of the body. In traditional societies, men are expected to be the commanders, standing tall and allowing their physical presence to represent their role in society, while women are expected to be quieter and more subservient. Under such societal conventions, women are not supposed to take up much space at the table, and most certainly, they should not be seen as a distraction to the men around them. Feminism seeks to embrace female sexuality and celebrate it, as opposed to so many societal conventions

that condemn women who are sexually aware and empowered. The practice of elevating sexually active men while denigrating sexually women creates a double standard between the genders. Women are shunned for having multiple sexual partners, whereas men are celebrated for the same behaviors. Women have long been subjected to sexual objectification by men.

Many cultures still cling to the notion that women must dress so as to not arouse men, and in many societies, women are required to fully cover their bodies. On the other hand, in some so-called enlightened societies, female sexuality is routinely exploited in the mass media. Scantily clad women in advertising and full nudity in movies and television are commonplace—and yet, many women are shamed for breastfeeding in public. These conflicting views on female sexuality create a confusing landscape of expectations that women and men must navigate on a daily basis. There are many differences within the constellation of feminist ideals, groups, and movements related to workplace unfairness, discrimination, and oppression that result from the real disadvantages women experience. Feminism assumes that sexism, which disadvantages and/or oppresses those identified as women, is not desirable and should be eliminated, however, it continues to be an issue in the workplace.

Among the socio-political movements that managed to change the world we live in, feminism can be fairly called one of the most revolutionary and influential. Before its rise, few believed women were capable of achieving something outstanding in fields other than housekeeping and motherhood. However, feminists managed to break this stereotype, resulting in the world where both genders are recognized to have equal rights and privileges; what we take for granted nowadays is the long and solid effort of women all over the world to expand their possibilities to be active within business and government.

Modern feminism can be traced back to the 19th century, when the suffragists—women who fought for the equality of men’s and women’s rights—achieved their first victory; in 1869, in Wyoming, women were given a right to vote during elections—or, women rather struggled and won to gain this right. In the 1890s, women won the right to vote in several other states. After decades of intense struggle, the Nineteenth Amendment to the American Constitution was adopted; this Amendment is also known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment. It became a law in August, 1920; it states, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” So, one of the most important accomplishments

of the feminist movement is that women can now freely participate in the political life of American society and to an extent, global society (The Development of Women's Rights).

Many women are physically weaker than men; men also tend to be more aggressive. Combined with certain psychological and environmental factors, this fact has become one of the causes of domestic violence. According to the statistics, the vast majority of people know about the suffering of women due to domestic violence. Although men can also suffer from domestic abuse, there is a huge disproportion between the number of males and females subjected to violence at home. The feminist movement has not only drawn public attention to this issue and founded numerous organizations aimed at protecting women from their violent spouses, but also helped create legislative and legal mechanisms that would protect victims of domestic abuse. Ensuring that every woman has the ability to make the best decisions for herself and her family regarding reproduction is a big issue in the feminist community. This does not mean every feminist wants free abortion parties for all women, but instead being able to consider all available options without restrictions from the government or anyone else. The Center for Reproductive Rights, for example, is one group that is working to advance reproductive rights for women nationally and internationally. Yet another positive accomplishment made by the feminist movement is that it has helped millions of women around the world regain self-confidence.

Nowadays, a woman is not just a housewife or mother; women are recognized to have equal capabilities with men, and are able to achieve as much as men in professional and self-realization fields. So in order for equality between men and women to be achieved, more women need to be empowered and protected. Women and girls need to get to a place where they are as free as men and are treated fairly.

## **FEMINISM AND DISNEY MOVIES**

Media plays a big role of influencing the people's daily lives this is because it influences how people view the world in general. Mass media is an agent of socialization and from this role; it has been attacked by an array of criticism from different portions of the society. There is a wide range of media among them television shows, movies, the radio, newspapers, advertisements and many more. In these many forms of media, there are images of men and women. These images are depicted in different ways and with different characteristics and having different meanings. Women are portrayed as evil, dependent on other characters, over-emotional, and confined to



low-status jobs when compared to enterprising and ambitious male characters. Male characters dominated the big screen throughout the past year. Women are underrepresented in film. Racial minorities are underrepresented in films. Considering the depictions of women in the context of social gender movements of the last two decades will provide a deeper understanding of the attitudes toward female characters, as well as factors that shape the themes and representations that appear in the most popular films

Take, for instance, fairytales. The popular understanding is that fairytales evolved exclusively from oral folk tellers – from the uneducated “Mother Goose” nurse, passing into the imaginations of children by centuries of fireside retellings. But this story is a myth. Disney’s animated theatrical feature films may be the most important battleground for gender/sexual equal representation in media. When considering the timeline of Disney movies it is easy to see the changing views on the roles of women in society reflected through the animated characters. For example, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), each princess waits for their prince to come and save them. In that time period it was socially acceptable for women to work only in the household and bare children, as well as have soft, submissive personalities.

Women’s lives during this period were deeply constrained. They were married as young as 15 in arranged unions to protect family property, often to men many years older than themselves. They could not divorce, work, nor control their inheritances. And where husbands were allowed mistresses, women could be sent to a convent for two years as punishment for so much as the whiff of rumors at having taken a lover. The *conteuses* created the archetypes of our classic fairytale heroine sleeping beauty. But this tale was complex and its moral ambiguous. The story is long, like novellas, and incorporated character development, dialogue and complicated plots. Its intended audiences were children but also educated adults.

