

Princess Mononoke from the Perspective of Spivak's Postcolonial Feminism

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Abstract. Since its release, Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* has often been interpreted within the frameworks of ecocriticism and feminism, but existing studies often neglect its implicit power structures. To overcome this limitation, this paper employs Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory to critically reread the film. Through an analysis of the three main characters—Lady Eboshi, San, and Ashitaka—this paper finds that: Lady Eboshi's "female utopia," Tatara, is actually based on the plunder of the forest, and her discourse replicates the imperialist logic of conquering the "other"; San, as a "cultural hybrid" rejected by both humans and beasts, is trapped of being a "subaltern," and her resistance is assumed as irrationality by the dominant discourse; while Ashitaka's mediator role implicitly contains the "savior" narrative criticized by Spivak, weakening the subjectivity of female characters. The study shows that there is a complex relationship of oppression in *Princess Mononoke*, and Spivak's theory can help reveal this relationship.

Keywords: *Princess Mononoke*, Spivak, Postcolonial Feminism, Subaltern, Other

1. Introduction

Since its release in 1997, Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* has become a milestone in the history of global animation due to its epic narrative, profound ecological concern and three-dimensional character portrayal. The movie is set in Muromachi history in Japan, depicting a war between humans who destroy the nature and animal gods who protects it. It tells the story of Ashitaka, a cursed young boy, who seeks to lift his curse and mediates between the two sides [1].

This paper is focused on the research background of *Princess Mononoke*. Scholarly interpretations of the movie consist of two parts: one is ecocriticism, which regards the film as a praise of the power of nature and a critique of anthropocentrism [2]; the other is feminist criticism, which praises Tatara Town as a self-sufficient "female utopia" established by marginalized women, showing strong female power and deconstructing the image of women in patriarchal society [3]. However, both of these mainstream interpretations have their problems. Ecocriticism typically sees "humanity" as a homogeneous whole, ignoring differences in gender, class, and power. Early feminist criticism falls into a simple empowerment narrative, and is not able to explain whether the construction of the Lady Eboshi's "female utopia" relies on constructing the forest and its creatures as the "other" to be conquered. Therefore, breaking down the restrictions of previous interpretations

and discovering that the text is deeply colonial in spirit is of great relevance to improve the understanding of Princess Mononoke.

To reach the above goal, this paper analyses primarily the power structure of the three main characters in the movie: Lady Eboshi, San and Ashitaka. By taking Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory of feminism together with close reading, it is possible to analyze the film story and character relationships. The advantage of this method lies in its effectiveness in deconstructing the implicit power discourse in the text and revealing marginal voices and oppressive relationships ignored by the mainstream discourse, thus facilitating the research.

The final research goals of this study are: Firstly, to investigate how Lady Eboshi justifies her abuse by constructing discourse, and to show the link between this discourse and imperialism; Secondly, to analyze how San loses her subjectivity under dual oppression, and why her resistance is devalued as irrationality; Thirdly, to explore how Ashitaka's seemingly neutral mediation reproduces the imperialist "savior" narrative critiqued by Spivak, and what his mediation lacks as the structure goes.

This study not only helps to gain a greater insight into Princess Mononoke, but also reflects the applicability and boundaries of Spivak's theory in text analysis, providing new perspectives and discussion space for related research.

2. Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory

Spivak's theory is characterized by heterogeneity. She does not follow a single tradition, but learns from the state-of-the-art theories and combines them into her own theories [4]. Therefore, to understand her key ideas, it is first necessary to explain the three foundational cornerstones constituting her theory: postcolonialism, feminism and Marxism.

Spivak started from Derrida's deconstructionism. Whereas Said relies on Foucault, she prefers Derrida, since his critique of European racism and logocentrism allows to break down the imperialist axiom of the Western subject as a universal form. Of course, she is also aware of the limitations of deconstructionism and tries to use and surpass Derrida's deconstructive approach.

Moreover, Spivak is quite a feminist—in spite of having a firm critical approach to the mainstream—that is, Western white feminism. In contrast to traditional feminism, she concerns women in the Third World who suffer from several types of oppression, including race, class, and gender. By criticizing the male-centric and Western white feminist discourse, she attempts to reveal their real circumstances and help them gain a voice [5].

At the same time, Spivak deeply studies Marxism. Spivak very much values the power of Marxism, especially its analysis of the international division of labor and the globalization of capital. Therefore, she can make explicit the situation of Third World women in transnational capital. However, she also questions the gender gap of Marxism from a feminist point of view, pointing out that Marx's theory of labor, alienation, and surplus value ignores women who take unpaid labor and reproduction in the family. She argues that it is necessary to reexamine the nature and history of the production of alienation, labor, and property from the perspective of women and reproduction [6].

