

Postcolonial Critique of *Avatar*

Probably no other movie will be watched by as many people this year or win quite so many awards as *Avatar*. If you haven't seen it yet, you just might be the only one. And this makes me happy since I'm teaching postcolonial literature this semester, and *Avatar* provides a rather easy way for me to explain my subject to my students. The movie is basically about an indigenous, local culture being destroyed by greedy business interests that use high-tech military force in order to gain access to a valuable natural resource. Does the plot sound familiar? Although the movie is a science fiction story set in the future (year 2154) and the "native" Na'vi people on the planet Pandora have blue skin, the allegories to the history of colonization should be somewhat obvious to anyone who's ever read a history book – Europe's greed-driven conquest and exploitation of Native Americans, Asians, and Africans. In addition, critic Roger Ebert suggests the movie can easily be read as an allegory for contemporary politics because of the strong anti-war, anti-colonialism, and pro-environmentalist messages.

However, on the other hand, other critics have attacked the film for repeating colonial fantasy narratives such as the classic tales of Pocahontas and *Last of the Mohicans*, not to mention more recent movies *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last Samurai*, and even another sci-fi movie, *Dune*. Just like in all these other colonial fantasy narratives, the protagonist of *Avatar* is a white male who is sent to subdue a far-away people, then comes to identify with those people after he falls in love with one of them, and eventually somehow assumes a leadership role in their doomed struggle against imperialism. So common is this narrative that one critic asks, "when will white people stop making movies like *Avatar*?" He claims such movies are basically symptomatic of white guilt about the history of atrocities against black, brown, red, and yellow peoples and attempt to symbolically redeem the audience. And for sure, almost all of these stories contain a redemption allegory in which the white male finds redemption for his past by coming to a new Eden-like land and identifying with the victims there. Another critic dislikes the white character's ability to literally become an incarnation (or avatar) of the other cultural identity, and he compares *Avatar* to earlier "black-face" narratives in which white characters not only "go native" but become even more adept at the native skills than the actual natives (like Tarzan or Natty Bumppo.)

Probably the most balanced and interesting response to the movie is this blog post by the Native American scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice. Although he admits to how effective the movie was at evoking an emotional response in him, he also argues that the plot line of good guys vs. bad guys is too simplistic. In his view, the movie's director James Cameron

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missed an opportunity to enable the American audience to really understand colonialism. Real colonizers are not cartoonishly evil people but often nice people who, because of their social position, do bad things. He worries that such a romantic good vs. evil story allows the audience to feel overly self-satisfied when they emotionally side with the good guys without really questioning how everyone is morally complicit with colonialism — even the “good guys.” In sum, the question that all these critics raise is why the white male hero is there in the first place? Why not just focus on the Na’vi characters and their struggle against the sinister forces of commercial empire? What is the difference between how the movie represents colonialism and how real colonization and oppression happens? And most importantly, why does the white male character become the leader of the “colored” (blue/red) people in their own struggle?

Hence, interestingly, we have two very contradictory readings of this movie. One reads it as an anti-colonialist story, and the other reads it as a colonialist story. And importantly the cultural identity of the reader is not the determining factor in how one reads it. Daniel Heath Justice observed that responses among the Native American community were very mixed, some liking the movie, some hating it, most somewhere in between; and as one can see from this little note in the right-wing *National Review*, some conservatives have claimed that the movie is anti-American because it inserts phrases from George Bush’s speeches about terror and preemptive strike into the mouths of the villains, but other conservative critics have praised it for its libertarian values. A few of my Oromo friends read the movie’s anti-colonialism and its reverence for a tree as an allegory for their own struggle against Abyssinian imperialism in Ethiopia and the Oromo reverence for the Odaa tree, which is a symbol for their liberation movement. But other Oromo really can’t stand the fact that the Na’vi have to be saved by a white guy.

The diverse reactions to the movie, I think, indicate why postcolonial theory can be difficult, and hence there is quite a lot more that could be said about this movie than I have time to write about here. But there are a couple of points I’d like to make that I haven’t seen made yet, especially in regards to postcolonial theory. First, although it’s easy to compare the movie to films like *Pocahontas* or *Dances with Wolves*, there are important differences, and I think critics ought to pay attention to the differences as well as to the similarities. As the theorist Homi Bhabha observes, postcolonial writing and art often mimic colonial forms — just as a lot of colonial writing and art were borrowing from indigenous forms and ideas — but mimic them with a difference that moves the narrative and the reader’s response in other directions. In *Avatar*, for instance, the most obvious difference is that the Na’vi win. Also, while in the

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Pocahontas story the Indian betrays her people by falling in love with John Smith, *Avatar*'s story is actually the opposite.

