



JAMES CAMERON'S *AVATAR* AS AN ECO NARRATIVE

Aparna K
Dept. of English, Sanathana Dharma College
Alappuzha
krishnaruparna@gmail.com

Abstract: The extension of power and dominion over a territory, group or culture constitutes imperialism. It can either be a hegemonic act or a forced one. Imperialism involves colonization. The term ecological imperialism was first pronounced by Alfred Crosby, which attributes to any deliberate or accidental introduction of animals, plants and disease posing a great threat, thereby creating an imbalance in the ecology of the colonized area. This paper attempts to foreground the imperialistic thirst of the white to conquer everything under and above the sun, featured in the epic science movie *Avatar* (2009) by the renowned director James Cameron. When watched through the spectacles of an ecologist, *Avatar* recounts the colonization of an alien space named Pandora and the struggle for existence of the Navi tribe to protect their mother goddess named Eywa. The movie depicts a live discourse which questions the worth of existence of every living being in this universe. The theory of deep ecology, which holds on the values of mutual respect, dependence and inter-relationships within the ecosystems can be applied to re-read this fiction. The paper explores the duality in Na'vi-human hybrids: which justifies the title of the film, their interaction with the Pandora environments and further destructions caused to the terrain due to mining of Unobtainium. The eco feminist notion in the use of a female Na'vi, Neytiri to know the secret

resources of the planet and the tree of souls which stands as the epitome of ecospirituality also demands a close introspection.

Key words: Ecological Imperialism, Deep Ecology, Eco Spirituality, Eco feminism

Avatar (2009) is a blockbuster science fiction movie that tells the saga of an unsuccessful mining mission. It is an anti-American movie written and directed by James Cameron, revealing his creative excellence once again after the fantabulous celluloid blasters *Titanic* and *Aliens*. Set in the twenty second century, it tells the tale of the colonization of a lush green gas giant planet called Pandora placed in the Alpha Centaury star system by humans in search of a mineral Unobtanium, a room temperature super conductor. The mining activities initiated by the Resource Development Administration (RDA) team from the earth create a huge imbalance in the ecology of Pandora, a home to unexplored plethora of flora and fauna. The mining extends till it becomes a great threat to the continued existence of a local tribe Na'vi- a quasi human species indigenous to Pandora.

The Pandora Ecosystem

James Cameron was successful in conceiving a visual paradise out of Pandora. This fictional planet is a green blanketed space filled with tropical rain forest and a diversity of bioluminescent species ranging from hexapods to a variety of exotic flora and fauna. The Pandoran ecology is strongly influenced by the presence of the mineral Unobtanium, whose super conductive properties allow it to float in the magnetic field. It is this property of Unobtanium that makes it valuable to the humans on earth. The presence of a mixture of gases such as; nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, methane and hydrogen sulphide makes the Pandora atmosphere poisonous. Hence humans wear exo- packs when they are outside their building or vehicle. The influence of Chinese

peaks can be seen in the floating Halleluah Mountains of Pandora. It resembles the Chinese Huang Shan mountains. The entire look of the Na'vi humanoids and the bioluminous terrain of Pandora were a dream inspired one, seen by Cameron's mother.

Ecological Imperialism and Deep Ecological Aspects in *Avatar*

Avatar is a science fiction which can be interpreted within the frame of deep ecology and imperialism. It is an action –adventure saga of self discovery woven in the context of imperialism and deep ecology. The story is set in a solid format, smoothly interconnecting the concepts of human invasion and its aftereffects in a planet. The extension of power and dominion over a territory, group or culture constitutes imperialism. It can either be a hegemonic act or a forced one. Imperialism involves colonization. The term ecological imperialism was first pronounced by Alfred Crosby, which attributes to any deliberate or accidental introduction of animals, plants and disease posing a great threat, thereby creating an imbalance in the ecology of the colonized area.. In *Avatar*, a deliberate move is held from the part of the Research Development Administration under the U S control with its leader Colonel Miles Quaritch to conquer the giant planet Pandora to extract the precious mineral Unobtanium. An extension of power from the earth disturbs the lives of inhabitants and an ultimate imbalance is created for the selfish needs of the humans on earth. The root cause of earth's destruction is man's selfish urge to plunder everything around him and the unsustainable practices that he opts for it, ultimately leading to the depletion of resources in earth. The name of the mineral Unobtanium, literally suggests that possibility of not obtaining the mineral and it happens so at the end of the film. The Na'vi humanoids fights back with all their power including their rich wildlife and throws out the colonizers to hell. It was their struggle for existence that plainly brings forth the truth of incompleteness without nature or it could be understood as the dependence of living things on their environment and the faith that makes them

adhere to it. Cameron brings in a parallel between this scene and the events connected to the September eleventh attacks on the World Trade Centre in the U.S. The imperialist face of U.S had been explicitly criticized by Cameron that he even comments on the role of U S in the Iraq war and the impersonal nature of the mechanized warfare in general.

Ecology is a branch of biology which determines the parameters of interference of living things with themselves and their immediate surroundings. According to Arne Naes, an ecological wisdom is necessary to answer the ethical question about how one should live. The prime assumption of deep ecology is to expand the ecological wisdom of population on behalf of the three principles of deep experience, deep question and deep commitment. Deep ecology invokes the intrinsic value in nature. Cameron presents the Na'vi humanoids, particularly the Omaticaya tribe group in Pandora as inseparable from of nature. They are such innocent, pure living beings like the other Pandoran organisms. The omnipotent presence of the nature Goddess Eywa is evidently presented throughout the movie, thereby strongly establishing the fact that nature has an intrinsic connection with all things in Pandora. It is this connection that is lost in the earth and it should be regained in order to retain the value of nature.