In this way, Spivak sets the ground for the two key ideas of her postcolonial feminist criticism.

2.1. "The subaltern cannot speak"

Spivak's term "subaltern" originates from the early 20th century Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies Group [7]. Spivak expands the term to include those who are

doubly marginalized in politics, economics, and culture in the presence of colonial rule and not from native elite narratives. She particularly focuses on the speechless women that have been triple oppressed by colonialism, class, and patriarchy. As the "subaltern of the subaltern," their subjectivity is most deeply obscured.

"Cannot speak" means that in the dominant discourse structure, the subaltern's voice cannot be heard and cannot become an effective historical or political voice. Spivak illustrates this with the example of Indian "widow immolation": between the colonialist narrative of "saving brown women" and the native patriarchal narrative glorifying it as "chastity," the subjectivity of the immolated widow is erased. Her conclusion is: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears" [8]. The intellectual's task is not naively to "let the subaltern speak," but to analyze the power structure that caused their silence by tracing the traces of their silence.

2.2. The complicity of white women with imperialism

Through readings of classic Western feminist texts, Spivak reveals the complicity between white feminism and imperialist ideology.

In *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, Spivak points out that the narrative dynamic of *Jane Eyre*, considered as a feminist classic, precisely relies on imperialist ideology. The heroine Jane Eyre's path to self-realization, from "anti-family" to "legitimate family," is built upon the sacrifice of another colonial woman—Bertha Mason, from the West Indies, demonized as a beast. Bertha must be portrayed as inhuman, mad, and ultimately self-destructive to facilitate Jane's status as the "feminist individualist heroine." Spivak interprets this narrative as an "allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism," and "the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" [9]. The situations in the other two texts are less sharp but also problematic.

This suggests the fractures within the category of "woman". While Western white women are trying to achieve their own emancipation, and resist patriarchal power in their countries, they might think of Third World women as backward "others" needing salvation. This myth of "sisterhood" masks class and racial oppression under the international division of labor. Thus, gender oppression and racial repression are intertwined; without criticizing imperialism, the feminist emancipation does not seem to be complete.

3. Princess Mononoke from the perspective of Spivak's theory

Based on Spivak's postcolonial feminist theoretical framework, the following will critically analyze the three main characters in *Princess Mononoke* to reveal the colonial logic and power discourses in the text's deep structure.

3.1. Lady Eboshi: a complicit agent of imperialist logic

Lady Eboshi first appears as a resolute emancipator. The Tatara Town she establishes shelters prostitutes, lepers, and the oppressed, providing them with work and dignity. Women here are no longer appendages; they smelt iron, forge guns, and defend the town, demonstrating strong agency. All this seemingly constructs a "female utopia" that subverts feudal patriarchy, with Lady Eboshi as its founder and guardian. She positions herself and the townspeople as rebels against a tragic fate, their struggle for the most basic right to survive.

However, Spivak's theory deconstructs this highly persuasive rhetoric. In *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, Spivak reveals that certain Western feminist narratives of individual heroism often form a complicity with the imperialist project. For example, the self-realization of the heroine in *Jane Eyre* is built upon the sacrifice of the colonial woman Bertha Mason. This narrative constructs a silent, sacrificial "Other" to enable the establishment of the subject.

Therefore, the other side of Lady Eboshi and her "female utopia" becomes visible. The survival and prosperity of Tatara Town are rooted in the systematic plunder of the forest as the "Other." Smelting iron requires charcoal and ore, meaning continuous deforestation and excavation, and guns are the most effective tools for conquering nature. Lady Eboshi's discourse effectively replicates imperialist logic: legitimizing one's own violent expansion by constructing an external enemy hindering development and survival. Thus, a spiritual world is distorted into a mere object existing to satisfy one's own needs.

More thought-provoking is Lady Eboshi's attitude towards "knowledge" of the forest. She is not ignorant of the forest, on the contrary, she possesses highly scientific knowledge—she knows the secret of the Night-Walker's transformation between day and night, meticulously develops weapons to wound the gods. But this knowledge entirely serves the purpose of conquest and control. When she calmly explains to Ashitaka how the Boar God Nago turned into a demon due to her gunshot, she transforms a tragedy she herself created into an objective case study. Nago's suffering is obscured by "madness," and her own responsibility as the perpetrator is quietly erased in rational analysis. Knowledge, which should serve as a bridge for communication, is here turned into a tool of violence.

3.2. San: the doubly marginalized "subaltern"

Abandoned by humans and raised by the wolf god Moro, San is placed within the oppositional structure between Tatara Town and the forest. She is neither fully human nor purely bestial. This "neither-nor" hybrid identity makes her a typical figure of marginal subjectivity.