In many classic stories, youth often equates to beauty; as old age does to a scornful, maybe even evil person. A well known example of this being the differences between Princess aurora (also known as Briar-Rose) and Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*. Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* is more faithful to the original tale it was based on, but Maleficent is a far better and interesting spin of the story. Like many fairy tales involving a princess, *Sleeping Beauty* presents the antagonist quickly. In the very first scene, Maleficent appears right away in this movie to curse princess aurora just because she wasn’t invited to the tiny baby’s christening. The king and queen make it

very clear to the audience right away that Maleficent is not a person to be messed with; calling her a witch before she curses Aurora.

By her appearance alone, I could only expect Maleficent to be the movie's villain. Maleficent carries around a scepter with her trusted crow, sitting at the top; and has a black robe that even trails behind her, when she spreads out her arms her robe makes her look like a bat. She also has big, curving horns that she even keeps in her design after turning into a giant black dragon later on. She is also very pale and has a long, pointed chin. When it comes to Sleeping Beauty, that would kiss once she fell prey to her curse, though the only one able to do so is Maleficent. Afterwards they help each other as they just wanted to go back to the Moor together.

Overall, Maleficent had so much of what I saw as lacking in Sleeping Beauty. It included an engaging plot, displaying there is both good and evil in others. Messages that are empowering and modern, for example, that one should be good to one another and not focus on hatred. Maleficent displayed fleshed out and changing characters with what I felt were realistic reactions for that world. A bit more time with Prince Philip and Aurora in Sleeping Beauty could do wonders for the movie. It is great that Sleeping Beauty was pretty faithful to original fairytale, but without major changes to the characters or the reasons for their actions; it isn't cut out to be made into a movie like Maleficent.

Parents tend to view Disney Princess media as a safe choice for their children compared to more sexualized media characters and programs. Some parents proceed with caution when it comes to Disney media as Disney has fostered criticism for glamorizing its characters, creating female protagonists who need to be saved by men, and adding sexual subliminal messaging. Disney female characters were six times more likely to partake in housework than their male counterparts. Also, the average princess is young and beautiful with large eyes, a small nose and chin, bigger breasts, a thin body type, and good skin. In research done on the effects of Disney characters, results have shown that as early as preschool, children begin to demonstrate a preference for thin body figures. Girls around 5 and older display worries about getting fat and begin to experience issues with body esteem.

Educational researchers studied children in kindergarten to see how Disney media affected children's play time. Disney media toys encourage children to role play through repeating familiar scripts and characters that they have seen in Disney programs. This sets literary limits and social boundaries for the children as they repeat similar dialogue, plot points, and character

roles. This also means that Disney Princess toys influence children's behavior by conveying subtle narratives about both identity and status as they often reflect societal beliefs about both gender and childhood.

# CHAPTER 1

## FEMINISM

**First, let's understand what feminism is meant to be.**

If you look up the definition of “Feminism” in the dictionary, you’ll see these statements:

Feminism is:

1. The advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes
2. The theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes
3. The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities
4. The doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men

Feminism at its core is about equality of men and women, not “sameness.” So many people offer up the argument that women are not the “same” as men so there can’t be equality. In other words, because their bodies are different (many say “weaker” and smaller), and because men and women have different physical capabilities, these physical differences mean equality is not possible. It’s critical to understand that “same” does not mean “equal.” The issue here is about equal rights and equal access to opportunities. Men and women don’t have to be the “same” in physicality to have the right to equality. I’d love to see that argument (that women and men aren’t the “same” so they can’t be equal) disappear forever. From my view, it’s a misguided one.

Feminism is a range of social movements, political movements, and ideologies that aim to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. Feminism incorporates the position that societies prioritize the male point of view, and that women are treated unfairly within those societies. Efforts to change that include fighting gender stereotypes and seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men. Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It encompasses work in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art

history, psychoanalysis and philosophy. Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. While providing a critique of these social and political relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. Themes explored in feminist theory include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, and patriarchy. In the field of literary criticism, Elaine Showalter describes the development of feminist theory as having three phases. The first she calls "feminist critique", in which the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena. The second Showalter calls "gynocriticism", in which the "woman is producer of textual meaning". The last phase she calls "gender theory", in which the "ideological inscription and the literary effects of the sex/gender system are explored".

The feminist movement (also known as the women's movement, or simply feminism) refers to a series of political campaigns for reforms on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, women's suffrage, sexual harassment, and sexual violence, all of which fall under the label of feminism and the feminist movement. The movement's priorities vary among nations and communities, and range from opposition to female genital mutilation in one country, to opposition to the glass ceiling in another. Feminist movements have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn fair wages, equal pay and eliminate the gender pay gap, to own property, to receive education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to have maternity leave.

Feminists have also worked to ensure access to legal abortions and social integration and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Changes in dress and acceptable physical activity have often been part of feminist movements. Numerous feminist movements and ideologies have developed over the years and represent different viewpoints and aims. Some forms of feminism have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle class, and college-educated perspectives.

This criticism led to the creation of ethnically specific or multicultural forms of feminism, including black feminism and intersectional feminism. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues concerning gender.

Feminism in parts of the Western world has gone through three waves. First-wave feminism was oriented around the station of middle- or upper-class white women and involved suffrage and political equality. Second-wave feminism attempted to further combat social and cultural inequalities. Although the first wave of feminism involved mainly middle class white women, the second wave brought in women of color and women from other developing nations that were seeking solidarity.<sup>[1]</sup> Third-wave feminism is continuing to address the financial, social and cultural inequalities and includes renewed campaigning for greater influence of women in politics and media. In reaction to political activism, feminists have also had to maintain focus on women's reproductive rights, such as the right to abortion. Fourth-wave feminism examines the interlocking systems of power that contribute to the stratification of traditionally marginalized groups.

