

# Jungian Archetypes in high fantasy films: An explorative study of Disney movies.

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## Abstract

Myths and fairy tales which upturns physical laws are present in all cultures and societies. The collective unconscious carries these, thus contributing to the repeated motifs of the myths, folk tales and fairy tales. Adored by a universal audience, fantasy films, mostly made around them, have a cult following. This paper attempts to understand the latent Jung archetypes focusing on the Mother archetype present in selected fantasy movies made by Disney from 2010. Qualitative methodology involving content analysis is used to identify the archetypal elements in the films. The movies are analysed based on Jungian Archetype, the Mother. The central argument of the paper is that the strongest and majorly present archetype portrayed in Disney films of this decade is 'the mother'.

Keywords : myth, archetype, high fantasy,

## Introduction

Oldest forms of narratives with unknown origins, Myths attract humans in all walks of their lives. They offer fantastic narratives with magical beings, sorcerers and supernatural events. Being away from reality and from natural facts and logic, they are often taken as falsehood and unreal (Fowkes,2010). Physical laws and natural phenomena are upturned and imagination knows no limits in myths. Present in all societies and culture, they become the base for the lore, folk tales, legends and fairy tales.

According to Jung (Iaccino, 1998; Jung, 1953) the source of all myths is the collective unconscious. This is attributed as the reason for the similarities and narrative motifs present in them. Myths, though concealed with the wisdom of the ages, are often dispensed as false legends. Folk tales and fairy tales are part of growing up. May be, that's the reason for the academic and non-academic community to condemn these as children's tales. These tales are at the heart of every community and is generated from the unexplored unconscious of all humans. Each and every milestones in the evolution of human beings have had its impressions in the collective mind, thus the collective unconscious (Jung, 1968). Thus the basic needs, the inborn characteristics and tendencies of the mind are "imprinted". The collective unconscious carries these, thus

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contributing to the repeated motifs of the myths, folk tales and fairy tales. Nevertheless, Self-discovery has been understood as the most important need in life (Bettelheim, 1976). Understanding meaning of life is a quite difficult task which has to be acquired step by step from early childhood. Fairy tales offer a solution to this by situating a child in a very different world where the challenges and threats of the protagonist remains similar to that of the child concerned (Bettelheim, 1976).

The conflicts the child faces, the resolutions he or she may receive are all placed in the narrative of the stories. The child relates its experience with them. She/he gets attracted to a story if it can “enrich” her / his life, “stimulates her/his imagination” , acknowledging her/ his difficulties and provide solutions to her/ his problems(Bettelheim, 1976). The evolution of human species, the problems they face, the resolutions, the natural phenomena, birth, death, all of these find a room in these tales. Knowingly or unknowingly people find answers to the life’s problems in them. Archetypes of various kinds are thus present in all these stories.

All these imaginary stories weaved around myths and folklores often find their way to the audiences’ notice in the silver screen through the genre, fantasy films. Adored by a universal audience, most of the fantasy films have a cult following. The fandom sites and blogs for science fiction and fantasy films vouch this. Criticised for pushing off the audience from a realistic experience, this genre is taken to be enjoyed for leisure and entertainment. The motifs that are present in the age old legends find their place in the fantasy films. Housing boundless imagination, the genre demands high cinematic and technological novelties. Through CGI, motion capture techniques and animation, the mystical and miraculous worlds are presented on the screen.

Major studios compete for the production of these films. Walt Disney, Warner Brothers, DreamWorks animation, New Line Cinema and the like offer the audience visual treat by means of sword and sorcery tales. Most often the films are much awaited by the global audience. They have much hope in the companies while the social media are bombarded by anticipated stories and expectations on the upcoming films.

But like these tales on which they are made, these films are also least seriously considered. Unsurprisingly, fantasy film scholarship remains a much unexplored domain, with little attention fetched from serious academic milieu. This genre is considered by the academics as meant only for children and young adults (Fowkes, 2010). Evading the norms and grammar of reality must have aroused mixed response from the academic society.

Walt Disney Company, headquartered in California, has attracted the audience through their films based on age old fairy tale collections. Rather than Brother Grimm's fairy tales, the tales promoted by Walt Disney are taken into heart by young and old alike. Disney's films tower above the rest in the genre; they have basically owned the genre for decades, with its animated classics and live-action remakes.

This paper attempts to understand the latent Jung archetypes focusing on the Mother archetype present in selected Disney movies from 2010. Qualitative methodology involving content analysis is used to identify the archetypal elements in the films under consideration.

