



An Analysis of Feminism in *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to examine the portrayal of the feminist characteristics of Maleficent as the main female character. Numerous researchers have focused on Liberal feminism on the main female character in the film as the main topic of their research. However, there have not been so many studies that particularly focus on care-focused feminism. For this reason, the present study aims to fill the gap by exploring the portrayal of the feminist character in Maleficent through care-focused feminism. The study employs a qualitative approach and textual analysis since this study focuses on an in-depth and descriptive analysis of Maleficent from evidence in the film text. Framed by the theory of care-focused feminism (Gilligan, 1982) and film theory (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2016) to achieve the aims. The study found Maleficent's portrayal of care-focused feminism can be seen from the three stages she experienced, which concludes that Maleficent is a main female character who does not only fight for her rights as a woman but also cares for others -women and men- to achieve harmony. Thus, this study implies that this portrayal offers a different kind of feminist character for young viewers.

Keywords: Care-focused feminism, female character, maleficent, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019).

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the main characters in stories for children have seen a slight change. According to Hourihan (2005), the role of the hero in stories was dominated by males because it was once assumed that heroism was an inherently masculine trait. Female characters are often marginalized in male hero stories and are deemed not as important as male characters. For example, films for children produced by Disney in the past also reflected the image of damsel in distress – women who were weak and had to wait for help from other people or the prince as we can see in the portrayal of *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950). However, recently Disney has featured female heroines who are not just damsels in distress, such as Fa Mulan from *Mulan* (1998), Moana from *Moana* (2016), and Maleficent from *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), which reflects a more understanding of feminist movement.

The characterization of Maleficent in *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) indicates a feminist perspective on being a woman. David (2020) found that as the main female character, Maleficent is described as a powerful woman who does not care about her status as a woman or a villain. Hence, Maleficent presents as a feminist character. Maleficent cares about the people and creatures around her, which resonates with care-focused feminism. Care-focused feminism emphasizes the feminine side of women as caregivers to people around them. The proponent of this perspective of feminism, Gilligan (1982) said both women and men need to care and try to live in harmony with one another.

Feminism comes from the Latin word “*femina*” which means women. Feminine is the characteristic belonging to women. The movement of feminism historically can be divided into three waves, namely first-wave, second-wave, and third-wave feminism. Tong (2009) stated that there are many thoughts on feminism. One of the third-wave feminism which emerged in the 1980s is care-focused feminism.

According to Gilligan (1982), care-focused feminism assigns a special value to care ethics, and this theory emphasizes concern for equality for both women and men. This theory highlights that humans are dependent creatures who must care for one another and foster one another's moral strengths. The ethics of care, particularly for women, develops in several stages (Gilligan, 1982). The pre-conventional stage is a stage in which women focus on the self by

discovering what they need of themselves and what they want to achieve. The second stage is the Conventional stage, in which women focus on their responsibilities toward others manifested through care and selflessness. The last stage is the Post-conventional stage, in which women take control of their decisions.

Studies on feminism are plenty. For example, Becker, Thomas, and Cope (2016) reveal post-feminism for children in *Bratz* Film. A study conducted by Azizah and Fitri (2019) analyzes the representation of liberal feminism through the main female character, while Siagian, Dirgeyasa, and Hartoyo (2018) analyze the main female character of *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* reflects the varieties of feminism. Another study by Wijayati (2020) analyzes how liberal feminism is reflected through Moana's actions. In another study, Sinuraya, Azhar, and Sazali (2022) identify how feminism is represented by the main character in *Mulan* (2020). Those studies deal with the main female character of a film. Maleficent is also the main female character, but she has a different characterization from other female characters, especially in Disney films for children. She is a good fairy who turns into an evil fairy, so humans see her as a villain. Moreover, although the studies above have dealt with feminist characters, little research has addressed a type of complex female character like Maleficent. Hence, this study tries to close the gap by analyzing the portrayal of Maleficent as a complex feminist character.

This study is about Maleficent who indicates a feminist perspective on being a woman. With Gilligan's theory on care-focused feminism (1982), the significance of this study is to understand why women are associated with dependence, communities, and relationships. Departing from the research gap of the studies mentioned above, this study aims to answer the question: How is Maleficent portrayed as a feminist?