## CHAPTER 2

### SLEEPING BEAUTY

*Sleeping Beauty* is possibly one of the most artistically impressive and utterly gorgeous animated films ever made, because it was so incredibly aesthetically in harmony with itself and with its subject matter. The wonderfully detailed and stylized animation, drawing its inspiration from medieval art, worked perfectly with the fairytale setting, and Far from being lazy or derivative, these choices reinforced the archetypal nature of the fairytale—allowing the film to make homage to the story’s earlier iterations while still being something entirely unique on its own.

*Sleeping Beauty* opens with a shot of turning pages in a storybook, indicating the historical but fantastical nature of the subsequent tale. In the story proper, a narrator introduces King Stefan and his unnamed wife, who finally have a child after years of longing for one. Well-wishers from all over Stefan’s peaceful kingdom arrive to deliver gifts and celebrate the birth. Stefan, a tall, thin, black-bearded king, invites King Hubert, a short, round, gray-bearded king from the adjacent kingdom, to the celebration. The two kings have planned a happy merger of their lands. As part of the festivities, Hubert’s young son, Prince Phillip, is betrothed to the infant princess, Aurora. Three pleasant, grandmotherly fairies from the forest arrive to bestow gifts on the baby. Flora delivers the gift of beauty, and Fauna gives Aurora the gift of song. But before feisty little Merry weather can present her gift, the evil Maleficent appears in a rush of portentous wind.

In bitter response for not being invited to the celebration, the tall, horned, black-clad witch curses Aurora. She declares that the princess will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel on her sixteenth birthday and die. She then disappears in a swirl of foul purple clouds. Merry weather can’t revoke the curse, but she changes the effect of the prick to a deep sleep instead of death, out of which the princess can be awakened by the kiss of true love. A distraught King Stefan orders a bonfire of all the spinning wheels in the kingdom, attempting to circumvent Maleficent’s powerful curse. Saddened, he also allows the three fairies to take Aurora away from the kingdom in order to protect her. To hide her, they will raise her without their magic, as mortal peasants. They rename her Briar Rose. Sixteen years pass mournfully in the kingdom. The day of Rose’s momentous sixteenth birthday arrives. Maleficent has not yet found Aurora because, as she realizes only today, her henchmen have been searching only cradles for sixteen

years. After zapping them with bolts of lightning, she commands her raven to scour the kingdom one last time looking for a sixteen-year-old. At the modest forest cottage of the three fairies, Rose's "aunts" are trying to prepare a birthday celebration. They've sent Briar Rose out to the forest to collect berries. As Rose wanders barefoot through the springtime wood, she radiates in the glory of Flora's and Fauna's gifts of beauty and song. She hums operatically and her congenial friends, the happy animals of the forest, come out to play. Her siren like voice also mesmerizes a distant horse rider, who convinces his tired white steed, Samson, to search for its source.

Rose stops singing to tell the animals about a vivid dream she had in which she fell in love with a prince. The passing rider has meanwhile fallen in a stream because of his horse's urgency, and a chipmunk notices that his cape, hat, and boots hang nearby to dry. The animals swipe the clothes and humorously simulate the dream-prince: an owl flutters in the cape, two hopping rabbits match steps in the boots, and the chipmunk sits on the owl's head wearing the hat. Playing along good-naturedly, Rose dances with her forest friends, sweetly singing the *Sleeping Beauty* classic "Once Upon a Dream." Midway through the dance, the mysterious rider finds his clothes and cuts in seamlessly, dancing and singing with a shocked Rose. Confused and surely feeling the sparks of love at first sight, Rose, having been told not to speak to strangers, tries to flee. The nameless rider asks for her name. Flustered, she doesn't reveal it, yet manages to yelp out an invitation to come to her cottage that night. Playing along good-naturedly, Rose dances with her forest friends, sweetly singing the *Sleeping Beauty* classic "Once Upon a Dream."

Midway through the dance, the mysterious rider finds his clothes and cuts in seamlessly, dancing and singing with a shocked Rose. Confused and surely feeling the sparks of love at first sight, Rose, having been told not to speak to strangers, tries to flee. The nameless rider asks for her name. Flustered, she doesn't reveal it, yet manages to yelp out an invitation to come to her cottage that night. Back at the cottage, the bumbling and nitpicky fairies can't bake a legitimate cake or sew a proper dress, which Rose will need to assume her rightful title as Princess Aurora. So, at Merry weather's urging, the fairies agree to make one exception to their no-magic rule and use their magic wands. A familiar Disney scene ensues, where dancing mops joyously sweep the cottage and anthropomorphic cake ingredients read their own recipe and waltz into the mixing bowl. Flora and Merry weather argue over the color of Rose's dress. Each wants it to be the color of her own dress: Merry weather's is blue and Flora's is pink. Riled, they start zapping with their wands everything in the cottage, turning it blue or pink. As a result, colorful magic



dust spurts up the chimney. Maleficent's raven spots the dust and flies down to surreptitiously witness the scene of Rose's return. He watches Rose return a new woman, gaily dancing and singing, clearly in love. The fairies are forced to tell her the truth of her life, that she's a princess who is already betrothed to Prince Phillip. The news devastates Rose, who flees in tears to her room. King Stefan and King Hubert together await sunset, the time of Aurora's prophesied return. Standing by a sumptuous feast, the anxious men argue briefly, then drink to friendship.

