

**Nature Versus Culture:
Mapping Imperialistic Alternatives in *The
Martian Chronicles* and *Avatar***

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Abstract

The innovative experiments and findings benefit the present world with power of predictions about futurist scenario. The Socio-political movements exist, before and at times, provide an in-depth analysis of the upcoming ages and events and the same has clearly influenced the literary genres mainly speculative science fiction genre. The inevitable role played by speculative science fiction genre over catastrophic situations paved a divergent way of thinking to apocalyptic narration. The drastic changes happening in the world scenario and its consequences on living habitat becomes the prime concern of both apocalyptic and science fiction genres. Along with the protection of natural habitat, the need for re-establishing basic human rights along with culture inculcates a new fervour to the science fiction genre and its related literary theories. The imperialistic exploration over the interrelationship of nature and culture led to the emergence of term ecological or eco imperialism in the discipline of social sciences. The world renowned sci-fi fantasy film *Avatar* thematically discusses about post - apocalyptic era, and the consequences of ecological imperialistic attempt over native land and its people. The socio-political invasion carried out by conquerors reminds all about colonisation, but the factor of disturbing ecology helps the viewer to critically analyse the exploitation in terms of nature and culture. While reading science fiction entitled *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury, the readers come across scientific and political invasion of earth citizens over Mars resulting in the total destruction and subsequent transition of Martians to spiritual beings. The present paper is an attempt to reread the effective relation between nature and culture by

exploring eco-imperialistic tendencies in Sci-fi movie *Avatar* and science fiction -*The Martian Chronicles*.

Keywords: nature, culture, imperialism, eco imperialism, neo-colonialism, science fiction, sci-fi film, *Avatar*, *The Martian Chronicles*.

Introduction

The socio-political movements of the present world have a tremendous influence upon every fields including ecology, anthropology and technology. The drastic situations resulted from scientific inventions during the past and present eras provide a new fervour over social and natural theory. Being the integral part of human life, science made its impact upon literature and movies, and thereby leading to the development of science fiction genres. Its prominence on literature and media further explores the aftermath on the backdrop of futurist scenic world offering new opportunities and solutions. Such tendencies and its exploiting possibilities in terms of ecology and technology becomes the chief point of discussion in science fiction entitled *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury and sci-fi fantasy film *Avatar*.

Science Fiction: Literature of Present and Future Era

With the effective portrayal of the upcoming apocalyptic ages, science fiction readily possesses the capability to address the threats and issues side-lined by experts on various fields. The effective impact of ecology and technology over anthropocentric world offer the probability of chaos over survival and sustainability, and the same has reflected on science fiction genres. Such thoughts profusely suggest a contemporary value to science fiction genre and its narrative.

Adam Roberts, on his seminal text *Science Fiction*, writes,

... But it is part of the logic of SF, and not of other forms of fiction, that these changes are made plausible within the structure of the text. This means that the premise of an SF novel requires material, physical, rationalisation rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one. This grounding of SF in the material rather than the

supernatural becomes one of its key features. Sometimes this materialism is rooted in a 'scientific' outlook - science is after all one of the dominant materialist discourse of the present day. (5)

The term 'science' has a startling influence upon the materialist discourse of present world. The more familiar colonial approach resulted in the environmental destruction becomes the main topic that gains significance in *The Martian Chronicles* and *Avatar*. Science fiction *The Martian Chronicles* vividly describes about the colonial settlement and changes made in ecology of Mars through scientific and technological implementations. While as, the sci-fi movie *Avatar* focuses on the colonial expeditions through scientific means at Pandora, resulting on the exploitation of Martian ecology.

Eco-Imperialism: Imperial Approach on Environmentalism

The world severely suffered from depletion and destruction of nature by colonial hands before. While watching the movie *Avatar* we come across many such incidents of nature destruction by colonial humans over Pandora habitat. Similar instances can be sensed in the science fiction *The Martian Chronicles* where the human beings pay no heed to the wellbeing of Martians, instead makes them extinct through diseases and ecological destruction. It is at this situation, the term ecological or eco imperialism gets its significance.