### **Archetypes, Myths and Fantasy Films**

Archetypes are images, motifs and symbols seen in lore and myths (Jung 1953). They are present in the collective unconscious and thus appear in myths and stories of all cultures. In other words, the collective unconscious is built with these archetypes. Jung has classified the archetypes into many types like persona, mother, shadow, anima, animus, etc. (Iaccino, 1998). Each has been defined elaborately by Jung in his works. They emerge in most of the fantasy films too. These films are built with Hero's journey along with other motifs. The film, as life itself is a transformation, a journey of self-discovery embedded with philosophical motifs and symbols. Various archetypes have their strong presence in these movies. Persona, The Hero, the Mother, the Shadow are majorly found in these movies (Iaccino, 1998; Nikolejeva, 2003).

The movies selected for analysis are Tangled(2010), Brave (2012), Frozen(2013) and Moana (2016). The movies are analysed based on Jungian Archetype, Mother. The central argument of the paper is that the strongest and majorly present archetype portrayed in Disney films of this decade is 'the mother'.

### **The Mother**

Mother archetype can assume many forms including natural mother, mother in law, grandmother, governess etc. At the same time, in many tales they appear as symbols which connote devotion, fertility, fruitfulness, protection, help (Jung, 1953). Thus, that which attributes to wisdom, magic, spiritual, growth, fertility, symbolise the mother archetype. This can assume the form not only of human mother but of goddesses, heaven, spiritual space, moon, sea, garden, "ploughed field", rock, cave, deep well, a magic circle and the like (Jung, 1953). The evil mother archetype also includes witches, dragons

etc. Jung also talks about “the loving and terrible mother” who provides the readers with an ambivalent feeling.

This decade had been phenomenal in the narrative construction in many of the Walt Disney films. They broke the binds of animation with regard to *The Jungle Book*, *The Lion King* by bringing CGI to live characters. They also have brought in live actors to their age-old damsels in distress like *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast* and even another version of *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Maleficent*. Apart from these recreations, they came up with some heroines who did not end up in a lip-lock kiss or a wed-lock. Nevertheless, the archetypal symbols and projections are more evidently present in these films.

### **Tangled, Brave, Frozen, Moana and The Jungian Mother**

*Tangled* (2010) is the story of Rapunzel told in a slightly altered narrative. Disney has added magic to the heroine’s hair which is sought after by the witch. She keeps her in the tower for this magic which offers the witch to be young and beautiful eternally. The mother archetype can be seen here in varied symbols.

There is the obvious natural mother, the queen who loses her daughter in the beginning of the film. The film ends with the reunion of the mother and daughter, in the tight embrace. This mother suffers the loss of the daughter, misses her, and awaits her return. There is the negative construction of the mother archetype, the witch. She steals the princess from her castle, keeps her in a tall tower, far from the gaze of other human beings in pretence of protecting her. A type of mother-complex as explained by Jung (1953) is also projected here. The ‘imprisoned’ Rapunzel has a “shadow existence” which is an attribute of the complex identified by Jung (ibid 25). He also identifies another feature which is “prolonging mother’s life by the daughter through a sort of continuous blood transfusion” Jung (1953). This is displayed in the film when the witch combs Rapunzel’s hair, her beauty, youth and life are rejuvenated and redeemed. It’s interesting that, though imprisoned and even portrayed as evil, the witch mother does not harm her in any way. Rapunzel also tries to make the witch happy by being obedient, though at heart she fights her instincts to see the outside world.

Apart from these clear and noticeable mother figures, there are symbolic mother archetypes too in ‘*Tangled*’. The flower which is given to the queen in her pregnancy is one such symbol. As identified by Jung, flowers function as symbols of mother archetype (Jung 1953). This flower restores the life of the pregnant queen and is thus depicted as the life saver. He also mentions magic

in the category of mother. The magic which heals everything, the aging, fatal wound is representative of the spiritual mother. The hair provides magic. It heals, restores youth and make the bearer beautiful. It is also the unseen thread that combines all the happenings, functions and motifs together in the narrative. Here, Rapunzel herself acts in a latent mode as the mother archetype, when her tear brings back life to the hero, Eugene. This is another attribute of the mother archetype as explained by Jung.

‘Brave’, released in the year 2012, offered a break from the typical story-line presented by Disney over the years. It characterises the binding between the mother and daughter, with the magic overlay in the narrative. The caring mother is accidentally turned into a beast and the daughter tries to revive her. The Bear-beast is manifested as the mother-complex as identified by Jung. Though manifested as a beast, the mother tries to save her daughter even by risking her life. In the initial scene, the audience are provided with a cue regarding the bear- beast. The mother while playing with her daughter, catches her and says that she would gobble her. She also acts as gobbling playfully, in an act of love. The Bear can also be read as an unconscious psychological manifestation of a beast-mother.

The underlying magic exhibited as ‘wisps’ is a mother archetype. Jung (1968) treats magic as mother archetype. The natural phenomenon occurring is also the mother. Thus wisps connotes the symbolic mother. Though, the other archetypes like the father, trickster and the like are present, this archetype is the strongest and occupies the major share in the story-line of the film. This is the conflict creator and the resolution offeror, the one which constructs the story and makes it flow forward.