Prince Phillip returns to the castle, devilishly tricking Hubert into agreeing to his marriage to the peasant girl instead of Aurora. Phillip rides off before Hubert realizes what has happened, heading back to Rose's cottage. But Rose, teary-eyed, has been secretly brought to Stefan's castle. Placing a gold crown upon her head, the fairies leave Aurora alone for a few moments to contemplate her future. Immediately, a glowing green ball puts Aurora in a trance and leads her through dark passages within the castle, up a staircase and into a tower, where it turns into the augured spinning wheel. Realizing their error too late, the panicked fairies follow and are able to make Aurora hesitate before touching the wheel, but Maleficent's powers are too strong. The princess touches the spindle and collapses. The sun begins to set, and the celebration nears. But Hubert has yet to tell Stefan about Phillip's intentions, and Aurora lies comatose in an upper chamber. Unsure of how to proceed, the fairies decide to put everyone in the kingdom to sleep as well. As Flora sprinkles fairy dust over those around the throne, Hubert reveals that Phillip met his peasant girl "once upon a dream.

" What luck—Phillip and Aurora are already in love but they just don't know it. Phillip can break Maleficent's curse with a kiss, so the fairies regroup and fly back to the cottage. However, Maleficent and her henchmen have already captured Phillip. Expecting a peasant boy, Maleficent is overjoyed at her luck and steals the prince away. Finding only Phillip's hat at their cottage, the fairies sneak into Maleficent's castle. Maleficent taunts Phillip, revealing the identity of his true love but refusing to release him to her for one hundred years. The fairies sneak in when Maleficent finally goes to bed, zap open the chains that bind Phillip, and arm him with a Shield of Virtue and Sword of Truth. An army of one, with three helpers, Phillip must navigate a brutal path to return to his true love. First, Maleficent's castle crumbles and goes up in flames around him. Then she makes a forest of thorns grow in front of Stefan's castle. Finally, she turns herself into a dragon to stop him. But Phillip brandishes the Sword of Truth and slays her with one thrust. Phillip awakes Aurora with a kiss, and the castle band launches into "Once Upon a

Dream.” As the couple dance into the clouds, Flora and Merryweather resume arguing over Aurora’s dress, which changes from pink to blue over and over again, until the storybook closes.

*Sleeping Beauty* is an inexplicably feminist film. *Sleeping Beauty* herself is barely more than a cipher. Princess Aurora has virtually no character at all in the film other than to be an ideal—and might add an ideal only achieved with the magical fairytale equivalent of surgical enhancement. Aurora in the film is not a person, per se; she is the prize that the other characters fight over. She is an object, really, and that is not feminist at all. The protagonist is not Aurora, for all the reasons just stated. She never grows as a character during the course of the film; she has no agency at all, in fact. She doesn’t act; she is acted upon. So she is definitely not the hero of the story.

The protagonists, the heroes, the main characters of *Sleeping Beauty* are not a dashing prince or a beautiful princess, but three elderly, frumpy, ditzy women, with ridiculous tiny wings and wands that scatter sparkles everywhere, who can’t bake a cake or sew a dress worth a damn (without cheating, anyway), but when it comes down to brass tacks, are more than capable to the task of saving Aurora, Philip, and the entire damn kingdom from a fearsome foe. It is Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather who make *all* the critical decisions in the film, the ones which drive the action. They are the ones who act with agency, to counteract their antagonist/enemy, Maleficent—who, it must be noted, is *also* female, and also the only other character in the film whose decisions and actions drive the plot. The Good Fairies are the ones who concoct the plan to hide Aurora and attempt to avert the curse placed upon her, and they are the ones who, when their plan goes awry, act to preserve the kingdom, rescue Prince Philip from Maleficent’s clutches, guide him to the castle, and give him the necessary magical augmentation to kill Maleficent at the end. Let’s be real: Philip would have been toast ten times over on that rescue mission, had he not had the three fairies basically babysitting him every step of the way. His victory over Maleficent is not *his* victory at all, it is Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather’s.

The central conflict in *Sleeping Beauty* is not the romance between Aurora and Philip, therefore, or even the conflict between Maleficent and Aurora’s parents. Instead, the conflict is the Good Fairies’ battle with Maleficent, in which Aurora, Philip, and all the other characters are merely pawns. Not to mention, the Good Fairies are just about the only characters in the film who grow as people in the course of the story, who are different at the end of the story than they are at the beginning, and who the audience identifies with and roots for as *people*, rather than the stereotypical idealized nonentities Aurora and Philip are, who we are trained to root for by

default. Which means, in sum, that all the truly central, important and *relatable* characters in the entire film are female. This proves *Sleeping Beauty* is accidentally the most feminist Disney film. Because making something “feminist” doesn’t necessarily mean making a film where there is a “strong” female character, but making a story where the female characters *matter*—who are the ones we identify with and who drive the story, instead of being driven by it. And, ideally, where there are *multiple* female characters who matter, not just one token girl. Aurora’s cipher-ness in *Sleeping Beauty* would be infuriating if she were the only female character in it, but the presence of the Fairies and Maleficent allow her to be what she is without it being a subconscious statement on what *all* women are. Because there *are* weak, damsel-like women out there; it’s just that far too often they are the only women we ever get to see, and that is where the problem lies. The problem is that the fundamental lack of multiple female characters in movies means that the one or two female characters who *do* appear have to stand in for all women, which just isn’t fair.