2. METHOD

This paper was conducted within a qualitative research method that utilized Gilligan's theory of care-focused feminism as the basis to support the data analysis of the film. Qualitative research is research procedures that produce descriptive data as spoken words of the person or behavior being researched and not numbers (Moleong, 2005). This study employed a qualitative approach and textual analysis since this study focused on an in-depth and descriptive analysis of Maleficent from evidence in the film text. According to Lockyer (2008), textual analysis is a research method by examining the text's content and meaning or its structure and discourse. Belsey (2004) states that the text can be a film, an article, or even a painting. The primary data were collected directly from the film *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), directed by Joachim Rønning and produced by Disney.

This study collected data through several film aspects: the dialogue, the *mise-en-scène*, and the camera shot and angle (Bordwell et al., 2016). The procedure of data collection was divided into four steps. The first step was watching the film repeatedly and carefully to find scenes or dialogues of Maleficent that represent care-focused feminism. The second step was to mark the words or sentences and note the conversations that contained care-focused feminism. Then, processes classifying and analyzing according to Gilligan's theory of care-focused feminism. Last, making a conclusion.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part reveals how Maleficent is portrayed as a feminist character through three stages of care-focused feminism according to Gilligan's (1982) theory which shows she is a motherly, responsible, and fair character.

3.1. *The Three Stages of Gilligan's Care-Focused Feminism*

Maleficent is portrayed as undergoing the three stages of care-focused feminism. According to Gilligan (1982), care-focused feminism follows through pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional stages. In the pre-conventional stage, women focus on the self and emphasize their self-interests over other considerations. In this stage, women must know what they need and want to achieve. In this case, Maleficent wants to be a mother. Maleficent does not like most humans, except Aurora, her foster daughter. She wants to be a good mother to Aurora. As a foster mother, she does not have a motherly instinct but tries to become a good mother. Being a mother can be a choice or an obligation. For most women being a mother is an obligation. However, for Maleficent, being a mother is a choice. Maleficent chooses to be a foster mother for Aurora because she loves her very much.

The first scene in this film shows Maleficent's motherly love when Prince Phillip proposes to Aurora. Maleficent comes to Aurora to refuse to bless Aurora's union with Prince Phillip. Maleficent has experiences that she does not trust that love would end well, so she projects it to Aurora. The first evidence is the following dialogue.

Data 1

Aurora : Why don't you like Philip?
 Maleficent : Well, for one thing, he's human.
 Aurora : I'm a human
 Maleficent : And I have never held that against you
 Aurora : Until I fell in love
 Maleficent : Love doesn't always end well, Beasty

(Rønning, 2019, 00:17:28 – 00:17:43)

In the scene, when Aurora says “I’m a human” we can see how much Maleficent wants to be Aurora’s mother even though Maleficent is not human. Maleficent replies, “And I have never held that against you” which shows that Maleficent truly loves her goddaughter, even though Aurora is a human. So, Maleficent refuses the union with Prince Phillip to protect Aurora from the same pain she had when she fell in love with a human in the first film, *Maleficent* (2014). Moreover, in the first film, Prince Phillip’s kiss of true love fails to wake Aurora. This failure makes Maleficent think Prince Phillip does not genuinely love Aurora then and in the present narrative.

Another scene (01:34:30) shows Maleficent protecting Aurora from Queen Ingrith’s arrow. Being a mother is to protect her child from danger. The scene uses an eye-level angle with the colors green and red from the magic power of Maleficent and dust from Tomb Blooms flowers. The medium shot shows an expression of Maleficent when she is shot by Queen Ingrith, which makes Maleficent instantly change into dust. This scene portrays how strong Maleficent’s love for her goddaughter, Aurora. The scene indicates her willingness to die for Aurora’s safety, her goddaughter.

After the pre-conventional stage, Gilligan (1982) states that women go to the conventional stage when women have come to focus on their responsibilities toward others. Women/females are concerned with caring for others and being selfless, despite that this position is defined by society. In this case, Maleficent is responsible toward the Moors (the fairy creatures) because she is the Queen of the Moors. Maleficent is shown as a protective character towards the creature of the Moors. This sequel tells that Maleficent is one of the last beings known as Dark Fey. Dark fey is a race of winged fairies and horns that hide from humans after being driven to near extinction. Maleficent is also the last generation of the Phoenix, an ancient and powerful Dark Fey ancestor. Therefore, Maleficent also cares for other Dark Fey because she is a Dark Fey and inherits Phoenix’s blood.

The scene (00:32:12) shows Maleficent’s responsibilities toward the Moors. Here, Maleficent attacks the thieves who poach the fairies from the Moors. Even though in this scene Maleficent does not say anything, she only uses her powers to attack the thieves. The shot is a medium-long shot, and it shows Maleficent’s horns. The scene uses low lighting because the setting is at night. This highlights Maleficent’s incredible power.

