

Cameron's Advocacy for Bio-Centric World-View in *Avatar*

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Abstract

This article attempts to examine James Cameron's movie, *Avatar* (2009) from the lens of eco-criticism. In particular, the article attempts to examine how Cameron advocates for the necessity of maintaining environmental ethics for nature conservation along with his critique of anthropocentrism throughout the movie. The movie presents a bleak future (mid-22nd Century) condition of the earth having all the natural resources as already consumed up. With the help of technology, people, however, make their access to the Pandora, a fictional setting which is presented as the home of the Na'vi, and start exploiting natural resources mercilessly destroying their home-tree. To examine Cameron's advocacy of environmental ethics in the movie, the research incorporates the philosophical ideas from eco-critical theory, especially incorporating theoretical insights from Edward O. Wilson's "The Environmental Ethic" along with the ideas of other thinkers in the same line of argument. This study is significant as it shows how a literary work like a movie can make advocacy for environmental ethics and critiques anthropocentric hubris that jeopardizes the earth ultimately that Cameron makes through the portrayal of a nature-loving protagonist, Jake Sully. This article, ultimately justifies *Avatar* as an epic movie alerting the humanity of the possibility of the bleak future in the world as a result of Anthropocene, and appeals for the urgency of maintaining environmental ethics to avoid the danger.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, biocentrism, energy crisis, environmental advocacy, environmental ethics, human-nature reconciliation

Introduction

This article, as an eco-critical analysis, examines James Cameron's film, *Avatar* (2009), from the perspectives of environmental ethics examining Cameron's advocacy for biocentric world-view in the movie. *Avatar* (2009), set in the mid-twenty-second century, depicts a world suffering from extensive natural resource depletion. Faced with a severe energy crisis on Earth, American scientists venture to the moon in a desperate attempt to exploit any available resources. *Avatar* stands out as a monumental piece of environmental advocacy portrayed on film, addressing key environmental concerns such as the endangerment of pristine rainforests due to exploitative practices, the wisdom of indigenous populations in contrast to the developed world, the harmonious functioning of a planetary collective,

the interconnectedness of the Gaia organism, and the malevolent influence of corporate interests seeking to annihilate it all. This live-action movie, enriched with cutting-edge special effects, transports audiences to an awe-inspiring and unimaginable world. The narrative revolves around Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a nature-loving hero who make a journey of transformation from his human life into the life of a Na'vi, combating against the human invaders for the protection of an endangered civilization in the fictional setting, Pandora.

This article particularly examines the protagonist of the movie, Jake Sully, an ex-army personnel, who has lost his legs in the war and has been using a wheelchair at the moment. Despite his bitter disillusionment, Jake's warrior spirit remains intact. His quest for something worth fighting for unexpectedly leads him to a distant world. Recruited for an expedition to Pandora, a moon being strip-mined for a mineral valued at \$20 billion per kilogram on Earth, Jake becomes part of a process that links human consciousness with a hybrid form resembling the indigenous Na'vi Omaticaya clan. Known as an "avatar," this crossbreed allows Jake to walk again, and serves him as a means to communicate with the Na'vi and influence them for gaining their assistance in excavating the valuable uranium. Despite facing hostility from the Na'vi, especially from Neytiri, an attractive female Na'vi who reluctantly protects Jake's life, Jake's connection with them deepens. As his respect for the Na'vi grows, he confronts the ultimate challenge, leading a monumental conflict that will determine the fate of an entire world.

Cameron's *Avatar*, since its release, has received ample number of comments and scholarly criticisms from the critics from multiple perspectives. Richard Kahn connotes the religious and Vedantic significance of the title of the movie, *Avatar*. In his article, "Avatar: A Prophetic Representation of Planetary Zoophilia?" Kahn argues, "The word "avatar" has Vedantic origins meaning something akin to the "de scent" or "manifestation" of a divinity in bodily form. It is the embodiment of the Holy Spirit. (59)" Kahn emphasizes the religious connotation of the term "avatar," suggesting that it signifies the representation of the Holy Spirit in the Vedic tradition. He asserts that, with the progress of science and technology, humans have the ability to embody themselves in a new avatar. In today's context, particularly in the domain of cyborgs, the term "avatar" is associated with one's digital portrayal. Characters with positive traits, such as Jake Sully, exemplify a favorable representation, while those with malevolent motives display a negative manifestation. Kahn underscores the film's critical stance toward modern industrial society, drawing attention to the ecological risks it poses. Additionally, he points out the movie's ambivalent perspective on whether art imitates art or if it imitates life.

