

天主教輔仁大學英國語文學系學士班畢業成果  
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATION PROJECT 2020

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***Princess Mononoke: Miyazaki's Revolutionary Gender  
Characterization?***

SANCTITAS BONITAS

PULCHRITUDO

VERITAS

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Composition & Conversation III

Research Paper 3<sup>rd</sup> Draft

24 June 2019



Outline

I. Introduction

A. Miyazaki's prior works and traits of the characters

B. *Princess Mononoke*

1. Brief introduction

2. Interview with Miyazaki

3. Possible aspects of being "revolutionary"

4. Question: Does Miyazaki's female characterization manage to create the revolution of gender in the film?

C. Literature review

1. Connection with ecofeminism

a. Agreement on the atypical characterization

b. Disagreement on the depiction of masculinity and femininity

D. Thesis statement: With the complexity of the female characters in

*Princess Mononoke*, this paper aims to discuss and question whether or not

Miyazaki's female characterization managed to start a revolution in the film.

II. Discussion

A. Variation of *shojo*

1. Definition of *shojo*

2. Comparison with other Japanese animations

3. Infusion of Western heroism
4. The use of such a technique in Miyazaki's prior works
  - a. Miyazaki's ideology in making animations and stories
  - b. Female protagonists in *Castle in the Sky* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*

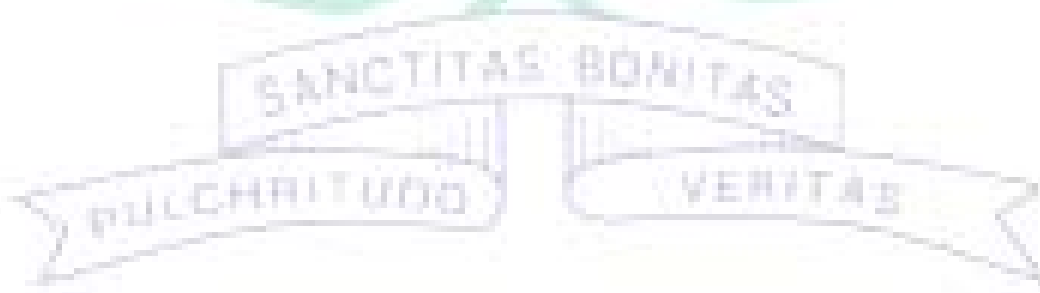
B. Lady Eboshi

1. Problematized femininity and masculinity
2. Women in Iron Town and their connection with Eboshi
3. Masculinity that backfires
  - a. Natural disaster heroine archetype by Cynthia Belmont
  - b. Re-construction of patriarchal society San's femininity

C. San

1. Definition of her femininity
  - Catherine Roach: good mother and bad mother
2. Breaking of ecofeminist archetypes
3. Revolutionary marginalization of San's femininity

III. Conclusion



*Princess Mononoke: Miyazaki's Revolutionary Gender Characterization?*

Hayao Miyazaki, a world-renowned animation director and the co-founder of Studio Ghibli, is famous for not only his fantasy animation films but his characterization of the female gender in those films. From the very first film released after the foundation of Studio Ghibli *Castle in the Sky* (1986) to the following works *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) and *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), while Miyazaki constructed his enchanting magical worlds in these films, he also created several female protagonists that appealed to both the domestic (Japanese) and global audience with their brave, adventurous and independent traits. His depiction of these characters overturned the stereotypical images of Japanese animation and anime female characters which were typically presented as highly feminized girls who tended to be wide-eyed, shapely and overall cute. Undeniably, Hayao Miyazaki made an impact on the Japanese animation industry and brought a new perspective of animation films to audiences worldwide.

In 1997, with the release of *Princess Mononoke*, Hayao Miyazaki once again fascinated the audience with the depth of the film, in which he infused the *jidaigeki*, or era drama, genre with not only Japanese traditional religious beliefs but also environmental issues and sophisticated characterization. His depiction of the female characters particularly seems to be rather different from that of his past works. In an interview on *Princess Mononoke*, when asked about Lady Eboshi and women in *Tatara Ba*, or Iron Town in the English dubbed version, Miyazaki replied:

And if I made the boss of Tatara Ba a man, he would be a manager, not a revolutionary. If it's a woman, she becomes a revolutionary, even if she is doing the same thing. So I didn't make them women who have to be protected by men, or women in their families. I intentionally cut them off ("Interview").

