

James Cameron's *Avatar*: A Pertinent Ecocritical Prophecy

Cibina Chandran, Ph.D. Research Scholar
cibinachandragopal@gmail.com

Dr. Cheryl-Ann Gerardine Shivan, Principal
Kasthurba College for Women, Villianur

Abstract

The paper deals with James Cameron's avatar from an eco critical perspective. Eco criticism is a literary, art and cultural theory that has been in vogue since the 1990s. Eco critical theorists stress upon the need for studying the relationship between the written, performance, oral or cultural texts and the physical environment for a better understanding of the ways in which human beings respond to the natural world of which they are a part. This theory deals with the representation of nature in literature, films, drama, paintings, music and many more forms of human expressions. It is also deeply concerned about the way writers deal with the global environment crisis in their works. Films happen to be one of the core performance paradigms in which literary, artistic and cultural artifacts of different societies are manifested in an effective manner. Many screenplay writers lend a lot of creativity and a literary touch to their movies. Among them, James Cameron occupies an important place in Hollywood. Most of his movies are not only box office hits but also critically acclaimed for their aesthetic value. His 2009 movie, *Avatar* was not only the biggest financial blockbuster, but also a movie which dealt with many global issues. The movie deals with how far the human race would go for material benefits. The storyline is set in a fictional planet called Pandora. The human race has gone there to colonize the inhabitants and to arrogate their natural resources. The movie is a bitter satire on the future of the Earth. This paper looks at the representation of nature versus human conflict in this landmark film that made an alarming portrayal of the global warming effects and natural crisis of the present world.

Keywords: James Cameron, *Avatar*, ecocritical prophecy, eco criticism, natural resources, exploitation, Omaticaya People, Neural System.

Introduction

The world is made not only for human beings, but also for other living beings and non-living things. Since the human race populates the whole world, individuals, groups and societies purposefully or unknowingly cause damage to nature either for survival or in self-interest. This exhaustive exploitation of the world's natural resources has spoiled the entire eco system and has become a big threat not only to other living beings, but to human beings as well. Many environment-conscious groups have made attempts to make people realise that they are under a big ecological threat. Nevertheless, the exploitation of nature has been continuing uninterrupted, in an unconcerned

fashion and with a vast majority unperturbed even by the explicit effects of global warming and the depletion of natural resources. Many writers have produced phenomenal works of art to create ecological awareness. These works deal with the relationship between human beings and nature. These environmental issues have been brought into the lime light by many critics who always like to associate themselves with the theory of ecocriticism. “Ecocriticism” is an American term; also known as “Green Studies” in Europe, which is essentially the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view.

The study of nature began as early as the eighteenth century itself with the advent of the Romantic poets. However, they never dealt with ecological concerns; they merely presented the beauty of nature in their works. The industrial revolution and globalization have since, motivated many writers to raise their voices in support of nature since it is being destroyed in the name of bettering the world with technology. The world is steadily losing its originality and it is entering into a grave period of destruction. Hence, the need to stand up and let the world know in which direction it is headed. Until the 1990s, there were only a few writers like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson who wrote about the degradation of nature. It was only after the 1990s that many people realized the need to save the world and concentrate more on ecological issues. The number of writers has also been on a steady increase and ‘Ecocriticism’ has been recognized as a growing field of literary study. The term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. Buell defines ecocriticism, “as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis” (The Environmental Imagination, 430). The Eco critic’s job is both complex and necessary. They apply eco centric perspectives in many of their major literary work. They pay special attention to the elements which are related to nature. They try to apply a wide range of eco centric concepts like the imbalance in nature, usage of energy resources, the future of the earth, etc. Many writers direct their focus on the strong connection of humanity with nature, such a connection is seen in Bate’s work. “We cannot do without thought experiments and language experiments which imagine a return to nature, a re- integration of the human and the other. The dream of deep ecology will never be realized upon the earth, but our survival as a species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the work of our imagination”(The Song of the Earth ,37). It is a must to maintain a balance with nature for humans to lead a harmonious life. As Suresh says, “The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other” (Contemporary Contemplation on Ecoliterature, 147). Apart from literature, many film writers also have been dealing with eco critical concepts. Their movies try to exhibit environmental issues and solutions. A number of Hollywood movies have been dealing with eco critical concepts and one among them and the best among them is James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009).

