

Colonial Power and Native Resistance: A Cinematic Study of James Cameron's Avatar

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Abstract

Colonial powers have the history of destroying native civilizations to suit their own ends. They do it either by psychological persuasion or by military force. They often come, pretending as messiah but later becomes a curse for the nations and cultures. This multidimensional exploitation also leads to strong resistance from the native people, often living their Utopian dream and believing in their culture, they have courage and conviction but not the resources to match their adversaries. Colonial powers seek methods to learn and observe the native way of living thereafter they manipulate the minds of natives to gain supremacy of several kinds. Cinema is known to have always mirrored, the truth, no matter how much uncomfortable it may look to some people. The great movie 'Avatar' by James Cameron is allegory of such colonial oppression. The present paper analysis how effectively Cinema has brought the native resistance and struggle of the colored people against the colonial oppression to the fore and has given voice and platform to the speechless subalterns.

Key Words: Colonialism, culture, cinema, exploitation, utopia, native resistance

Civilization is like a plant that grows and culminates to its maturity. Between these two poles it faces many threats from outside. Such threat might be in the form of military attack that becomes the cause of total demolition or cultural invasion through various possible mediums that manifests itself gradually. We have the examples of Sindhu, Haddappa, African, American and Australian civilizations, those faced such trauma of extinction and finally succumbed to the colonial authorities on the name of democracy and welfare state. In other words we may state that they lost their utopia. It would be an exaggeration to say that there were no vices in these societies, but indeed, there was absence of colonial exploitation that assured them their utopia. Cinema has always captured such apocalyptic and exotic experience to its entirety. Cinema that mirrors the social reality also mirrors the historical reality. James Cameron's Avatar is the interpretation of such history on celluloid. Roger Ebert says 'through Avatar it is easy for me to teach the concept of post colonialism' (Roger-2022).

Before we move ahead, it would be pertinent to first understand the term "colonialism" "post colonialism" and "utopian resistance" so that we can properly differentiate and decipher the meaning for better understanding of the paper. "Colonialism, says Roland J Horvath, 'is a form of domination – the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups". Similarly "Post colonialism is an academic discipline featuring methods of intellectual discourse that analyze, explain and respond to the cultural legacies of

colonialism and of imperialism, to the human consequences of controlling a country and establishing settlers for the economic exploitation of the native people and their land” (web). The term utopia is formed by ‘conflating the Greek word ‘eutopia (a good place) and outopia (no place), (Abrahm 328).Oxford dictionary defines Utopia as “an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect” but Utopia is not just an imaginative ideal world but is a seen and felt experience for many intellectual minds. We have the example of Rousseau who implores the society to return to nature and Swami Dayanada, who requests the people to return to Veda. Are these claims not denoting towards something, that is very much like utopia? If we are not in Vanity Fair then why do we always think to return to a place or position that would be utopia or ideal world? So utopia also stands for good place or a state of mind, where there are no racial differences or black and white divisions. If the fundamentals of a society are strong and based on the mutual respect and harmony, there would be nothing like a master and slave. Every civilization has a culture, history and its indigenous traditions. The primitive societies are not subalterns but equally rich, like any other culture or civilization in the world.

Resistance is one of the key phenomena without it there is no possibility of decolonization of any form; cultural or political. There are several models of resistance but use of violence is one of them and Frantz Fanon supports this model. He proposes ‘revolutionary violence’ as one of the most ‘effective mode of opposition to the violence of colonial oppression” (Boehmer, 2006, p. 347). Fanon agrees with encounter that can give immediate solution instead of peaceful demonstration. He says:

“Under colonial conditions, no compromise can be made with the colonizer, no strategic ground given, that will not eventually reproduce in one form or another the Manichaeic conflict of colonizer versus colonized”. (Boehmer, 2006, p. 347).Homi Bhabha has talked about ‘Sly Resistance’ and Jaffrees is in support of ‘peaceful resistance’ but when nations face first encounter of colonial powers they resist with their military and material power which goes, sometimes, unchallenged.