Apparently, Miyazaki intended to create some sort of revolution in his female characterization, but what exactly did he mean by "revolutionary"? Was he, presumably,

trying to free these female characters from the restraint of the conventional patriarchy since the chronological background of *Princess Mononoke* is set in Muromachi period, which, according to Kaori Yoshida, is “often considered historically to be a male warrior-oriented society,” namely a society under patriarchal system (Yoshida). Or, was he simply referring to a brand new technique that he deployed in the female protagonists, such as the variation of *Shojo*? These are possible aspects which will be examined while analyzing that whether or not Miyazaki’s female characterization starts a revolution as he complicates the gender scheme in the film where the female protagonists are problematized and generate confusion as the plot of the film goes on toward the end.

Given the plot of the film, *Princess Mononoke* has been associated with and further analyzed by scholars through an ecofeminist perspective. In the film, the plot revolves around the conflicts between humans’ desire for prosperity, namely the development of civilization, and nature’s reaction against humans’ exploitation and invasion. Each side is presented with a strong female character, that is, San on the side of nature and Lady Eboshi on the side of civilization. Naturally, ecofeminism, in which women and nature are aligned under the oppression of civilization and men, seems apt to analyze the film (Gaard). According to Wendi Sierra and her colleagues in “Nature, Technology, and Ruined Women: Ecofeminism and Princess Mononoke,” they indicate both San and Lady Eboshi are “troubling archetypes to women and their connection with nature” (Sierra). In other words, they argue San and Lady Eboshi do not fall into the stereotypical woman archetypes from the ecofeminist point of view (Sierra). Likewise, as Michelle J. Smith and Elizabeth Parsons point out in “Animating Child Activism: Environmentalism and Class Politics in Ghibli’s Princess Mononoke (1997) and Fox’s Fern Gully (1992),” “the ecofeminist binaries are profoundly overturned by Miyazaki’s extensive spread of powerful female characters in varied roles” (Smith).

Despite the agreement on the atypical characterization under the lens of ecofeminism,

disparities emerge when it comes to how the depiction of masculinity and femininity in the female protagonists function. For instance, Sierra et al. suggest that Lady Eboshi's coexisting masculinity and femininity are her struggles and eventually lead to her ultimate failure (Sierra). On the contrary, Smith and Parsons indicate Miyazaki's characters render "the dividing line between these binaries as not only as able to be transgressed but as fluid and, in so doing, dissolves differences" (Smith). In brief, straddling the binary of masculinity and femininity is depicted negatively, whereas the opposite side argues such a characterization breaks the stereotypical order of masculinity and femininity, which goes back to the discussion question "does Miyazaki's female characterization manage to create the revolution of gender in the film." Under the current debates, this paper attempts to argue the female characterization in *Princess Mononoke* is only partially revolutionary and to illustrate the potential concerns in Miyazaki's gender characterization.

Undeniably, San and Lady Eboshi can be differentiated from the typical female characters in contemporary Japanese animated works, in which the element of *shojo*, or young girls, is a dominant component in the mainstream market. *Shojo* is defined to be at the age "between childhood and adulthood, cutely attractive but outside the heterosexual economy and privileged by associations with freedom" (Freiberg). Compared to the typical figures in the popular culture of *shojo*, San is neither sexually appealing as in the shapely *shojo* figures nor cute (the lack of *kawaii* in *shojo*). In the very first close-up scene of San, she is seen with a face smeared in blood, rendering the audience a ferocious and intimidating image of her. In addition, San's figure is not traditionally depicted as *shojo* characters in other Japanese animation, such as *Aa Megamisama* where the female characters are portrayed erotically in their shape with the typical wide eyes. Likewise, in "Confronting Master Narratives: History as Vision in Miyazaki Hayao's Cinema of De-Assurance," Susan Napier indicates "Miyazaki's heroines differ from the typical *shojo* in their activeness, determination, and independence" (Napier). While Lady Eboshi is not characterized as a female at her age of

*shojo*, she shares similar masculine courage and heroism like San. When San entered Iron Town and finally made it to fight Lady Eboshi, Lady Eboshi ordered her soldiers make way for San so that the two of them could battle with each other. In doing so, not only did Lady Eboshi show neither fear nor even intimidation, but this invitation of combat almost seems like a one-on-one classic Western heroic duel with bystanders, here the people of Iron Town, around them cheering for the heroes.