In *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europ 900-1900*, Alfred Crosby equates the process of colonisation with that of environmental terrorism. According to Crosby, the resulted new diseases and disturbed ecology during colonial endeavours acts as a catalyst for the destruction of native land. A shallower ecological perspective can be felt in Paul Dreissen's usage of the term "eco-imperialism ". Paul Dreissen, in his work *Eco Imperialism, Green Power, Black Death*, discusses about the relation between current developed and developing world in terms of anthropocentrism and environmentalism. While explaining the neo-colonial perspectives and its adverse effect upon the developing world, Dreissen focuses on radical mentality of imperialists, corporate social irresponsibility etc. The survival and sustainability of native beings and ecology becomes the main point of discussion on the social

theory of ecological or eco imperialism, and the similar sense is reflected on the fictional work *The Martian Chronicles* and the sci-fi fantasy *Avatar*.

Neo-Colonial Struggle and Ecological Concerns in *The Martian Chronicles*

One of the main pioneers of science fiction, Ray Bradbury made effective alterations upon science literary genre with his provocative and thematic narrations. Though published in 1950's, *The Martian Chronicles* till this day carries its relevance because of man's everlasting expeditions, discoveries and exploitations. The disillusionment resulted from revolutionary scientific and technical innovations seriously affected the modern and postmodern era.

The Martian Chronicles effectively portrays the chaotic state of humanity, and their ultimate decision of depending on science for further survival. The fiction begins on the first part of 20th century Earth witnessing the launching of rocket expedition to Mars, and their ultimate success after many futile efforts. Many of Martians lost their lives due to diseases brought by colonial humans. By restructuring Martian land, the settlement of human beings at Mars brings many changes and this becomes the important point of relevance. The terrifying World war and resulted apocalyptic state compelled the newly settled humans in Mars to return back to Earth. The condition of Earth is getting worsened more, and finally one family succeeds in their effort to reach at Mars marking the rebirth of new Martian Civilization.

Alfred Crosby, on *Ecological Imperialism*, discusses about the biological accidents created by European invaders through their invasion over ecology and culture of native land. The population, due to lack of prior contact to European diseases, succumbed to the diseases. Such experiences led the colonials to affirm on the rightness of imperialist actions. Crosby writes, "The South Eastern US was fairly heavily populated, with complex societies, before diseases left the area empty... The unevenness of exchange [between Old World and New World epidemics] operated to the overwhelming advantage of the European invaders and to the crushing disadvantage of the peoples whose ancestral homes were on the losing side of the seams of Pangae" (216).

In *The Martian Chronicles*, the readers come across the ultimate success of fourth rocket expedition. The members of fourth team don't have any idea about the result of earlier expeditions. It is the archaeologist in team that deciphers about the extinct Martians and their culture. Jeff Spender is greatly disturbed with the realisation of true cause behind Martian extinction:

Chicken pox, God, Chicken pox, think of it! A race builds itself for a million years, refines itself, erect cities like those out there, does everything it can to give itself respect and beauty and then it dies ... It has to be chickenpox, a child's disease, a disease that doesn't even kill children on Earth! It's not right and it's not fair... It doesn't fit the architecture; it doesn't fit this entire world!
(Bradbury 88)

Jeff Spenders is totally devastated with the real truth behind Martian extinction. On his further research, Spenders gets attracted to Martian philosophy and their concern for nature: "They knew how to live with nature and get along with nature" (Bradbury 108). Spender further points out the harmonious co-existence of nature and science in Mars:

... Life was the propagation of more life and the living of as good a life as possible ... They quit trying too hard to destroy everything, to humble everything. They blended religion and art and science because, at the base, science is no more than an investigation of a miracle we can never explain, and art is an interpretation of that miracle. They never let science crush the aesthetic and the beautiful.
(Bradbury 109)

The high regard of Spender towards Martians reminds the reader about "the coloniser who refuses"(Memmi 19). Albert Memmi explains in detail in *The Coloniser and The Colonised* about such colonisers who recognise the colonial system as unjust. Sometimes they withdrew themselves from the conditions of privilege. Or else, they remain to fight for change. The action of killing four of his team mates by Spender is justified on his explanation to Captain Wilder:

That'll delay the next trip in a rocket for a good five years. There's no other rocket in existence today, save this one... A good report from you, on the other hand, if you returned, would hasten the whole invasion of Mars. If I'm lucky, I'll live to be sixty years old. Every expedition that land on Mars will be met by me ... I'll kill them off ... Mars will be untouched for the next half-century. After a while, perhaps the Earth people will give up trying. (Bradbury 106-107)

Though Spender gets killed by Captain, he gets reminded of Spender's words: "But one day Earth will be as Mars is today. This will sober us" (Bradbury 90). They laid Spender's coffin in an ancient Martian tomb yard. Though a short-lived character, Spender realized the significance of maintaining the purity of native Mars and tried hard to protect it from further colonial dangers.