With their Utopian primitivism they are often the centre of exploitation and perhaps the enlightened west or the developed world has failed to comprehend the subaltern’s sensibility beyond the commercial domains. It is the nature of society to pour out the felt consequences in various forms; either it is religious allegory or through scientific experimentation. Every indigenous society lives in its natural utopia, untouched and unmixed with any alien civilization. Such utopia escapes, advertently or inadvertently many threats of the external world because of its resistance power. This power makes them naturally natural and unites them against all adversities, which is really difficult for a so called educated outsider to understand. Cameron’s Avatar might be scientific entertainment for cinema addicted audience but on the other hand, it is an allegory of resistance against the claimed universalism of the western world, that was vehemently opposed and exposed by writers like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Frantz Fannon.

The film is set in the future 2154. It is story about Na’vi people who are living on the Pandora planet. Na’vi people are blue skin people against whom white skin people launch military exercise for business purpose. In old manner a white man works against white man’s

unquenched guilt. At last he overcomes his Whiteman's guilt and becomes natural Na'vi. This is allegory of colonial exploitation.

There has been a conscious attempt on part of the erstwhile colonial powers, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century to acknowledge the injustices done to colonized people through various means. For example *The Declaration on Granting of the Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, adopted by U.N General assembly in 1960 accepted that, "the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights" (Article 1). Such movies are basically symptomatic of white guilt about the history of atrocities against black, blue, brown, red, and yellow peoples and the attempt to symbolically redeem the audience. And for sure, almost all of these stories contain a redemption allegory in which the white man finds redemption for his past by coming to a new Eden-like land and identifying with the victims there. With the opening scene of the film, we see hero is being sent to meet Na,vi people so that he can mix with them and win their heart. But he lands himself in trouble; he is caught on the island but rescued safely by a valiant Pandora girl. She chides him because it is for him she kills one creature. That is why she says, "They were not to be killed". They were innocent creatures. She does not need any thank. Then he requests her to teach him their language and manners. But she rejects that proposal saying his people don't see god. She says 'we cannot make you see'. Then hero takes the sympathy and something divine happens around him. This is the divine power that may seem exotic to modern societies and culture but is pivot of Utopian concept for pagan and primitive people. In this film we see this Utopian reflection that is the cause of blessings and happiness for the inhabitants of Pandora. Perhaps this is the utopia that induces the mind of the hero with resistance power against the colonial trick and he launches war against his own people. That is why Jack respects the divine tree and he wants to save these trees and the people of Pandora against the colonial atrocities. He says 'o divine tree look from which world we came. There is no greenery because they have destroyed the beauty of their own motherland now they are here to rob everything. They will come again in majority to destroy this world also'.

On Pandora everything is under divine or natural relationship, there is not least of the scientific development. They call this relationship 'sahelo'. This bond is in existence because of energy that is overflowing through everything. After this deep experience, Jack realizes that Pandora's life is the real life and the life that they are living in scientific experimentation is unreal and tasteless. Perhaps it is not fantasy or fairy tale that we observe in this film but an allegory of a pious culture with its primitive reliability and truth that is distorted by colonial aggression. The colonel, who launches war against Na'vi people, consoles Jack and says that they will provide them education, medicine and other goods but on the condition; that they must evacuate their homes so that the colonial masters can get hold of the stone 'unobtenium'. But Jack rejects the idea and says that they will not leave their home, because the colonial people, in reality have nothing to offer them. At last the subalterns speak with their resistance power and oppressive regime faces strong resistance. Though people of Pandora bag loss and pain yet they stand valiantly against the colonial apparatus. The colonial power reaches at great loss. This defeat is a kind of poetic justice that stems from white guilt but it is not the end. The people of Pandora got momentary restoration but the truth is they too have been

corrupted and changed forever, like all third world countries, which after so many years of independence have failed to reclaim their cultural identities, and are still in quest for the room of their own. The movie has great resemblance with European domination on different part of the world which has never been restored and recovered till date.

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