***Avatar* and Ecocriticism**

The Neural System of Pandora

The movie *Avatar* is set in a fictional planet called Pandora in the year 2154. Anyone who watches the movie can easily understand that human beings will go to any extent to destroy nature for their material growth. In contrast, the Pandorans, who resemble aborigines, love nature and worship it. Once, human beings lived in harmony with nature and had a great bond with it. In the present scenario, however, this bond and interdependence have virtually disappeared. Human action and advancement have proved to be detrimental to nature to the extent of spoiling it thoroughly and out rightly. Industrial advancements, the consumerist market and the expansion of massive mining work are all carried out with absolutely no respect to the human race, and other living beings. Cameron tries to show people how far they move away from nature by portraying the Na'vi, the original inhabitants of Pandora. Men presume that they don't have any spiritual and mental connections with nature, whereas all the living beings in Pandora are shown to have a neural system which connects the Na'vis with all the animals and planets. They can connect their Tsahaylu (nerves which are found in their tails and used to connect themselves to one another) to any tree or animal to feel each other's emotions and thoughts. It is entirely contradictory to human nature. Human beings of the present desire to break all relationship with nature. In the name of scientific advancements, human beings have spoiled all the natural wealth and prefer to connect their neural system to machines. It is evident that many devices have been invented to connect human beings to computers and other devices. The Omaticaya people want to be ruled by nature where as human beings want to be ruled by machines. Cameron uses this neural system to pass a bitter satire on human tendency.

The Home Tree

Cameron also raises his voice against deforestation in this film. Colonel, head operation's security and Parker Selfridge, RDA administrator on Pandora think that nature is money and nature is made only for human beings. They have come to Pandora to loot the natural resources of the planet. They want the Na'vis Home Tree to be uprooted to help continue their mining process. They try all tricks to drive the Na'vis out of the place. The Home Tree is the biggest tree in the planet which provides shelter for the Na'vis. Each Na'vi has his own web in the tree for sleeping. The Na'vis respect the tree more than anything else on the planet. They do not want any education, money or sophistication from human beings. They want to safeguard their natural resources for their future. Dr. Grace believes that the uprooting of the Home Tree will spoil the entire neural system of the planet and objects to the idea. However, it was finally destroyed.

Equal Respect for Animals and Plants

The people of Pandora pay the same respect to plants and animals as they pay to other Na'vis. They are no sense of superiority demonstrated over plants and animals. They believe that every creature has its equal right on the planet. So they never kill anything except for food. They also never believe in wasting resources. It is evident from the scene when Jake and Neytiri meet first. Neytiri, in order to save Jake, kills a dog like animal and is not happy with her actions. She also refuses to be thanked by Jake Sulley. The conversation is as follows:

Jake: Hey, wait! I just wanna say thanks for killing those things.

Neytiri: Don't thank! You don't thank for this. This is sad. Very sad only.

Jake: Ok. I'm sorry. Whatever I did I'm sorry.

Neytiri: This is your fault. They don't need to die.

The Na'vis also have the habit of talking to the trees. They often go the Tree of Souls, connect their neural system with the tree and convey their ideas and feelings to the tree. At the beginning, Neytiri doesn't like to teach Jake anything. But, once the seeds of the Tree of Souls surround him, she thinks that Eywa (the Goddess) has chosen him and accepts to teach him the life style of the people of Omaticaya. Her people act according to the orders of nature. They believe in natural medicine. During adverse situations, the other inhabitants like the Ikrans and the animals come for help. So, one cannot separate the life of the Na'vis from nature. They are interdependent. One of the remarkable and significant features that is portrayed in the film is the self-lighting capacity of the planet during night. When people walk, the floor shines like a fluorescent light. Cameron creates a desire in the minds of the audience to think along the lines of such a ground. This very thought is also an alert for everyone to conserve the beauty of our planet. Cameron symbolically says that not only Pandora, but also the earth has abundant wealth. But it has to be maintained in a proper way.

Earth Versus Pandora

Life on Earth is entirely opposite to life on Pandora. The film is like a prophecy that foretells the future of human beings on Earth. There will be day when people have to depend on other planets for natural resources. A day will come, when people will fight for air and water. The viewers are directly or indirectly forced to compare Earth with Pandora in each frame. Instead of just imagining such a naturally beautiful world, men are strongly urged to save what is left of not only the beautiful but also the vital natural resources of this planet. A world of cement blocks will never appear beautiful to the human eye. People will begin to examine how far they have distanced themselves from the natural world. This film shows people that money and technology won't give life to the earth and human beings. Those two (money and technology) won't allow people to have healthy life. It is a warning to the inhabitants of Planet Earth that in 2154, people may not go to other planets for 'unobtainium', but for essentials like fresh air or water. All the natural resources would have been by then either been depleted or polluted. Depletion and pollution should be stopped immediately to increase the age of the earth.

Conclusion

Many people in the U.S.A. feel that James Cameron's Avatar is an anti-American movie because at the end of the movie, their army is defeated by the Na'vis. But many critics and supporters of Ecology feel happy that the audience was very happy to see the defeat of the army. It shows how much people understand the importance of a healthy environment. Harold Linde says that "James Cameron's Avatar is without a doubt the most epic piece of environmental advocacy ever captured on celluloid, and it only very thinly veils its message which, on the heels of a failed Copenhagen summit, is timelier now than ever... Nature will always win." (Is Avatar radical environmental propaganda, 1)

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