On the chapter entitled "Theoff Season", fourth expedition member Sam Parkhill opens a hot dog stand at Cross Road in Mars with the aim of gaining more profit from the fastening migration. Sam even kills two Martian people who came to warn him about impending dangers on Earth. On the ironical way, the Martians provide Sam the land grant to all the territory. "We leave. Prepare the land is yours "(240). Overwhelmed with unexpected achievement and happiness, Sam is not able to realize the reality. His wife Elma showed Sam, "Earth changed in the black sky ... Part of it seemed to come apart in a million pieces as if a gigantic jigsaw has exploded" (Bradbury 242). Elma tells confused Sam, "There will be another batch of customers along in about a million years. Gotta be ready, Yes sir"(Bradbury 243). The character of Sam reminds the reader about the usurping nature of colonizers. By not giving any value to words, actions and above all to the lives of Martians, Sam, out of superiority, tries to destroy them. The unexpected outcome made Sam realize the destruction of nature and culture in Martian and Earthly terms, and this futility compels him to return back to Earth.

In the section "There Will Come Soft Rains," the writer discusses about the automatic technical functioning of daily chores at a vacant home. "This house was an altar with ten thousand attendants, big, small, servicing, attending, in choirs. But the gods had gone away, and

the ritual of the religion continued senselessly, uselessly "(Bradbury220). This description suggests about apocalyptic situation developed as the further consequence of war. Like the earlier extinct Martians, Humans, in this narrative, are endangered due to the exploitation of nature and culture by destructive imperial power authorities.

Nearing to the end section, "The Million Year Picnic" discusses about the resettlement of William Thomas and his family at Mars by completely renouncing earthly life. The elder son Timothy, since his birth, has only experienced the horrors of war, and the new expedition gives a strange feeling to him. His father explains him,

I'm burning a way of life, just like the way of life is being burned cleaned on Earth right now... Life on Earth never settled down to doing anything very good. Science ran too far ahead of us too quickly, and the people got lost in the mechanical wilderness ... Wars got bigger and bigger and finally killed Earth. That's what the silent radio means. That's what we ran away from. (Bradbury 302)

William Thomas succeeded in his effort to save his family from dangers World war. When his son Michael demanded to see a Martian, he realizes the necessity to embrace Mars as part of their life:

"There they are," said Dad; and he shifted Michael on his shoulder and pointed straight down... The Martians were there -in the canal - reflected in the water. Timothy and Michael and Robert and Mom and Dad. The Martians stared back at them for a long, long silent time from the rippling water. (Bradbury 304-305)

The realization of being the part of Mars civilization marks a new beginning on the lives of human settlers. William Thomas makes his children realize the follies of imperial power authorities and their misuse of science and technology on Earth habitat. The need for protecting the ecology of Mars for further survival and sustainability becomes the ultimate aim for new Martian humans.

Imperialistic Impact over Ecology in *Avatar*

Hollywood epic science fiction film *Avatar* got released worldwide in the year 2009. Sci-fi movie *Avatar* thematically discusses about the apocalyptic situation in Earth, and Environmental destruction resulted from colonialism. The renowned director James Cameron, on the backdrop of post-climate change Earth scenario, points out the emerging futurist planetary wars between Earthlings and Pandorians for the sake of energy sources.

James Cameron, in his interview to *The Telegraph*, tells: " ... the West can learn from Indigenous peoples is how to live an environmentally conscious life: ' a life that's in balance with the natural cycles of life on Earth'" (web). Through this interview, director points out the necessity of protecting ecology by exhibiting resistance against environmental destruction. *Avatar* indirectly discusses the struggle for survival and sustainability that makes human beings to depend on other energy sources for their living. But, in this process, they deliberately forget the ethics of reconsidering nativist feelings and existence of ecology. The necessity of protecting ecology along with the theological cultural pattern of natives made the sci-fi movie *Avatar* a serious subject for scrutiny.