However, this technique of Western heroism infusion and embodiment of determination and independence that are coded as male had been deployed by Miyazaki in most of his prior works in the 1980s and 1990s. As Susan Napier suggests, Miyazaki's works support the idea of *kokusaika*, or globalization, and part of Miyazaki's success in box office could be credited to his intriguing application of "global fantasy, legends, and science fiction to create original stories" (Napier). Although the narratives of *Princess Mononoke* is based on the domestic fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Muromachi period, the characters are evidently not depicted traditionally because of their, for example, Western heroic behaviors. Similar to what Napier agrees, *Princess Mononoke* "is certainly not a conventional history film" (Napier). Further, resembling characters characterized by this technique in *Princess Mononoke* have made their appearance in Miyazaki's prior films. For instance, Miyazaki, in *Castle in the Sky*, introduces a strong female protagonist, Sheeta, whose heroic traits almost outshines the male protagonists while Kiki in *Kiki's Delivery Service* captures the audience with her activeness and independence. In "From Animation to Anime: Drawing Movements and Moving Drawings," Thomas Lamarre cites an interview with Miyazaki on *Castle in the Sky* and argues "Castle in the Sky is ostensibly a boy's [Pazu's] adventure story," contending his characterization in the film is possibly a play on femininity within the frame of gender convention (Lamarre).

Given Miyazaki's tendency to blur and play on masculinity and femininity, how he depicts the masculinity and femininity of San and Lady Eboshi and how the depiction can be

further interpreted both should then be examined in order to understand whether or not the characterization is a revolution. On the surface, Lady Eboshi appears to be rather feminine, yet the embodiment of her masculinity and femininity grows more problematized as the plot carries on. From her outfit and make-up, Lady Eboshi is clearly feminine. However, her masculinity is highly remarked in the ambitious way she rules the people in Iron Town and oppresses the nature. Her core drive of invading the nature is to not only secure and prosper Iron Town where she rules but also to expand her reputation and influence towards other nations. Because of this endless hunger for power, she will not stop the aggression against nature from which she benefits. Described by Sierra et al., “she is war, she is destruction and she is power (Sierra). One of the men in town also told Ashitaka when he first arrived at Iron Town: “You better watch out there, young man. Lady Eboshi wants to rule the world” (Miyazaki). These traits of Lady Eboshi are all conventionally coded as male. Yet, she reveals female-coded caring and loving traits privately in her secret chamber where she creates a shelter and offers an opportunity for the crippling and/or badly injured lepers to work and live on. Moreover, she repeatedly asserts her identity as a woman and even humorously jokes about it sometimes. In fact, it is possible that she thinks women are superior to men as she told the women in town they should not trust men. In addition, as Gonza appears to be her hand who is always by her side, Toki, however, is actually who Lady Eboshi lays trust in, taking on the responsibility of iron manufacture.

Similar to the characterization of Lady Eboshi, women in Iron Town are presented to be in control of society. Iron Town is a fortress whose economy and power are derived from the production of iron and firearms, which is the reason Lady Eboshi initiates the attack on the forest so that more resources for iron can be used to thrive the fortress. In other words, the prosperity of this society that is Iron Town entirely relies on iron manufacture. Women are in full charge of the procedure of the fortress’ vital iron manufacture while men are assigned to patrol on the border walls of the fortress. Moreover, during the attack from San and the war



between the Samurai and Iron Town, abundant scenes where men and women stand together with rifles in hands and courageously fight against the intruders can be seen. Miyazaki is clearly stressing on the significance of women and attempting to overturn the conventional patriarchal society. Likewise, as Kaori Yoshida agrees in “National Identity (Re)Construction in Japanese and American Animated Film: Self and Other Representation in Pocahontas and Princess Mononoke,” “Eboshi and town women coming from different backgrounds together prevent potential patriarchal authority from emerging” (Yoshida). Like Yoshida suggests, Lady Eboshi, who brings these women together, is a key component to achieve the avoidance of patriarchy in Iron Town, but does the depiction of Lady Eboshi herself align with that?