Nidesh Lawtoo, in his article, "Avatar Simulation in 3Ts: Techne, Trance, Transformation." interprets the movie as representing modernist clash against nature in a modernist fashion. Lawtoo argues, "Avatar is not only a transparent mirror of the modernist clash with nature, but also a modernist representation of this clash that immediately complicates the relation between nature and civilization (133)." For Lawtoo, the movie is all about modern technology's clash with nature. Lawtoo further claims *Avatar* as "arguably the first sf film that relies on a past-oriented anthropological account of possession trance in the context of traditional societies to reflect, in a hyper mimetic way, a future-oriented entranced dispossession induced by virtual simulations in network societies (139)." Here, Lawtoo claims *Avatar* draws on a historical anthropological understanding of traditional societies as the movie uniquely combines elements of past anthropological concepts with futuristic notions of

virtual reality and societal dynamics, offering a complex interplay between tradition, technology, and society.

The mythological and religious interpretations of *Avatar* draw explicit parallels to Hinduism, specifically the ancient epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The film is intricately connected to Hindu beliefs, as evidenced by the use of the term "Avatar," draws on the Hindu mythical notion of Reincarnation as argued by Rajsekher Priya, in *The Irish Times*, highlights Jake's avatar body and the Na'vi characters having resemblance between the reincarnations of Hindu deities like Rama and Krishna. Priya locates the term within "ten incarnations of Vishnu" (25). The term "Avatar" is situated within the context of the "ten incarnations of Vishnu," reinforcing the Hindu influence in the film.

Similarly, Sheila Shayon further unveils a Hindu mythological connection in the movie, pointing to the teachings of *The Veda*. Shayon comments, "An undeniably Hindu connection between the film's story and the Vedic teaching of reverence for the whole universe, as well as the yogic practice of inhabiting a distant body by one's consciousness and the film's love scene is equal to the tantric practices (9)." The depiction of a love scene in *Avatar* is equated with tantric practices, deepening the connection to Hindu spirituality. The interpretation extends to the character of Eywa, the mother goddess of the Na'vi resembling the traits and qualities of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. This intricate weaving of Hindu mythology into the fabric of *Avatar* provides a rich layer of symbolism and cultural references for those attuned to these religious narratives.

Apart from the interpretation of the above critics, the present study is an eco-critical study of the movie borrowing the philosophical ideas from Edward O. Wilson's "The Environmental Ethic" along with other thinkers advocating environmental ethics.

Textual Analysis

Edward O. Wilson, in his essay, "Biodiversity Threatened", claims that, "The cutting of primeval forest and other disasters, fueled by the demands of growing human populations, are the overriding threat to biological diversity everywhere (445)." For Wilson, humanity has been acting as a threat to the entire biodiversity in the world. Wilson further argues, "If species vanish en masse when their isolated habitats collapse, they die even more catastrophically when entire systems are obliterated (449)." Wilson's statement stresses the vulnerability of species to large-scale environmental disorders and underscores the significance of preservative and restoring ecosystems to prevent severe biodiversity loss.

In the same line of argument, Val Plumwood offers a profound exploration of how distortions in reason and culture lead to perilous forms of ecological denial. Through a comprehensive analysis of the crisis of reason, she unveils the interconnectedness of our culture's destructive practices and its ethical and spiritual deficiencies with human inability to recognize themselves as a part of the ecosystem. Plumwood's perspective provides a thought-provoking diagnosis for the cultural illusions perpetuating the current environmental crisis. By introducing the concept of 'human-centrism,' she exposes patterns of belief and treatment in the human/nature relationship, equating them to the hegemonic structures seen in other forms of discrimination. Plumwood astutely draws parallels between the construction of nature as 'Other' to humans and the marginalization of women and 'coloured' people throughout history, criticizing the pervasive tendency of men to perceive nature as an 'Other.' Plumwood argues, "We can

now spell out a parallel concept of 'human-centrism', and characterize as anthropocentric those patterns of belief and treatment of the human/nature relationship which exhibit this same kind of hegemonic structure (106)." For Plumwood women, nature and the 'coloured' population have been destined to be in the margin since very long time. In examining the dynamics of anthropocentric culture, she highlights the shared logic of defining nature, women, and marginalized communities as 'Other' in relation to a dominant group, illustrating how this perspective has perpetuated throughout human civilizations. Despite the undeniable interdependence between men and nature, the tendency to treat nature as an 'Other' remains a subject of Plumwood's critique. Her insights shed light on the urgent need to reevaluate these ingrained patterns of thought and treatment to foster a more sustainable and equitable relationship between humanity and the environment.