## CHAPTER 3

# MALEFICENT

*Maleficent* is a 2014 American dark fantasy film directed by Robert Stromberg from a screenplay by Linda Woolverton, and starring Angelina Jolie as the title character with Sharlto Copley, Elle Fanning, Sam Riley, Imelda Staunton, Juno Temple, and Lesley Manville in supporting roles. The movie is loosely inspired by Charles Perrault's original fairy tale and Walt Disney's 1959 animated film *Sleeping Beauty*, the film portrays the story from the perspective of the eponymous antagonist, depicting her conflicted relationship with the princess and king of a corrupt kingdom.

Long ago, two rival kingdoms sat side by side: The human kingdom, ruled by a power-hungry king, and the Moors, a peaceful place inhabited by many gentle supernatural creatures. One resident of the Moors is Maleficent (Isobelle Molloy), a young fairy girl with enormous wings, who acts as a guardian for the other magical beings. Young Maleficent is alerted by three small fairies, Knotgrass (Imelda Staunton), Flittle (Lesley Manville), and Thistlewit (Juno Temple), that a thief has been apprehended by the forest guards at the borderline of the Moors. The thief, a human boy called Stefan, returns the jewel he had taken and explains that he is an orphan with no real home. Maleficent forgives him and the two strikes up a friendship that lasts for several years. On Maleficent's sixteenth birthday, Stefan gives her "true love's kiss," but then abandons her to pursue his thirst for power in the King's inner circle.

When Maleficent is grown (now Angelina Jolie), she is the primary guardian of the Moors. King Henry (Kenneth Cranham) leads his army to conquer the Moors for the human world, but Maleficent victoriously counter-attacks with her band of magical creatures. King Henry is mortally wounded in the battle, and makes known his hatred for the winged woman who defends the Moors. Having only a daughter for an heir, King Henry promises her hand and the throne to whichever of his men brings proof of Maleficent's death. Stefan (now Sharlto Copley), despite his relationship with Maleficent, takes on the task in hopes of becoming the new king. Stefan returns to the Moors at night and reconnects with Maleficent, who is happy and not at all suspicious to see her friend again. After giving her a drink to put her into a sound sleep, Stefan

prepares to stab her to death. Unable to bring himself to kill the woman he once loved, he crudely removes her wings as she slumbers and then departs. When Maleficent awakens, weak with the pain from her severed wings and realizing she had been betrayed, she swears revenge against Stefan. On his deathbed, King Henry accepts the wings as proof of Maleficent's demise and awards the crown and his daughter's hand to Stefan. Having lost her ability to fly, Maleficent frees a captured raven in a nearby field and gives him the power to transform into a man. She recruits this raven-man, Diaval (Sam Riley) to serve as her "wings" in exchange for having saved his life. She declares herself ruler of the Moors, infusing her surroundings with dark magic and pitting herself once and for all against Stefan, ruler of the human kingdom.

While spying on Stefan's palace, Diaval overhears the royal staff speak of the baby girl just born to the King and Queen. He hurries to relay the news to Maleficent, who sees an opportunity for revenge. She attends the child's christening ceremony uninvited and bestows a curse on the princess: Before the sun sets on Princess Aurora's sixteenth birthday, she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into an eternal death-like slumber. As an added insult to Stefan, Maleficent snidely remarks that the only possible restoration to life is "true love's kiss." Stefan begs Maleficent to reconsider, even falling to his knees at her request, but she is too happy at having avenged her mistreatment to show mercy. After leaving the court in chaos, Maleficent causes a massive wall of thick-thorned trees to surround the Moors and keep humans at bay. Stefan orders all spinning wheels in the kingdom to be destroyed, and sends his infant daughter to be raised by the three fairies in the forest in hopes of avoiding the curse. Knotgrass, Flittle, and Thistlewit are easily distracted and have difficulty supervising Aurora as she grows, but the princess is kept safe by Maleficent's curse, which rules that she must stay alive until her sixteenth birthday.

Maleficent and Diaval keep a semi-distant watch over Aurora throughout her childhood, coming in contact a few times but never revealing her identity. Aurora grows into a pretty teenager (Elle Fanning), with no inkling of her royal roots or Maleficent's curse. As Aurora's sixteenth birthday nears, Stefan falls deeper into paranoia. The Queen is dying, and he knows Maleficent will return on the day the curse is set to culminate. He keeps her severed wings in a glass cabinet in an isolated wing of the palace. He becomes more and more detached from reality, having long rambling "conversations" with the wings and is deaf to any subject other than Maleficent. He sends his men to hunt her down before Aurora's birthday. Maleficent begins to admit that her hatred for Stefan does not extend to Aurora. Emerging from the blind rage she felt when the

princess was a baby, Maleficent now sees that Aurora is a good, innocent person undeserving of such a harsh fate. Feeling guilty, she puts a temporary sleeping spell on the girl and transports her into the Moors. When Aurora wakes, she is enchanted by the beautiful fairy kingdom and shows no fear when Maleficent makes her presence known. Aurora happily explains that she recognizes Maleficent from several incidents in her childhood and believes Maleficent is her fairy godmother. Without explaining the truth, Maleficent spends the evening getting to know the victim of her own curse. After returning Aurora to her cottage home to sleep, Maleficent attempts to retract the curse, but she had made it too powerful to be undone. Diaval reminds her that true love's kiss can still break the spell, but Maleficent admits she added it as a false hope because she believed it did not exist.