By placing Lady Eboshi in a role that is traditionally taken by men while confounding her masculinity and femininity, Miyazaki portrays a fluid spectrum that suggests an inner androgyny within Lady Eboshi, a new woman that is a positive representation of female and their femininity; be that as it may, her masculine end on the spectrum backfires on her in the end. As Sierra et al. points out, Lady Eboshi is “in fact a perfect demonstration of the ‘natural disaster heroine’ archetype” (Sierra). By “natural disaster heroine,” it is referred to what Cynthia Belmont describes:

The disaster films, which in some cases overtly connect the destructive power of nature with a disapproving view of women in positions of authority, portray the trouble with nature as being tied to the dissolution of traditional gender roles: as they foster a fear of and drive to conquer nature, they also feed cultural anxiety about women’s empowerment and suggest that meekness and passivity are required of women if order is to be restored to a chaotic, unstable world (Belmont).

The masculine empowerment of Lady Eboshi later transitions into recklessness under the male manipulation of Jigo, the monk, and ultimately leads to her failure which suggests she should not straddle the masculine and feminine ends of spectrum. Subsequently, with Ashitaka being the savior of Iron Town, the empowerment of Lady Eboshi, who is now hurt

both physically (the loss of one arm) and authoritatively, is removed as the natural order is restored with Shishigami's head returned, and she has to submit to the male leader Ashitaka, implying female's need of "meekness and passivity" and the need for Iron Town to construct a conventional patriarchal society with a male leader (Belmont). In the end, she turns into a stereotypical and traditional female who gives in to the male, so do the women in Iron Town. Compared with Lady Eboshi, San, at first glance, may seem to be coded as masculine due to her wild and ruthless traits. However, according to Catherine M. Roach in "Mother/Nature Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics," Mother Nature reflects two sides: good mother and bad mother (Roach). The good mother features being "providing, caring, self-sacrificing, and exhaustible," whereas the bad mother can be "dangerous, cruel, and torturous" which is as "inherently feminine" as the traits of good mother (40, 76). Therefore, her ferocity should be defined as feminine instead.

That said, unlike the ecofeminist archetypes where women and nature are the oppressed, Miyazaki noticeably attempts to shape San as a female who rises against the oppression from civilization, which seemingly strengthens her femininity and renders an unconventional portrayal of femininity; however, by doing so, San's femininity, in fact, is marginalized and coded as otherness that is not accepted by the social convention. This becomes more obvious in her interaction with Ashitaka. When San is rescued by Ashitaka from her failed assassination of Lady Eboshi and recovers her sense, she immediately jumps back and positions herself defensively with her knife, resembling an alert wild animal and showing the conspicuous contrast with "human" Ashitaka. San's position between nature and humans is further challenged by her step-mother, Moro, when she says to Ashitaka: "now, my poor, ugly, beautiful daughter is neither human nor wolf" (Miyazaki). Eventually, San and her femininity depicted are symbolically defined to be outside of norms when she refuses Ashitaka's offer to join society with him at the end of the film. Nevertheless, such a portrait of San not only retains San's primitive femininity that cannot be tamed but also sets her free

from the cliché and, most importantly, from any stereotypical, discriminatory or patriarchal system.

Despite Miyazaki's failure to create the revolutionary characterization in Lady Eboshi and subsequently the women in Iron Town, he did create the revolution of San. And this paper does not intend to imply *Princess Mononoke* is a bad film or to degrade its success. In box office, *Princess Mononoke* managed to top the charts of Japanese highest-grossing film and highest-grossing animated films, until it was surpassed with the release of, respectively, *Titanic* and Miyazaki's next worldly-renowned work, *Spirited Away* ("Hayao"). Compared to those in his prior works, the characterization in *Princess Mononoke* is masterfully presented by Miyazaki. In spite of the concerns argued above, he succeeded in providing different aspects of femininity in San, whereas a number of other similarly-themed films fall short. For instance, Smith and Parsons indicate Crysta in *FernGully*, the equivalent of San as the representation of nature, is characterized as "visually hyper-feminine" and shows the superficial female representation of being "unintelligent" and "powerless" while Miyazaki introduces the primitive side of femininity in nature (Smith). The atypical ending of *Princess Mononoke* where we see San refuses Ashitaka's offer to join him and live happily ever after alludes to the untamable nature, which then efficiently accomplishes Miyazaki's motive to remind people of humans' loss of awe of nature ("Interview"). Likewise, Miyazaki does not simply reverse the gender of the town leader from male to female. Instead, he combines a variety of elements, as discussed above, and infuses them into Lady Eboshi, a character with depth despite her failure to break the convention. Even though Hayao Miyazaki does not completely establish a breakthrough of gender characterization with these characters in *Princess Mononoke* because of the overall return to patriarchy, he never stops astounding us with his complex yet fascinating characters, each one with a story to be told.

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