In the philosophy of biocentrism, all organisms are interconnected, forming a complex web within the universe. It sees humans as integral members of the Earth's community, emphasizing the intricate interdependence of elements in the natural world. The philosophy advocates for humans to live reconciling with nature, recognizing the world as the source and lifeblood of human existence. Consequently, there is a call to focus on environmental issues and to show due respect to the natural world that sustains us. This perspective lays the foundation for environmental ethics. Paul W. Taylor, in *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, delves into the concept of the fundamental value of every living organism, aligning with the biocentric view. Environmental ethics, in contrast to anthropocentrism, promotes biocentrism by asserting that the natural world possesses intrinsic value, fostering human respect and moral obligations toward nature.

In the argument of environmental ethics, all organisms are interdependent to each other. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all organisms within an ecosystem, highlighting their organic unity and the delicate balance that constitutes the whole system. The idea that removing any part can disrupt the entire ecosystem is fundamental to understanding the fragility and interdependence of nature. Edward O. Wilson, in "The Environmental Ethic" underscores humanity's integral connection to nature, emphasizing the importance of identifying with the broader spectrum of life to develop a sustainable ethics. He argues:

Humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species. The more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built. (157)

The notion here is that recognizing our interconnectedness with nature leads to a deeper understanding of human sensibility and the development of a lasting ethical framework. This philosophy calls for respect and protection of nature for its inherent value to humans, promoting a harmonious coexistence. In the context of the movie, the narrative reveals a dichotomy between characters' missions regarding nature. Jake Sully emerges as the sole character dedicated to protecting nature, while others are focused on exploiting and destroying it. The reference to the master plan involving the destruction of the Na'vi's home-tree for resource extraction aligns with the broader theme of human disregard for nature's well-being. Jake's role in safeguarding nature becomes challenging and risky, symbolizing the difficulties and sacrifices required to protect the delicate balance of the ecosystem in the face of destructive forces. This narrative highlights the tension between conservation and exploitation, emphasizing the importance of individuals like Jake who recognize the value of preserving nature.



Figure I: The Giant Bird of the Pandora Helping Jake and Niyetri Flying while Defending the Natives from the Human Invaders (1:27:17)

Source: Screenshot by the researcher

The above medium shot represents Jake Sully's love for nature who involves himself into a fierce battle against the human invaders for the protection of the Na'vi in the Pandora in particular and nature in general. As a hero, he places himself into challenge and fights an epic battle protecting nature and advocating for the urgency of maintaining environmental ethics in the modernist society.

In the same light of argument, Edward O. Wilson, further claims that human beings should be far-sighted in terms of ethics considering every entity in the biosphere. It is human responsibility to protect and conserve each species and race from the world. Wilson argues, "The ethical imperative should therefore be, first of all, prudence. We should judge every scrap of biodiversity as priceless while we learn to use it and come to understand what it means to humanity. We should not knowingly allow any species or race to go extinct (595)." Wilson emphasizes the idea that every element of biodiversity is invaluable, and our primary duty is to treat it as such. The call to judge every scrap of biodiversity as priceless underscores the significance of preserving and understanding each species for the benefit of humanity. He advocates moving beyond mere salvage efforts and actively engaging in the restoration of natural environments.

David Dobereiner, in his book, *Organicity: Entropy or Evolution*, advocates biocentric worldview as he emphasizes the idea of equality not as a strict mathematical identity, but as a concept rooted in a rough equivalence of access to societal goods. The biocentric perspective values the interconnectedness of all living beings and ecosystems, suggesting that everyone, regardless of their location on Earth, should have access to the essentials needed for a decent life. "Equality does not mean mathematical identity but a rough equivalence of access to whatever goods society offers. No one, anywhere on earth, should receive less than what they need to live a decent life. Above this level, goods become luxuries, responding to wants not needs (22)." Dobereiner's assertion aligns with a biocentric ethos, as it emphasizes a consideration for the basic needs of all individuals, mirroring the biocentric principle that all life has intrinsic value. The notion of justifying one's bid for luxury goods beyond the norm through consensus or majority vote resonates with the idea of collective decision-making that respects

the well-being of both humans and the broader ecological community, reflecting a holistic approach to societal well-being within the framework of a biocentric worldview.

In Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle*, the assertion that "everything is connected to everything else (33)" encapsulates the idea of viewing the whole universe as a unified organism, having every element, whether living or non-living, is intricately linked to one another. Commoner's this holistic concept reflects a systemic interconnectedness, emphasizing the interdependence of various components on Earth. The following snapshot from the movie



Figure II: The Na'vi attending a ritual in the Pandora (2:14:09)

Source: Screenshot by the researcher

The above long shot from the movie shows the Na'vi in a ritual ceremony, where they are connected to each other, the land, the tree, and every living being. Every vein of them is shown as connected to the vein of other organism whether it is living or non-living one. This scene from the movie presents the Na'vi people's collective unity. The scene emphasizes the holistic connection within the group, illustrating a profound sense of interdependence and shared spirituality. The framing of the shot echoes the broader theme that "everything is connected to everything." Within this context, the Na'vi people are portrayed as intricately connected to each other, embodying a collective bond that extends beyond mere physical proximity. It serves as a visual metaphor for the interconnectedness of all elements, resonating with the idea that in this spiritual procession, the people are not only connected to each other but also part of a larger interconnected web that binds them to the broader world.

Cheryll Glotfelty, in her exploration of the history and emergence of ecological studies, highlights the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism. Glotfelty opines that Ecocritics address environmental consideration which "includes ecological theory, environmentalism, conception of nature, and their depictions, human /nature dichotomy and related connection" (xvii). She notes that ecocritics explore various aspects of environmental considerations, encompassing ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions of nature, and their depictions, as well as exploring the human/nature dichotomy and related connections. This broad scope reflects the depth and diversity of ecocriticism, capturing the complex interplay between literature, culture, and the environment. Together, Commoner and Glotfelty's perspectives underscore the importance of recognizing the intricate connections that bind together the natural world and the various components that shape our ecological reality.

Nature constitutes a unified community for every species, encompassing both humans and nonhumans. Every living being is interconnected in a web-like relationship with other species, forming a comprehensive chain of existence. Unfortunately, due to the pursuits of civilization, urbanization, and the quest for human emancipation, people have become excessively anthropocentric. Over time, this has led to their increasing isolation from nature, diminishing their understanding of its vital role in the sustainable development of all species. Despite this, there exists a profound interconnectedness within the great chain of being, establishing biological and ecological correlations. It is crucial for people's minds to be human-oriented, yet not exclusively anthropocentric one. The movie presents the Na'vi in the Pandora in a harmonious coexistence with all the living and non-living organisms there, as evident in the immediate assistance provided by birds or animals whenever a humanoid faces adversity. Human isolation from nature, often viewed as a vulnerable state, remains challenging to comprehend in a mature manner as civilization and urbanization have led to a detachment driven by the allure of transient materialistic happiness. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing humans as integral parts of, rather than separate from, the larger entity that is nature.

Human beings need to recognize the intrinsic worth of non-human entities and embrace a moral obligation, a perspective found in deep ecology, where understanding and valuing other species is fundamental. The consequences of human actions, particularly in the pursuit of urbanization, have led to environmental issues and the destruction of nature's aesthetic aspects. To rectify these mistakes, it's crucial to acknowledge that humans are not separate from nature but an integral part of it. The philosophy of "We are all one life" as argued in the book, *Environment and Philosophy*, human beings should accept the notion that every organism in the world has the same life as, "Human beings are part of nature. If we understand that we would understand that destroying the prairie or exterminating the wolf or polluting the sea are all forms of self-mutilation (19)." Understanding the philosophy of harming the environment as a form of self-mutilation emphasizes the need for sustainable development, a concept championed by the deep ecology movement. This movement, rooted in self-expression and a deep understanding of the significance of human life in relation to other beings, provides a pathway for the welfare of all species on Earth.

David Dobereiner, in his book *Organicity: Entropy or Evolution*, suggests that organisms grow through a symbiotic interaction among their diverse components, including organs, organelles, and micro-organisms. This growth occurs by multiplication at various scales, but at the micro scale, it can only happen through addition. Macro-organisms, such as plants and animals (including humans), continue growing by forming communities even after achieving self-regulation. They create organic relationships within colonies, hives, families, tribes, nations, and various associations.

