

## AN OVERLOOKED POTENTIAL OF A FANTASY FILM TO HONE CRITICAL GENDER LITERACY

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### ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore the potentiality of a fantasy film, i.e., Maleficent, to be used as a tool to sharpen language learners' critical literacy toward the issue of gender construction. The purpose of the study is to unravel the genre of fantasy film as a space to deconstruct the way gender is represented. This study borrows the framework of postcolonial feminism in deconstructing and reconstructing the portrayal of the main female protagonist. As the study also discusses the insights of using film as a tool to facilitate language learning, the data is also gained from the teacher-student written and verbal reflection. The reflection data is then analyzed using narrative analysis proposed by (Creswell, 2012). The study gives insights into how fantasy films can be used for language teaching. The analysis of Maleficent as a powerful tool to sharpen language learners' critical gender literacy.

**Keywords:** critical literacy, gender construction, postcolonial feminism, the fantasy genre

### INTRODUCTION

The use of films for teaching has been prominent, particularly in the field of history (see Marcus & Stoddard, 2009; Peters, 2020; Stoddard, 2012), social work (see Head & Smith, 2016; Liles, 2007), and language (see Pegrum, 2008; Pierson-Smith et al., 2014). However, discussions on the

use of a fantasy film as a space providing opportunities particularly to hone critical literacy (CL), by deconstructing how female characters are portrayed in the film are still scarce. This study, hence, attempts to explore the potentiality of a fantasy film, i.e., Maleficent, to be used as a tool to

sharpen language learners' CL and gender literacy at the same time.

Popular culture can be referred to as belonging 'to the people' (Williams, 2015, p. 179), or simply being "widely favored" or "well-liked" (p. 180). (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015) propose popular culture as the texts produced to be interpreted meaningfully. There are published articles addressing the potential use of films for language learning not only in delivering language-related materials but also in asking learners to observe everyday practices and question the power dynamic in the films and their everyday happenings. The findings from the previously published articles offer films, one example of popular culture products, as authentic tools for language learners to enhance critical media literacy (Pierson-Smith et al., 2014). This view proposes that students' lives revolve around a wide range of popular cultural forms – social media exposure, music, movies, online mobile games, and a plethora of technological applications. This aspect brings the realization that films are among the cultural types that students cannot miss, hence the use of it for language and literacy learning is promising.

Considering the importance of films and other cultural forms in the language-learning context, particularly in enhancing critical literacy skills, which is referred to as the capabilities to critically analyze texts believing them to be unfree of ideology (Freebody & Luke, 1990), this study argues that the practices of teaching and learning language through films are not as seamless as in the realm of theories. Stewart et al., (2021) argue that the teaching that encourages critical literacy within the digital era in teaching practices still faces many context-specific challenges. The challenges include perpetuated gaps

between what teachers instruct and what learners have in mind in order to understand the learning goals. To explore more about the nuanced context such as Stewart, et al., (2021) report, this study investigates this issue by delving into an English language teacher's narrative of orchestrating English and critical literacy pedagogy in an under-resourced high school in Indonesia. Besides, the findings of this study aim to inform how to analyze gender construction in *Maleficent* following the postcolonial feminism framework in manifesting the agenda of boosting critical gender literacy among English language learners.

## METHOD

This study departs from a critical postcolonial feminist approach to scrutinize a fantasy film that is used as a teaching tool in a language-learning context. In deconstructing the display of gender in the film, this study reflects on the concept of 'Other' as monsters, aliens, or savages who threaten the values of civilized society (Morton, 2003). In structure of western thought, the 'Other' is mapped outside the normal, civilized portrayal of western culture. This concept is adapted to deconstruct the portrayal of the female leads in the fantasy film entitled *Maleficent*. This deconstruction is important as the basis to trace how the female lead characters are constructed in the film according to the definition of 'Other' offered. The consensus is then used as the basis to equip the teacher in teaching about critical literacy focusing on gender construction, see Engelbrecht (2021), while at the same time instructing narrative text as the materials required for high school language learners.