On the eve of Aurora's fateful birthday, Maleficent speaks with her about an evil that she is unable to protect her from. Aurora remains optimistic, and announces her wish to live in the Moors with her "fairy godmother." While preparing to break the news to her "aunties" (the three fairies who raised her), Aurora encounters Prince Phillip (BrentonThwaites), who asks her for directions, though both are awkwardly stunned by their mutual attraction. After their brief meeting, Aurora delivers her news to the fairies, who, in their shock, let slip Aurora's true parentage and the details of Maleficent's curse. Horrified, Aurora rushes to the Moors to confront Maleficent, who sadly admits the truth. Aurora, now frightened and untrusting, returns to the human kingdom.

That night, Princess Aurora is finally returned to her father. They share a brief emotional reunion before Stefan orders his daughter locked away for her own protection. Back in the Moors, Maleficent prepares a last-ditch attempt to stop the curse. She and Diaval journey toward the palace and encounter Prince Phillip, who remembers meeting Aurora and is recruited to provide "true love's kiss" to save her. Maleficent casts a sleeping charm on the rather confused prince, and whisks him away through the forest, hoping to get to Aurora before the curse unfolds. As Aurora's birthday progresses and night begins to fall, she feels a strange sensation in her finger and hears a eerie voice calling her name. In a trance-like state, Aurora follows the disembodied voice through the palace until she discovers a hidden room containing piles of broken and burnt spinning wheels. She approaches a sharp spindle and touches it, drawing blood. A moment later, she sinks to the floor in a deep sleep. Aurora is carried back to her chambers and laid on the bed. Stefan is enraged, blaming the three fairies for failing to protect his daughter. Maleficent and Diaval manage to infiltrate the palace with the unconscious Prince Phillip, who is woken at the

door of Aurora's bedroom. The three fairies, guarding the sleeping princess, encourage Phillip to try and wake Aurora with true love's kiss, but since the two are not yet in love, the effort fails. Heartbroken, Maleficent approaches Aurora's bed and apologizes for her actions, promising to protect her as she sleeps. Maleficent kisses Aurora on the forehead and is both shocked and elated to find that the spell had been broken through the power of her own maternal love for the princess.

Aurora realizes how much Maleficent cares for her, and begins to trust her again. A guard reports to Stefan that Maleficent was spotted in the castle. The royal guards ambush her and attack when she leaves Aurora's room. Maleficent orders Aurora to run to safety before transforming Diaval into an enormous dragon and beginning her showdown against Stefan. While searching for something to aid Maleficent, Aurora discovers the severed wings in the glass cupboard. The wings, sensing the presence of their mistress, begin to flap violently until Aurora frees them. The wings fly to Maleficent and re-attach themselves to her moments before Stefan delivers a fatal blow. Maleficent rises above her attackers, but Stefan loops a chain around her leg and clings to it as she pulls him out a window and onto one of the palace towers. Maleficent attempts to end the fight without any fatalities, but Stefan attacks her once more, sending them both plummeting off the tower. Maleficent takes flight and Stefan falls to his death, a victim of his own unrelenting desire for power and revenge. Maleficent soon undoes the dark magic in the Moors, restoring its former light and beauty. The Moors and the human kingdom are now united, and Aurora is crowned Queen of both kingdoms. Prince Phillip and Aurora continue their romance, and Maleficent, now free from the chains of her vengeful thoughts, lives happily among the peaceful creatures of the Moors, and flies happily through the skies with Diaval.

Many critical responses came across the movie. With two shorn wings and an astonishing maternal kiss, *Maleficent* demolishes stereotypes. The movie surprises not for its baroque visions of colorful woodland enlivened by joyous fairies and a forbidding castle peopled by unhappy humans, but rather for the thematic richness of its story gloriously personified by Angelina Jolie in the title role. Everyone else, even Aurora, fades in maleficent's presence. The theme of the movie is Rape allegory, Capitalism and socialism. An early scene in the movie, in which Stefan drugs Maleficent and removes her wings from her unconscious body, is a metaphor for rape. This is an example of horrific side of rape culture. it's impossible to ignore a metaphoric rape that occurs in a Disney movie. *Maleficent* offers a dark, surprisingly adult exploration of rape

and female mutilation. The film portrayed Maleficent's actions as a rape revenge fantasy. In *Maleficent*, Aurora is the product of a cold and loveless marriage and a vengeful, unhinged rapist. Her safety relies on a trio of clueless and dangerously careless fairies, and her Godmother is the woman who cursed her—and who had, in turn, been violated by her own father. However the movie gives a positive and hopeful message to rape victims, ultimately allowing the woman to recover which gives them power. In the story Moors represented a socialist, nature-oriented, democratic society while the human kingdom was one of capitalism, industry and absolute monarchy. What Maleficent does is provide meaning to yet another fairy tale that tells women a kiss from a Prince will solve all their problems. Ironically enough in the film, it is men that cause almost all the problems and it's women who fix it all in the end. It all starts with Maleficent but not the sinister witch of previous tales. Instead the audience is presented with a kind hearted fairy child, who is protector of the magical world. We're shown how and why a young and trusting girl who grows to be powerful and wise, suddenly becomes cruel and vindictive. The answer? A man.

