Eastern Princesses: Hayao Miyazaki's Women, Nature and Identity

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This is an abstract of a paper presented at the 22nd Annual Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) international conference held at Yogyakarta, Indonesia in July 2013.

Please note that this paper is under publication review.

Abstract

Hayao Miyazaki has come to be known as one of the most revered anime directors of all time. The international success of Spirited Away (2001) coupled with the film winning an Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2002 has cemented Miyazaki’s popularity as a great auteur. Miyazaki’s Princess Mononoke/Mononoke-hime (1997) was “the highest grossing Japanese film of all time” (Napier, 2001) highlighting the pervasiveness of anime in Japan. Known for his powerful environmental themes, Miyazaki’s films also feature strong female protagonists who drive the stories forth, a characteristic that seems unconventional given western cinematic norms. Miyazaki’s women are not the other, indeed they take centre stage. Susan Napier (2001) observes that Miyazaki “has played a vital role in creating shojo in anime,” though Miyazaki’s shojo (school girl) is distinctively “quite assertive and independent.” Also known for his detailed visuals and complex stories, Miyazaki’s animated worlds are deep, textured and not limited to children. Bigelow (2009) notes that Miyazaki’s visual imagery acts “as a counterweight to the morbidity of conventional thinking.” Miyazaki’s diegesis comprises of images of a vibrant, rich, living and sustaining natural environment.

We examine two of Hayao Miyazaki’s films, Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind/ Kaze no tani no Naushika (1984) and Princess Mononoke (1997) while drawing on principles from ecological feminism, which regards the identities and experiences of women and nature as one, oppressed by patriarchy. As the natural environmental occupies a great deal of space in Miyazaki’s diegesis, and his female characters are central to narratives linking humans and nature, Miyazaki’s cinema in essence reinforces the symbolic link between women and nature. Nausicaa of the Valley of the...
*Wind* is set in a post-apocalyptic Caucasian world, where humans have set out to destroy the very environment they had made toxic, not realising that Nature has shrugged off the toxicity and is alive. Nausicaa, the protagonist princess of the Valley of the Wind brings the ultimate balance to this disharmonious world. Though both her name and physical identity is Caucasian, Nausicaa is in spirit Asian. *Princess Mononoke*’s (1997) namesake, San, also known as Princess Mononoke, is the embodiment of nature and animals, as she was raised as a wolf. Miyazaki’s female protagonists are not simply pitted against men. Indeed, patriarchy is found embedded in spirit and not in body. Despite all the destruction that the spirit of Man brings upon nature and therefore upon the female spirit, Nature survives and resurfaces, as can be seen in both *Mononoke-hime* and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. Miyazaki’s female protagonists represent an alternative Asian reading of women’s identities. Drawing from Miyazaki’s rooting in the Japanese Shinto belief, Miyazaki’s Nature herself is not subdued, nor constrained by anthropocentrism; she is raw, wild, nurturing, sustaining- representing an alternate universe.

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References