This study uses the combination of postcolonial feminist approach (Spivak, 1998) and narrative inquiry delving into the teacher's experience in enacting language teaching using a fantasy film. The first author has a role to help the second author, who is the teacher, to implement this concept in a high school. The first author also analyzes the second author's narrative to gain insight into how she understands the concept of gender construction and how the students improve their critical literacy after the learning has taken place. The teacher and learners' reflection is then analyzed using the framework of narrative analysis (Creswell, 2012).

The setting of the study is a newly emerged public high school in Indonesia. The high school has not been equipped with its own building so the learning process takes place in a public elementary school building. The high school students can only learn after the elementary school students complete their classes in the afternoon. The lack of facilities makes high school learning challenging because of two things: their learning time cannot be held until after the elementary classes have been completed and the infrastructure to support learning is still very limited and insufficient. This context will be the point of departure to comprehend the situation in which the language teacher and learners are having.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Deconstructing The Witch in Maleficent

When deconstructing the characterisation of Maleficent as a so-called 'evil' witch in *Sleeping Beauty* (Clark et al., 1959), we need to question how a witch is depicted in media, particularly popular films. In doing so, we need to see this from the

concept of 'Other' in western culture. This concept refers to any different ideas, characters, and people that are categorized as monsters, aliens, or savages that threaten civilisation (Huddard, 2006). Looking back at the history of witch hunts during the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England (Shelfmark, n.d.), the image of witches has always been framed negatively. The dark era left a bitter impression because the witch hunt practices were prone to false accusations and unnecessary execution of women. Hence, the witches in fantasy have always been portrayed mostly as women, including Maleficent.

The portrayal of witches in history is then perpetuated in the fantasy genre, but Maleficent is one that breaks the tradition. The lead evil witch is portrayed in a more complete image of why she did what she did to Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* (Clark et al., 1959). This is a courageous act from a big film production to display the experience of a seemingly fearful woman witch on what triggered her rage and what heals it. The motherly love, that the character shows, becomes the antidote to the fearful image that the magical witch is framed in fantasy cinema. If we see this point of view from a feminist perspective, this becomes interesting because the power of the witch is shown through their motherhood (Engelbrecht, 2021).

No matter how ideal the representation of the evil witch is in Maleficent, (Critchley, 1992) argues that the most ethical way to address the portrayal of the 'Other' (Maleficent) still has issues such as the singular process of reconstructing the witch's experience. The witch is represented as white, even though she is portrayed to be treated as a monster that threatens civilization, which is the key



feature of white men's burden (Kipling, 1899) in the colonial discourse. This issue seems to be corrected in the sequel of *Maleficent* though. She is portrayed as a type of being in a witch community that consists of many other ethnicities. However, we will not focus on that particular film in this study. Regardless of the ethnicity issue, the false portrayal of *Maleficent* in *Sleeping Beauty* is reconstructed in *Maleficent* the movie. The image that *Maleficent* "kiss of maternal love" (Engelbrecht, 2021) revives Aurora from her sleeping symbolizes women's solidarity that destroys patriarchy (Justice, 2014)(Justice, 2014)(Justice, 2014)(Justice, 2014)(Justice, 2014).

### **The Critical Reflection of the Language Teacher**

To understand how learning happens in a newly established public high school we need to look back at the context of the study. The teacher facilitated learners to watch the film in an under-resourced public high school in Indonesia. The school does not have adequate facilities to help the learning take place in a comfortable manner. The classrooms are owned by the elementary school where learning happens in the morning. After the elementary students went home, the school was reused by the newly emerged public high school for learning. In this school, one classroom is divided into two, separated only by a thin plywood so that the classes are not sound-proof. This makes learning uncomfortable as students need to focus their attention on the teacher's instruction while the next class's learning can easily tear their concentration.

The second thing to consider is the lack of facilities and media to support multimodal learning. Since the teacher needed the in-focus to support learning with the aid of multimedia tools, she had to prepare the setting of the tool which took almost half of her teaching time for technical matters. And because the learning started at noon, the time is very limited for her to complete the teaching.