Eco feminism in *Avatar*

Eco feminism pinpoints feminism within the context of environmental concerns. It theorizes the female ways of being and thinking about nature throughout history. Ecological feminism projects the female perspectives on nature. In *Avatar*, James Cameron juxtaposes the innocence of nature via Neytiri against the quasi pure minded Dr. Grace Augustine, who turned against Colonel Miles Quaritch's decision of destroying the tree of souls which existed as a lifeline of the Na'vi community.

Neytiri, the daughter of the Omaticaya clan leader Eytukan and Mo'at (the spiritual leader to the clan), is represented in various life situations in which her feminine qualities are projected. Neytiri is the first one who meets Jake's avatar and helps him to escape from thanator attack. Her instinct to take care an alien in her planet seeks forth the genuine human goodness. Even in between all the commotion of colonization, Cameron brilliantly portrayed the love tale of Jake and Neytiri. Through their relationship a fusion of different cultures and competing communities are made possible. Neytiri- Jake relationship is portrayed in a colorful manner. Her innocence is sometimes questioned by Jake's curiosity to know about the tree of souls and the vast Unobtainium deposits under it. The physical attraction of Jake towards Neytiri's alien appearance and vice versa could be perceived as a believable one. Neytiri remains as an embodiment of the gentleness of nature.

Another prominent female cast is that of Dr. Grace Augustine, head of the Avatar project. Grace primarily hates Jake Sully who was a replacement of his deceased twin brother, as inferior and good for nothing. During the second half of the movie Grace herself transforms into Avatar and comes in aid of Jake for settlement options with the Na'vi humanoids. The innate goodness of a woman is mirrored through her strong arguments with Colonel Miles Quattrich, who ordered to destroy the home tree for the excavation of Unobtainium.

The character of Mo'at, the spiritual leader of the Omaticaya clan brings out the extensive possibilities of placing a woman in the prime position of a clan. Mo'at is the mother of Neytiri. Her quick decision making capacity and her advices to her daughter are crucial in the story. One could observe Mo'at as a responsible mother who guides her daughter and an able leader. Cameron pictures Mo'at as a strong woman who remains self gathered even in the loss of her husband. She handles cleverly the turbulent situations faced by her people and even dares to negotiate with humans.

The worship of mother Goddess, Eywa depicts the indigenous culture of respecting the origin of every living organism in a feminine aura. Eywa stands as a female icon protecting her subjects in the Pandora. The essence of femininity is conceived in the spiritual symbol of Eywa as an infinite source of love and care.

Here the character of Dr. Grace Augustine proves to be a perfect white. She acted as an advocate of peaceful relations with the Na'vis. She even initiated the very deed of setting up a school to teach them English.

Eco spirituality in *Avatar*

Eco spirituality marks the fusion of religion and environmentalism. It beholds the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment. Eco spirituality considers the nature-earth-universe trio as sacred entities. *Avatar* pictures the alien space Pandora as a rich green biosphere with a bunch of sacred tree groups like the home tree, the tree of souls, the tree of voices etc. which strives to revitalize the connection of the natives with their environment. The home tree in *Avatar* is portrayed as a giant tree which is great enough to house hundreds of Omaticaya clan members. The tree resembles a honey comb structure that accommodates the Na'vi and establishes a permanent connection with Eywa. It is in this tree that a Na'vi performs his daily chores, thus creating an inevitable bond with nature. This giant tree is central to the story since it occupies a distinguished position in the Pandora landscape. Life in Pandora flourishes around the home tree which is situated above an enormous source of Unobtanium. Since it was a sacred site to the pandorans the destruction of the home tree by humans using missiles and rockets led to the Na'vis' wrath over the humans.

Like many sacred sites in Pandora, the tree of souls and the tree of voices ensure the frequent connection of the Na'vi with nature. The tree of souls stands as a communication tool in the biological network of Pandora. Cameron once described the tree of souls as “an input-output station”. The tree of souls is the manifestation of nature being an intermediate to living organisms. In the movie, the tree is pictured as a capable medium to transfer a specific energy from one body to another. The tree of voices is a cluster of illuminated small herbs that stands as an icon of the past reverberating the voices of Na'vi ancestors. The long connectivity between generations is established through the tree of voices. It is before the tree of voices that Neytiri and Jake choose each other as mates, thus making the tree as a totem of their sacred relationship. The fact that nature is part of every living being and one's entry and exit from the material world is truly indebted to the sacred spirit inherent in nature is justified by the wood sprites in *Avatar*. Wood sprites are airborne jellyfish like seeds of the holy tree. They are pure spirits. There is an instance in the movie projecting the value of these seeds: that the Omaticaya clan plants one of the seeds in a deceased Na'vi body that his conscious became part of the Eywa. This process brings out the amalgamation of nature- humanoid relationship and the faith that everything is safe under the arms of nature, turning its position to that of a divine one.

Cameron's definition to the film's title was subjective and resonates his occidental turn towards the Hindu Gods. The word 'Avatar' is literally defined as the manifestation of Hindu deities taking super human forms. Here Cameron tries to relate the film's title slightly in an Eastern perspective. The Eastern notions of Hinduism are predominant in the creation of the Na'vis, who appears all blue in shade. The luminous blue background resembles that of Lord Krishna, the Hindu deity. The wide eyes, big ears and tall physique of the Na'vis illumine that of a territorial God like figure carved out of the Hindu mythology. Pandoran ecology itself resembles the adobe

of nature God. The Pandoran ecosystem endures a close resemblance to the Eastern Hindu concept of the sacred grove (Kavu) the destination of a variety of living organisms. The movie depicts Pandora as a natural satellite of Polyphemus, named after the Greek God. Pandora's orbit around Polyphemus parallels to the entire life in Pandora that revolves around Eywa and the tree of soul which are the nucleus of existence in the gas giant space.

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