Another scene in the conventional stage (01:33:29) shows Maleficent’s responsibilities during the war between the fairies and the human race. Maleficent is selfless in this scene as she protects the Moors, Dark Fey, and Aurora. The costume also supports the characterization of Maleficent. The color of her dress makes her stand out in the red background, which indicates her strength and seriousness in taking up her war to take responsibility. Also, her makeup supports the characterization she looks like the strongest and scary character.

The last stage of care-focused feminism is the post-conventional stage. In this stage, women have control of their lives and take responsibility for their decisions. Gilligan (1982) states this part contains the decision of the women’s self-needs. In this stage, Maleficent is responsible for her decisions and has consequences for her responsibilities. Maleficent knows that taking the responsibility of protecting the Moors and the Dark Feys means that she has a consequence. She has to ensure the lives of the Moors and the Dark Feys are peaceful. A peaceful life must accept that it is not only they who live in this world but there are humans and other creatures.

The first scene, which shows Maleficent’s decision, is that she finally approves the relationship between Aurora and Prince Phillip. By agreeing to Prince Phillip’s marriage with Aurora, there is a consequence. She accepts Prince Phillip as her son-in-law and must accept Prince Phillip’s strengths and weaknesses as a human being. The evidence is in the following dialogue.

Data 2

Maleficent : Phillip
 Prince Phillip : Yes?
 Maleficent : Do you love my daughter?
 Prince Phillip : With anything I have.
 Maleficent : Good.

(Rønning, 2019, 01.40.20 – 01.40.42)

Maleficent acknowledges Phillip's sincerity and kindness from his firm answer. Maleficent also changes her attitude towards love as now she can understand that Phillip loves Aurora by taking her side instead of his mother's bad intentions.

The other scene (01:47:24) shows Maleficent's decision to start a harmonious life where all humans, fairies, and the Dark Fey live together. In this scene, all the fairies stand together with the citizens of Ulstead, and all the people smile happily. As a result, Maleficent's effort to have a harmonious relationship between humans and the fairies is successful. As a Queen of the Moors, she wants to live harmoniously with other living features, a consequence that must be taken so the Moors can live a peaceful and sustainable life.

In conclusion, Maleficent is portrayed as a care-focused feminist because she goes through the three stages of care-focused feminism, as pre-conventional stage, the conventional stage, and the post-conventional stage, which is revealed by the presentation of narrative and visual elements of the film. Maleficent does not experience all stages separately but almost overlappingly. For example, while she focuses on her desire to be a mother, which marks her pre-conventional stage, she always takes care of her people, which is her conventional stage. During her pre-conventional stage, she transitions to being a selfless mother by sacrificing her life to save Aurora. Meanwhile, in the conventional stage, she transitions to being a fairer queen by not destroying the opponent despite her victory. After she overcomes the problems in both stages, she becomes an ideal post-conventional feminist who does not only care but also takes responsibility for her decision.

3.2. Characteristics of A Care-Focused Feminist

During her transitions from each stage, Maleficent's characterization can be identified into three characteristics of a care-focused feminist, namely motherly, responsible, and firm and fair.

She has a motherly love character in the pre-conventional stage because she wants to be a good mother. Maleficent has cared for Aurora since she was a baby, and her affection is strong toward Aurora. Maleficent has some aspects of a motherly character, such as being selfless prioritizing her child's happiness over her feelings, and protecting, even sacrificing herself to save her child. Although loving her child can lead to being possessive, Maleficent learns her lesson. By being possessive she may cause Aurora to lose her happiness. As a result, Maleficent would rather let Aurora marry Phillips than let Aurora be miserable.

Another trait that reveals Maleficent's characterization as a care-focused feminist is her sense of responsibility. Maleficent protects the Moors and its creature, as can be seen in the conventional stage. In the opening scene (00:32:12), for example, we can see that Maleficent attacks the thieves who poached the fairies from the Moors. Throughout the film, Maleficent takes care of her subjects by protecting the Moors and its creatures, Dark Fey, and Aurora. Being able to care for others is being responsible and selfless. Maleficent is a queen, so she is responsible for maintaining a peaceful life for the Moors and other creatures. The care-focused feminism is caring for others, regardless of their gender or race, through her actions.