Face at this meeting, limited to teaching narrative text through animation film requires additional time to do in-depth analysis. The teacher-researcher must ensure that it was planned well within the available time limit. This can be seen in her diary entry below:

*"Based on my reflection in action, applying multimodal text to English learners face-to-face in a classroom required not just the preparation of the film-watching activity but also the learning prompts that ensured students' engagement because learning was a social process that could be optimized by social interaction. Besides, the learning process in the classroom can achieve the expected goals and the timing based on teachers' creativity with the limited time availability."*

Regardless of the complexity that language learning had in this under-resourced setting, "*Maleficent* gives a strong impression of the character of an evil witch that develops into an affectionate mother." This unseemly motherly love that is embedded into an evil witch deconstructs the stereotype embedded in the female character.

Considering the entry of my teaching diary in June 2023, I discovered

that my teaching was decided based on my own experience when I was a high school student, my English learning was just focused on the structure of the text which emphasized grammatical accuracy. In every meeting, I only learned about tenses and memorized the form of them. Besides, I only learned from the book and did the exercise. There was no media involved during the learning process. Students were only asked to complete exercise sheets and there were no games at all so the learning was quite monotonous and dull. The reflection that I did, implied that teaching strategies could be modified based on the teacher's personal experiences that affected her decision to enact a better teaching practice. The reflection that was gained from teaching diaries and confirmed with students' voices through interviews showcasing their voices regarding language learning using a fantasy film.

### Critical Gender Literacy

Maleficent is a film that is suitable for young adult learners at the high school level because, at that stage of education in Indonesia, they are required to learn narrative text, which can be deliberated by Maleficent as a kind of narrative text. In this learning, language learners were prompted to ponder upon the characters of a 'witch'. Most of the learners have a preconception of the image of a witch. Such as these:

*A witch is greedy, arrogant, and scary.*  
(Learner 1)

*A Witch usually seems ambitious and can do anything to get what she wants cunningly.* (Learner 2)

*A witch usually has something to do with magic, she can spell and act in an evil manner.* (Learner 3)

These preconceptions must have reigned in their subconscious because that was how a witch was represented in fairytales. The watching activity of Maleficent has the potential to deconstruct the image and reconstruct the image of a witch and any other identities that are embedded in women characters. No fairy is flawless as is a witch. The characterization of women characters is thus multi-layered and complex. This is the core agenda of honing language learners' critical gender literacy through this particular learning activity.

Language learners' reflection then concluded into:

*"First, don't give negative judgments about other people's bad attitudes because we don't know what background caused them to do this. Secondly, do not ever give up on fighting for the things that should be done, especially for good things. Third, no matter how far we keep secrets/bad things, they will be revealed."*

This evidence shows the multiple possibilities teachers could make use of with a fantasy film to hone gender-critical literacy at the high school level. One was the space it created for students to reflect on the daily happenings around them and bridge the spaces between their daily experience and what they could find in the film, for instance. This finding is in alignment with Exley & Dooley (2015) and Huh (2016) studies that critical literacy can be performed through text deconstruction and cognitive challenges



that can be actualized by triggering relatable conversations. Fantasy films, even though are considered fiction, play a key role in sharpening language learners' critical literacy (Engelbrecht, 2021). This study offers a fresh insight into how gender-critical literacy can be trained through a fantasy film-watching activity where the learning is made enjoyable and the interaction between learners and the teacher is organically triggered by daily happenings around them. This helps the process of learning not only meaningful but also leaves a deep impression that hopefully can be carried with them for their lifelong learning,

## CONCLUSION

The study offers an insight into what a film-watching activity can do to help learners sharpen their critical literacy. The film used in this is a fantasy film, *Maleficent*. The film not only can be a tool to ensure learning authentically in the language classroom but also a fruitful medium to ponder upon how gender is portrayed in the fantasy genre. The process of learning can be seamless if the facility and school infrastructure are sufficient, but what about the learning that happens in an under-resourced school? Learning can still happen but due to technical problems and external challenges, the learning time needs to be adjusted, hence the language teacher plays an important role in enacting her creativity with this particular condition. Can this important learning agenda happen in an under-resourced school? Most definitely but with the collaboration from the school management board and the students alike. Just like solidarity that is displayed in *Maleficent*, solidarity is also required to make learning happens in the most comfortable way possible.

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