Spivak's proposition that "the subaltern cannot speak" provides a tool for understanding San's predicament. She points out that within the dual power structures of colonize and male, the truly subaltern woman cannot speak. San's situation is precisely this—she is an "Other" in a dual sense: though devoted to protecting nature, she cannot be fully accepted by the other animals in the forest because she is human; though retaining human language and behavior, she is deeply estranged from humans in her heart [10].

San's subjectivity is lost in this double exclusion. She cannot use the human discursive system to accuse Lady Eboshi of plundering the forest; her emotional and ethical appeals are difficult to translate into a language understandable to the opposing side. Consequently, her resistance can only manifest in embodied, violent forms—which precisely confirms the anthropocentric discourse labeling her as "savage" and "irrational." Her anger and sorrow are more often expressed through roars and combat, rendering her struggle defined as ineffective noise rather than dialogue to be heard. Her confrontation with Lady Eboshi thus becomes a tragic microcosm of the conflict between the subaltern and the colonizer: one side holds the rational discourse that legitimizes violence, the other can only counter with primal violence, which further reinforces its objectified position.

3.3. Ashitaka: the limitations of the "savior"

Ashitaka's journey begins with an undeserved calamity. To protect his village, he kills the demonized Nago, incurs a deadly curse, forced to travel, and gets drawn into a violent world. He

belongs neither completely to the "civilization" of Lady Eboshi and Tatara Town, nor to the "savagery" of San and the forest, thus potentially becoming an external, impartial mediator—and he indeed attempts to do so.

However, Spivak's critique in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* of the imperialist narrative that "white men are saving brown women from brown men" provides a new perspective for examining Ashitaka's actions [8]. She points out that this "savior" narrative, seemingly benevolent, actually conceals unequal power relations and strips the agency of those being "saved."

Some scholars note that the plot of *Princess Mononoke* can be seen as employing the mythological pattern of "violation—disaster—salvation" [11]. Ashitaka is precisely this "savior" criticized by Spivak; his seemingly neutral mediation repeats the structure of male and colonial intervention. He tries to interfere in the conflict between the two women with universalist slogan of "stop the hatred." In this context, San's anger at the destruction of her home, and Lady Eboshi's struggle for survival—these differing female experiences in relation to their circumstances—are transformed into irrational "hatred" to be overcome, implicitly denying women's possibility to fully adjust to conflict. Particularly in his attitude towards San, he repeatedly says that "You're beautiful" and "You must live". This seemingly caring words in fact sees San as someone who needs protection.

Furthermore, the failure of his mediation reveals the structural limitations. Ashitaka's position between the forest and the human world does permit him to mediate, yet it obscures the limitations of his own perspective and the unequal power relations. The outcomes of his interventions often run counter to his good intentions, failing to prevent the rise of violence and chaos. For instance, his attempt to arrest San from killing Lady Eboshi indirectly leads to the shooting of the Night-Walker. This powerlessness is just the postcolonial intellectual dilemma exhibited by Spivak: he can identify contradictions in a smart way, but fails to find effective solutions to the structural conflict. The essential value of the film is that it is based precisely on this unsolvable dilemma, rather than giving a virtual answer [12].

4. Conclusion

Utilizing Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory, this study finds that: the existence of Lady Eboshi's "female utopia" is based on the systematic plunder of the forest as the "Other," and her discursive logic forms a hidden complicity with imperialist narratives. San, as a "cultural hybrid" and doubly marginalized "subaltern," loses her subjectivity under the double exclusion by humans and beasts, her resistance devalued by dominant discourse as irrational violence. Ashitaka's seemingly neutral role as mediator inadvertently repeats the androcentrism inherent in the "savior" narrative, and the failure of his mediation exposes the limitations of universalist solutions in the face of structural opposition.

Therefore, the main conclusion of this study is: Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* is not a simple ecological fable or feminist ode, instead, it deeply encompasses the intertwined oppression that Spivak is revealing: the entanglement of gender, race, class and colonial logic. The significance of this study are twofold: On one hand, it provides a more fundamental postcolonial feminist view of *Princess Mononoke*, breaking through the limitations of previous ecological and early feminist interpretations. On the other hand, it has been shown that Spivak theory can be applied to cross-cultural text in a meaningful way, showing that her essential ideas such as "subaltern cannot speak" can be used to clarify complicated relations within a complex framework.

Future research can be directed towards the following directions: Firstly, the analytical framework of this study can be applied to by Miyazaki or other Japanese animated texts to study

how similar postcolonial and gender power structures are presented in different stories; Secondly, one can further discuss whether beyond the dilemmas with Princess Mononoke, there is an ethical principle which goes beyond the "either/or" opposition and expresses the "other," and that other postcolonial or ecocritical theories do likewise; Finally, the limitations of Spivak's theory itself—such as her silence on particular practical paths after giving a critical answer—can be further explored in cooperation with other texts.

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