Finally, Maleficent's characterization as a care-focused feminist is her determination and fairness. Maleficent sticks to her principles, but she is also fair to others. Maleficent can give happiness to anyone who does good, but when someone commits a crime and betrays her, she does not hesitate to give punishment, even if it may cause her to be killed. For her, good things will be rewarded with good, and bad things will be punished severely. A determined character is holding up to Maleficent's morals and values. In contrast, a fair character gives rewards and punishment.

The reason why Maleficent is a firm character is understandable. She used to be betrayed by Stephan, a human who was obsessed with being King and did various ways (see *Maleficent* (2014)). Also, humans always want to attack and destroy Moors and their creatures. That is why she does not trust people, and it is shown by her brave actions and sticking to her principles to fight people, which she does not like. Maleficent tries to fight, but when she knows she is fighting the wrong way, she changes it another way in a better and fairer manner. The rewards for being good can be seen in the (01.40.20) when Maleficent accepts Prince Phillip to marry Aurora because she sees Phillip's sincerity and kindness and knows that Prince Phillip and Aurora love each other. In contrast, the punishment is given when Maleficent turns Queen Ingrith into a goat for her cruelty (01.42.53). For Maleficent, everything they get is according to what they are doing.

3.3. Discussion

There are three stages of findings that reveal how Maleficent is portrayed as a care-focused feminist. The analysis in the first stage in the pre-conventional stage shows that Maleficent is portrayed as motherly and protective of her granddaughter, Aurora. For Maleficent being a mother is a choice, and she knows what she wants. In line with Gilligan

(1982), women need to identify what they want to achieve. Second, the conventional stage shows that Maleficent is portrayed as being a responsible queen. She cares for others and protects the Moors and the Dark Feys. In line with Gilligan (1982), good is defined as caring for others. In the post-conventional stage, Maleficent is portrayed as fair and firm. She sticks to her principles, but she also is fair to others. Gilligan (1982) said that the theory of care-focused feminism highlights that humans are dependent creatures who must exchange care with each other and foster one another's moral strengths.

This research, subsequently has several similarities and differences from other research on feminism. For example, the findings of the present study confirm David's (2020) analysis. Similarly, it analyzes the same main character and concludes Maleficent's strong sense of care. However, the present study emphasizes the stages Maleficent goes through to show how she becomes a caring character. Moreover, unlike Mulan who seems to focus on fighting for her rights (Sinuraya et al., 2022), Maleficent does not only fight for her rights but also for others' rights. Different from other studies on main female characters in films (Azizah & Fitri, 2019; Becker et al., 2016; Siagian et al., 2018; Wijayati, 2020), this study analyzes a more mature character who has moved beyond her personal quest.

The findings shed some light on the issue of feminism. Liberal feminism asserts a gender inequality which encourages women to strive for equality as men and women have the same capacity. In contrast, a care-focused feminism foregrounds care as women's strength. Being selfless and being responsible for others are not signs of weakness. By being selfless and responsible, a woman cares about others as part of her life. A woman should know what she wants, but it is not enough. Just like Maleficent, a woman's happiness lies in her capacity to love and care for others. She understands that she knows what she wants and how to achieve it. However, she also understands that her achievement is related to others' lives and well-being. Living in harmony with others makes a care-focused feminist different from other types of feminism. It does not only champion women but all human beings.

Thus, the findings follow a trend of feminism in film. Some researchers note that there have been more alternatives to women's portrayal in films produced in the last two decades (Perkins & Schreiber, 2019; Smelik, 2016; Shuterland & Feltey, 2016) which try to counter the typical passive or femme fatale stereotypes. This seems a promise for a better representation of females in comparison to that of the previous decades. However, they also warn against the still dominant female character who represents the white and middle class which also appears in Maleficent: Mistress of Evil (2019). This should be a worthy note for further studies.

4. CONCLUSION

Maleficent is portrayed as a care-focused feminist from the stages she experienced: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, and the characteristics of care-focused feminism. Maleficent's actions show her characterization as a care-focused feminist, which is someone who does not only know what she wants but also cares for others. This study points out that the main female character in this study has moved toward care-focused feminism. The findings are in contrast with some female characters in Disney films which are portrayed as liberal feminists because they fight for their women's rights. A care-focused feminism is not the privilege of being a woman but privileging human beings regardless of their race. Gilligan (1982) said that a care-focused feminist is fighting for their rights and caring for others. It implies that this film offers another perspective on being a feminist. However, it also calls for further studies on female white representation to have a more balanced representation of women in real life.

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