Witnessing the bitter betrayal of Maleficent (wonderfully portrayed by Angelina Jolie) by her childhood friend Stefan (Sharlto Copley) gives depth and relatability to a character that is traditionally seen as a "bitter old hag". The model of the "crone" type character is seen in Neopaganism with the Triple Goddess theory which presents: the Maid, the Mother and the Crone, each of which represent different stages of a woman's life. Whether consciously or not, Maleficent manages to incorporate this theory into its story, whilst giving it a refreshing, contemporary twist. Aurora (Elle Fanning) is not portrayed as a helpless, pure "Maid" who is only destined for marriage but instead we get an inquisitive, joyous young woman who isn't afraid to challenge society and make her own way. The "Mother" figure is seen in the three hilarious fairies Knotgrass (Imelda Staunton) Thistlewit (Juno Temple) and Flittle (Lesley Manville) who raise Aurora from infancy. Whilst they are constantly at odds with each other and seem to have no idea how to raise a child, they prove to be a delightful and ever so slightly radical alternative to a conservative family. This leaves the "Crone" figure best fitting Maleficent herself. Yet the film leaves no room for stereotyping.

Maleficent proves to be a multifaceted female character, one that is not beyond help, that can make mistakes and that can learn and grow from them. Maleficent faces many internal conflicts throughout the film, as she comes to terms with who she is and what she can offer the world she lives in, even though it has rejected her on multiple occasions and moulded her into something



ugly. She sees the true beauty and innocence of humanity in Aurora, instead of the cruelty and greed she has continuously encountered. It is for this reason that true love's kiss comes from a Fairy Godmother and not a Prince. This changes a very integral part of the original story as not only does the Prince prove useless in waking Aurora (meaning there's no need for a man), we now have a very pro-women, feminist ending. (There's nothing like seeing women helping out other women). With a peck on Aurora's forehead, Maleficent shows that true love comes in a variety of forms and also from within. *Maleficent* is ultimately a familial love story between two women. Refreshingly, both of these women are badass in their own right: Angelina Jolie's Maleficent is an independent, fairy warrior who can outwit and torture an army of men; Elle Fanning's Aurora is a buoyant, free spirited explorer and carrier of "light". Without giving the ending away to those who haven't seen it, in *Maleficent* we learn that it is *women* who bring about world peace. her heroine is both "hero" and "villain" that light and dark — like us all possessing.

Adaptions that take on a feminist re-write are very much needed in a society that still promotes the idea of a Prince Charming and often tends to oppress the idea of powerful, independent-thinking women. What Maleficent offers is the idea that you aren't just what people believe you to be. You don't have to be wholly good or bad, or what anyone thinks you are for that matter. You can be the hero and you can also be the villain – it's okay to be both. In fact it's better.

# CONCLUSION

There is a distinct pattern in the fairy tales adapted by Disney (The Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White etc.): a courageous prince meets a beautiful, young and innocent girl. The stories always end with a happy, heterosexual marriage. When analyzing the portrayal of gender in the characters of Disney's Sleeping Beauty, it is easy to distinguish the gender roles of a patriarchal society and how they are assigned to the characters. The female characterization in this version displays typical patriarchal notions of the female sex.

Aurora, the princess and heroine of the fairy tale, is described as a beautiful young woman. Instead of the story revolving around the distressed and helpless princess, the story is about the young life of an independent, strong-willed, brave and adventurous girl... Maleficent is depicted as a beautiful woman, unlike most of witches present in fairy tales. She is capable of very strong magic, more so than the three good fairies, as is obvious from the christening, where the fairies are unable to undo her curse. In addition to her power, she is also intelligent and independent. She is a free woman, not controlled by any man. In having these attributes, she can be interpreted as a symbol of matriarchy, where women are more powerful than men and therefore a challenger of patriarchal power.

By making Maleficent, the powerful and free woman, the impersonation of evil, these traits are in turn associated with evil. These attributes in a woman are not considered as beneficial in a patriarchal society, and are therefore assigned to the evil witch. Prince Philip, the impersonation of righteousness and patriarchy, must overcome the obstacles before him in the form of a hedge of thorns and the evil witch, the symbol of matriarchy. By piercing the witch's heart with his sword of truth, he is able to save the princess, and fulfill the ultimate goal of a man and a woman in a patriarchy, a happy, heterosexual marriage. The introduction of the kiss as an important aspect of the fairy tale in Disney's version holds a significant symbolic value, it is also one of the most significant alterations Disney made to the original. Aurora is put to sleep by the fairies, instead of being killed by Maleficent's curse. While the fairies cast their spell, they sing: "one day He [Prince Philip] will come, riding out of the dawn, and you'll awaken to love's first kiss, till then sleeping beauty sleep on!" This sleep has been interpreted in many ways, of which the perhaps most common is the woman's dormant sexuality, or the patriarchy's wish for women to be sexually dormant and passive until such a time when a man whom they are going to marry comes along (Tyson 89). It is also a symbol for women's passivity, them not needing to go

looking for the man of their dreams, he will heroically come and save them. The kiss is the symbol of the sexual awakening of the woman; the sexuality is awakened by the man of their dreams, when the time is right, not before.