We might also consider too the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Spivak. Her answer to that question is no, the most marginalized peoples can't represent themselves. One of the strongest criticisms of *Avatar* is why the whole story is narrated from the white male character's point of view. In this way the movie is similar to *Dances with Wolves*. The alternative to this scenario would seem to be to have the movie narrated from the point of view of one of the Na'vi – perhaps Neytiri's character. But for Spivak, this would not be satisfactory either for several reasons. First, does Neytiri speak for all the Na'vi or just some of them? Second, along those lines, wouldn't the movie then have to begin acknowledging the forms of oppression and disparity that existed within the Na'vi culture? After all, feminist and Marxist critics have reminded the upper-class, male postcolonial writers that things were not all roses before the colonizers came. Third, how would Neytiri or any of the Na'vi be able to speak about the colonial system unless she had spent some time within it or had some position of authority that would give her access to all that knowledge. Fourth, any articulation would really be a translation. Fifth, few of us really understand our identities – we are, in other words, when all things are considered, strangers to ourselves.

Perhaps a more avant-garde film could explore the multiple points of view and theoretical problems of representation, but such a film would miss the romantic inspiration of *Avatar*'s plot; such romantic plots require a simple identification between audience and character, and good romantic plots aim to inspire and morally reform the members of the audience by means of that identification.

We might also consider Edward Said's discussion of discourse in his classic book *Orientalism* and how the discourses of anthropology, biology, and other sciences all operated to give the colonizer expert knowledge of the exploited other and encouraged the colonizer to exaggerate the differences between himself and the other in ways that were dehumanizing, racist, and simply inaccurate. One of the things I appreciate about *Avatar* is that it included the ambivalent role of the scientist in the colonial project. Although the scientist is sympathetic to the Na'vi and even takes their side, it is precisely her knowledge and science that is used by the greedy bad guys and gives them the tools for how to win against the Na'vi.

But although the movie explores the problematic position of science, here the movie seems to repeat a lot of the biases of such colonial scientific discourse. Such discourse represented (and still represents) indigenous people as nature people, incapable of progress or

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development. Such representations were always used by the colonizer as the rationale for why it was OK (in the name of progress) to subdue them. Interestingly, Native Americans and environmentalists have turned that “nature people” image to their own advantage and used it as a tool for critiquing the environmentally destructive practices of capitalist imperialism. Although there are many debates about this among indigenous communities, many Native Americans have gladly identified with that image. In effect some Native American and postcolonial theorists have exploited the incoherence of colonialist ideologies and discourses that value pristine nature and human liberty but destroy them anyway.

What is perhaps most unrealistic about the movie is the strategies of the colonizers. In the movie, the evil military commander just wants to blow up the Na’vi, and so all the Na’vi unite to fight back. But historically, empires usually used a divide-and-conquer strategy. Years before any formal conquest took place, merchant colonizers formed alliances with segments of the indigenous society and sowed the seeds of discord. Some of the indigenous actually benefited (often temporarily) from these alliances. The political reality was never a simple binary of good and evil. After all, why would the Na’vi be such good warriors if they weren’t already fighting amongst themselves before the humans came? Hence, for postcolonial theorists, one of the most challenging problems was (and still is) how to unite people under the banner of a nation or form pan-national or pan-ethnic movements. For sure, *Avatar* simplifies this problem in a troubling way by allowing the white, male character to do the uniting after he tames the giant flying Toruk. But I don’t think we should so easily dismiss alliances between native and non-native cultures. The Trinidadian scholar C. L. R. James was very clear about the power of such alliances in his famous history of the Haitian revolution, as were Linebaugh and Rediker in their history of the revolutionary Atlantic. And theorists Negri and Hardt indicate that social movements today in the age of globalization are necessarily transnational and multiethnic. And for sure, most oppressed people know that they can’t defeat an empire by themselves and need allies, so it is a bit ridiculous for anyone to simply criticize *Avatar* for exploring the possibility of that cross-cultural alliance. At the end of the day, the movie does dramatize the important possibility of a colonizer learning, growing, and changing his mind. And according to this CNN article, it would seem that *Avatar* is, if anything, having a significant effect on people’s minds.