The protagonist of the movie, paraplegic former marine Jake Sully, gets the unexpected opportunity to be the part of Earth scientific mission investigating Pandora, due to the sudden demise of his identical twin brother. The movie revolves around the new "Avatar" of Jake and his association with Na'vi community. The Pandora inhabitants are closely associated to their environment, and the same has started to influence Jake's thoughts. Finally. Jake and Na'vi community succeed in their effort to save their motherland from the clutches of Earthly Colonisers and their Unobtainium extraction mission.

Sci-fi movie *Avatar* puts forward many issues related to the environment including deforestation, exploitation of nature, ecosophy, deep ecological sense etc on the backdrop of neo-colonial movements. As Edward W Said mentioned in *Orientalism*, it's better to attack the orient before they invade occident is the misconception followed in Eco-Imperial movement over Pandora. The features of familiarising geography to the colonials provide the apt eco-terrific effect to this colonial movement.

When Jake and others reaches the new habitat Pandora, Colonel Quartich explains to all:

Out beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubees ...

... We have an indigenous population of humanoids here called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin which can stop your heart in one minute. We operate... We live ... at a constant threat condition yellow.

(*Avatar* 00:01:06-00:01:10).

The initial familiarisation of Oriental Pandora geography to Earth colonials makes them alert to their new surroundings. The fear of impending danger, even from ecology of Pandora, accelerates the process of neo-colonial efforts to distort Pandora for rich mineral Unobtainium extraction. Similar situation can be seen when Jake in Avatar form tries to stop bulldozer:

Jake: Hey! Hey! Stop! Stop.

Operator: I got one of the natives blocking my blade here.

Supervisor (to Selfridge): What do we do?

... He'll move. These people have to learn that we don't stop. (*Avatar* 01:33:01-01:33:20)

It is the concern of Neytiri for her ecology that brings Jake to the frame point. She gets horrified when she watches bulldozers crushing their sacred forest. Being a Pandora native, it becomes impossible for her to act against technological exploitation over Nature at such horrified state. The mentality of Selfridge is like a colonial who is interested to grab more profit by not paying any heed to nativist feelings.

When the Na'vi community starts to react against the attack of Earth neo-colonials, they become more alert. The only concern for the authorities is their profit. As Colonel Quartich earlier mentioned to Jake, "This is my war here" (*Avatar* 00:24:01). The same thirst for war can be seen in Colonel Quartich when he urges his team mates to fight against Na'vi community:

“People, you are fighting for survival.

There's an aboriginal horde out there massing for an attack...

Then they'll be overrunning our perimeter here. We can't wait. Our only security lies in pre-emptive attack. We will fight terror with terror. (*Avatar* 02:00:03-02:00:10).

Though Jake is in form of Na'vi avatar, he clearly understands the neo-colonial and eco-terror activities of Earthlings over Pandora. He shares his deep ecological concerns with Na'vi community:

Jake: If Grace is there with you... look in her memories. She can show you the world we come from. There's no green there. They killed their mother, and they're gonna do the same thing here ... More sky people are gonna come.
(*Avatar* 02:08:58-02:09:00)

Through the above statement, Jake clearly hints at the apocalyptic changes on his own planet Earth due to environmental destruction by neo-colonials. It is this injustice that provokes Jake to fight for the environmental rights of Pandora and its civilization. The movie ends with optimistic note as the colonials are returning back to Earth, and Jake gets transformed to be a complete Na'vi and thereby becoming part of Pandora forever.

Conclusion

The science fictional work *The Martian Chronicles* and sci-fi movie *Avatar* shares the common thematic pattern of apocalypse and invasion over the other planet. In *The Martian Chronicles*, Ray Bradbury gives a detailed description on man's expedition over Mars, destruction of natives, world war and re-birth of new Martian humans. Whereas sci-fi movie *Avatar* describes the neo-colonial Earth expedition over Pandora for grabbing valuable mineral Unobtainium by destroying the ecology, native land destruction questioning survival, and natives regaining their Pandora at the end. Though in both the fictional plots, imperial humans craving for profit by destroying ecology of native land gets no desired result marking their attempts as futile. It is the imperial mentality and its relation to environmental destruction that makes topic of ecological or eco imperialism more significant in present times. Several instances

of such ecological and imperial influence over human lives can be witnessed throughout the sci-fi movie *Avatar* and fiction *The Martian Chronicles*.

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