What makes Disney films so appealing is the sense that the fairy tales are directly relevant to the audience (Marling). The majority of their target audience remains to be children; however their scale is at an international level. As more and more parents trust Disney with the content they are exposing their children to, the company has a lot of power over the young minds of the next generation. Thus, it is important for Disney to incorporate feminism in their films to reflect the changing mindset of society today, as well as evaluate how it has changed over time. At first, the films were released every eight years. This process would allow them to deliver a new message to each generation. While some may question the influence of animated films, other believes that it is underestimated. Animators have the ability to manipulate every single image in the film and thus constructing a very specific message. A combination of the popularity, availability, format, and overall experience of the films allow children to grasp the message more effectively when compared to more mainstream mediums. The reason for this is that children may internalize the values taught in these stories, which may lead to them perpetuating patriarchal ideals and gender normative behavior.

They cover all kinds of topics, from power and magic over domesticity and standards of feminine beauty to love and friendship, which open the spectator opportunities to identify. In the following the role of women is in the focus of the analysis. As every movie is a product of the time it was produced in and “reflects the diverse views of society and self”, gender roles are depicted differently over the years. When considering the timeline of Disney movies it is easy to see the changing views on the roles of women in society reflected through the animated characters. For example, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), each princess waits for their prince to come and save them. In that time period it was socially acceptable for women to work only in the household and bare children, as well as have soft, submissive personalities.

It is undeniable that Disney has a huge sway on young girls (and kids in general). Many of their animated films are called “princess movies,” and they target that young female audience in particular. And Disney is such a cultural powerhouse that it has itself created and proliferated many gender-associated tropes... some of which are incredibly unfortunate and find girls growing up to think unfortunate things. It is absolutely undeniable that media, even fictional, can

shape our perceptions of reality, of ourselves, and of our futures. And if you think that non-heterosexual, non-white, non-male people and their aspirations and equality in society matter, then feminism is incredibly important for media. The past decade or so has definitely seen the word crop up more and more in the popular vernacular as we increase not only our connection to the world at large through social media, but also increase certain progressive stances on equality. But, frankly, there still are a LOT of people that don't know what it is.

The popular version of the fairy tale, made by Disney, follows many of the typical patriarchal ideals with a strong male hero, a wicked female witch and a weak and submissive young female, close to nature. The version made by Disney is a product of its time, and portrays ideals from that period that could affect children of today into internalizing archaic patriarchal ideals. Dokey's version is better adapted to the current socio-cultural environment and succeeds in aligning the story with modern values and provides a better option to teach children the actual values and gender roles of our society. Historically, fairy tales are prone to change according to the social and cultural changes that take place in a community. Each historical epoch and each community altered the original folk tales according to its needs as they were handed down over the centuries.

Fairy tales have gone through dramatic changes as they were told and re-told throughout history. Originally, they were actually matriarchal, meaning that they cast women as superior to men. As the influence of Christianity grew during the Middle Ages, the tales were altered to fit this paradigm. The entity once described as a goddess was transformed into the evil witch, fairy or stepmother that are still present in these stories today. Originally, the purpose of fairy tales, created by European peasants, was to identify, teach and uphold culture, traditions, values and morals of the particular historical context. They have been told from peasant to peasant and used not only for teaching, but also for entertainment.

As an effect of these stories being used as a tool to teach and reflect the values and morals of the society in which they were told, which was predominantly patriarchal, they also as a consequence functioned as a source for learning patriarchal values. Elisabeth Bell et al. describe the functions of fairy tales as an institution in middle-class society at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the most important functions of the fairy tales was that they reinforced the patriarchal symbolic order based on rigid notions of sexuality and gender. In the last couple of decades there have been attempts made by feminist writers to create more modernized

adaptations of the basic story into a present context, where gender consciousness is a current political issue.

Disney, in producing the *Sleeping Beauty*, also produced the image of the perfect woman, setting up parameters and rules for how girls should be in order to grow up to be a princess and to find their dream prince. From the movie, certain assumptions about women can be made, such as they are to be beautiful, sing and dance beautifully and be obedient and passive and care for the home. As an effect of this portrayal of women, feminists regard many Disney movies as directly harmful to children since they so strongly support male dominance. The media is a very powerful tool when it comes to forming the attitudes, values and behaviors of its viewers. In combination with the fact that children learn typical gender behavior and values from social learning and imitation of models and how they are affected by social modeling in the creation of their behavior, the importance of examining how media portrays gender becomes apparent.

There have been many changes even during the last 30 years, regarding the sociocultural roles of women and what is appropriate behavior and life styles for both men and women. This sociocultural change is, however, seldom portrayed in the media, especially in television, which still persists in portraying women as emotional, family oriented and dependent on males for emotional and financial support. This portrayal of women is not an accurate depiction of reality, and it may teach impressionable children values that do not fit in our contemporary society. From studying the Walt Disney movies, it is evident that they continue to display traditional gender roles; they may have changed slightly to better fit the culture, but their focus is on duplicating the social structures of a patriarchal society rather than changing it or adapting it as society changes. The study showed that boys were more prone to reduplicate the gender roles portrayed in fairy tales than girls, who favored stories involving more independent heroines and upside-down fairy tales. From this I draw the conclusion that the boys were reluctant to leave the more powerful position as the strong and independent hero because it is an advantageous position, whereas girls also seek a more independent role model.

“Feminism and Disney movies gives an account of how women internalize the values of a patriarchal society that are present in such folklore, and unconsciously relate to the social rules present. The women in these tales are assigned certain attributes that female readers internalize as they are suggested to be the norm, or the wanted and expected features of a good woman. “Subconsciously women may transfer from fairy tales into real life cultural norms which exalt passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female’s cardinal virtues suggests that culture’s

very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity. As time passes disney movies put forward the ideas like **Women can have a "happily ever after" without Prince Charming, Women will always need each other.**

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