‘Frozen’ (2013), a tremendous box-office hit was acclaimed for its portrayal of sisterly love and breaking of stereotypes. The archetype, Persona is relevant in the film as the elder sister Elsa, who tries to hide her original personality. The movie is her accepting her power and regulating it so that it can be used wisely. The mother archetype is also strongly evident in the film. Elsa’s natural mother who died in the sea is the strength behind her daughters. This archetype has her hidden presence in all over the narrative.

The strongest mother archetype is Elsa herself. As the one who tries to control her younger sister, she is a perfect mother archetype with mother-complex working in her inner psyche. The conflict initially created at the coronation ceremony is through her opinion about Ana’s choice of a life partner. This is the mother acting in her role. She assumes the role of elder sister converted to mother. The authority, care and attitude she has on her sister, represents the

mother here. She is also the life giver for the snowmen, Olaf and Marshmallow. She gives life to them through magic and at the end, extends the life of Olaf. The magic present in Elsa is another mother archetype. Though fierce in the beginning, it becomes the healer and the force that holds the sisters together. It also provides the power Elsa needs to rule the kingdom. It is the spirit of Elsa in the film.

The ice which is present in the film is again the mother archetype, by portraying the natural phenomenon. Though the Hero, trickster, father figures are around, the mother archetype functions as the strongest in these movies.

Released in 2016, *Moana* says the life of the daughter of a chieftain, Moana, who is strong-willed and brave. There are quite a number of mother archetypes in the film. The initial ones to be mentioned here are her natural mother and her paternal grandmother. Moana's mother is shown in a woman-typical costume with long hair, a flower in the hair, chain and the mannerisms of a woman. Quite contrary, Moana has a loose hair, does not wear a chain or does not have mannerisms ascribed by the society to a girl. This binary opposition is pronounced by her mother's dialogue referring her to be like her father. But she, supports her in her decision to sail. Her grandmother calls herself, the village crazy lady. Though she also acts as the caregiver and magician archetypes, her latent and manifested archetypes are in the form of mother. She tells Moana the story of Maui and urges her to look for him and restore the heart of Te Fiti. She dies by the time Moana departs to the sea, but manifests as spirit, guiding her at moments of peril. She also guides her as a light in her voyage.

In the initial scene, a cute and little Moana who is greatly attracted by the sea, saves the life of a baby sea turtle. She is shown to have the motherly instinct while acting as the saver. In the scene where she tries to restore the heart of the goddess, Te Fiti, she shows the care of a mother and a daughter to the great goddess.

Ocean is an omnipresent mother archetype in the film. Moana is attracted by it. In the initial scene the ocean is displayed as playing with her and caressing her hair like a mother. The ocean is shown to be helpful and it is always present for Moana's guidance. The heart itself which looks like 'the spiral of Yin and Yang' is also a mother archetype. Its heart which creates life through Te Fiti. Thus the function of creation makes it a mother archetype.

Te Ka the volcanic demon who is made of earth and fire is the evil force, the negative mother. She attacks as fire. But she is later revealed as Te Fiti herself

without the heart. Once Moana restores the heart, she transforms into Te Fiti, The ultimate Great Mother archetype. She is restored and emerges from the ocean. The shot where the green Te Fiti emerged on the waves of the ocean symbolises the myth of Earth lying on the great sea. She later touches the black ground which becomes green. Plants, trees and flowers sprout from her. She wears a green tiara made of leaves and flowers. She is depicted as the Nature-Mother, the Greta mother archetype.

Having adopted elements from Polynesian Mythology, *Moana* also has a demigod, Maui, who carries a Fish-hook which could be decoded as a male phallic symbol. The attack of a male figure on the Te Fiti is also read the attack of male phallus over the female. He is also the archetype, trickster, who tries to establish himself as the hero too.

### **Conclusion**

Fantasy Films, which contains lores, myths and fairy tales, contain plethora of images which could be deciphered as mythical. These elements are derivated as explained by Jung from the collective unconscious. The archetypes which are present in these stories have their abundant representations in these films. Disney films are not exceptions. They are blamed for making gender stereotype and reinforcing the patriarchal paradigm. Still the Jungian archetypes are hugely present in these films.

Journey of life is shown along with the Hero's Journey. The rites of passage, the father, the hero, trickster, jester, persona, shadow and all other archetypes find their place in Disney movies. But the omnipresent and the strongest of archetypes present in Disney's recent animation movies is 'The Mother'. The mother archetype as explained by Jung is manifested as the provider of life, the helpful agency behind all beings, the magic, the nature, the provider, the supernatural being, and even as the evil witch or demon provide the major crux of these films. The symbolic phallic is altered by these mother archetypes bringing in the Nature itself as the powerful being. This archetype creates the conflict, resolves it and restores the balance of life.

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