Organisms grow themselves by symbiotic interaction of the myriad organs, organelles and micro-organisms that compose them [. . .] But macro-organisms, that is to say, plants and animals (including humans), although self-regulated, do not cease to grow by addition after they have achieved the capacity to grow by multiplication. (121)

The interactions between individual entities that result in the formation of larger structures are termed compound entities. However, Dobereiner notes that most of the universe consists of aggregations of individual entities that do not interact in such ways, commonly referred to as 'inert' aggregates. This highlights the dynamic and symbiotic nature of growth in living organisms, contrasting it with the inert nature of much of the universe.

The movie also explores this intricate relationship between humans and nature as Jake says, “It’s hard to put in words the deep connection the People have to the forest (79)” as observes an incredibly sensuous image when Neytiri bends a large pitcher-like beautiful flower gently towards her, and sips sweet and thick as honey like nectar from it. Jake further wonders, “They see a network of energy that flows through all living things. They know that all energy is only borrowed (79).” Jake realizes the symbiotic relation of the organisms in the Pandora, which deeply motivates him.

In line of the same argument, Robert Lanza and Bob Berman, in their book, *Beyond Biocentrism: Rethinking Time, Space, Consciousness, and the Illusion of Death*, advocate for maintaining environmental ethics. They claim that plants are similar to humans in some aspects. The authors claim, “Like us, plants possess receptors, microtubules, and sophisticated intercellular systems that likely facilitate a degree of spatio-temporal consciousness (226)”. It is not only humans but also plants having consciousness. Lanza and Berman further argue, that, “Instead of generating a pattern of colors, the particles of light bouncing off a plant produce a pattern of energy molecules—sugar—in the chlorophyll in its stems and leaves. Light-stimulating chemical reactions in one leaf cause a chain reaction of signals to the entire organism via vascular bundles (226).” This perspective challenges traditional notions about consciousness and extends it beyond the animal kingdom, introducing the concept that plants may have a form of consciousness influenced by their interactions with light and chemical processes.

In the biocentric world picture, every organism has a kind of interdependence to the other organism. In this world picture, human beings do not have any superior value, nor the other organisms have inferior importance. In this line of argument, Paul W. Taylor in his book, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, justifies the value of every organism in the world where mutual help, support and deep respect for each other is the fundamental principal of the world. Taylor, in “The Ethics of Respect for Nature”, argues:

. . . [W]e come to understand other living things, their environmental conditions, and their ecological relationships in such a way as to wake in us a deep sense of our kinship with them as fellow members of the Earth’s community of life. Humans and nonhumans alike are viewed together as integral part of one unified whole in which all living things are functionally interrelated. (83)

Here, Taylor argues that human beings should acknowledge the existence of every environmental entity as our fellow members in the same community, and treat them like our own kith and kins. Cameron, in the movie, advocates the same principal through the portrayal of his hero, Jake Sully having intimate relation with the Princess of the Pandora, Neytiri and ultimately marrying her as he leaves his human body and transforms into a Na’vi himself.



Figure III: Jake sharing a bed with Niyetiri in the Pandora (1:37:47)

Source: Screenshot by the researcher

This close shot from the movie presents Jake and Niyetiri's love relation advocating human-nature reconciliation. It critiques the anthropocentric attitude of the humans treating the non-human organisms in the environment as inferior to themselves. In the same line of argument, Aldus Huxley, in *Literature and Science*, advocates for the co-existence of all the living and non-living organisms in the world. In his view, "In the light of what we know about the relationship of living things to one another and to their in organic environment (108)." Huxley claims that there is symbiotic relation between every organism in the world. Arthur Schopenhauer in his essay, "The Will in Nature" claims that "Everything is entirely in nature, and nature is entire in everything, she has her centre in every brute. It has surely found its way into existence, and will surely find its way out of it" (397). Schopenhauer claims that nature encompasses everything.

Conclusion

This article has examined Cameron's movie, *Avatar* (2009) from the perspective of eco-criticism. In course of examining the movie, the article has incorporated the theoretical ideas as developed by eco-critical thinkers like Edward O. Wilson among others. As the movie presents human encroachment into nature in a demonic manner, and presents the harmonious relationship among the living and non-living organisms in the fictional setting of the Pandora in a beautiful manner, Cameron advocates for the necessity of maintaining environmental ethics in the modern society. Human beings in the modern time are merciless and cruel towards the life of the non-human beings not only in the earth, but also in the Pandora. The human anthropocentric hubris in the modern society has been violating environmental ethics that advocates for the harmonious relationship between every organism in the biosphere. As everything is regarded as "connected to everything else" in the words of Glotfelty, the movie appeals for human-nature reconciliation for the sustainable and peaceful future society.

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