



Heroic Self –Discovery against Imperial Force in *Avatar* Movie (2009)

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Received: April 05, 2022

Accepted: April 12, 2022

Publication: April 25, 2022

ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is on the subversion of heroic identity. The hero in Avatar movie challenges imperial force. Such a study is important to reexamine the heroic deeds in the new light. It counters the preoccupied concept of seizing resources as a heroic deed. The approach adopted in this paper includes study of hero's journey mainly in Joseph Campbell's term. Instead of covering the entire process of hero's journey, it concentrates on hero's self-discovery for the benevolence of indigenous life and nature. The finding from this study provides an idea that mythical avatar for human welfare contradicts with modern man-made avatars for exploitation of others. The main conclusion of this research advocates against the human folly of the modern world over the insurmountable nature.

KEYWORDS: Avatar, hero, journey, imperial force, Na'vi, Pandora, Unobtainium, RDA, indigenous

Avatar, an appearance of sacred power of god or goddess in reincarnated form in the Hindu mythology, emancipates the world and people from the trap of evil forces. In the movie *Avatar* by James Cameron, Avatar has been created by US Armed Force, Resource Development Administration (RDA), to capture the valuable mineral called "Unobtainium" from a distant planet Pandora. In the mid -twenty second century, minerals in the earth are exploited causing severe energy crisis compelling imperial power to find minerals beyond the universe. In the history of mankind, the people leading for imperialism and colonialism by tricky diplomacy, cultural hegemony, economic influence and military presence are taken as heroes. This version of heroism subverts in the movie *Avatar*. Generally, a hero is a person who fulfills the mission of government or institution unquestionably. However, the protagonist of the *Avatar* goes against the current to save the indigenous culture and pristine nature of the Pandora. This paper argues the journey of a person to obtain some 'elixir' exploiting the innocent culture counters the vested interest of imperial force at the cost of livelihood and independence of victims. Instead, co-operation, respect to indigenous world and harmony with nature counts as a heroic deed.

The liberation from the boundaries of imperialism is the quest of hero. As long as Jake Sully is in the earth, he cannot get liberation. People's harmony with nature has been challenged. Cities are full of crowd; people are found to be wearing masks. They cannot breathe openly. Sully's agreement to be the part of the mission is also his quest for liberation because in the

war his both legs were paralyzed. Making contract of getting the movement of his legs back, he joins the mission. Robert Elbert writes in the movie review entitled *Cameron Retains His Crown*, "Pandora harbors a planetary forest inhabited peacefully by the Na'vi... the atmosphere is not breathable by humans... to venture out our landing craft we use Avatar... while acting as Avatar, they can see, fear, taste and feel like Na'vi, and have all the same physical adeptness" (n. p.). Sully can assimilate with Na'vi in avatar form. When his avatar form sleeps he awakens as human. As he awakens in human form, he is forced to hurry to chase Na'vi away from a big tree under which huge quantity of "Unobtainium" is deposited. He is warned by Colonel Miles Quaritch to make military attack upon the tree and settlement of natives under it if it is delayed. Sully tries to convince him saying that he was learning the language and way of life of Na'vi, he would be able to move them away from the spot where was the deposit of minerals. So, it would not be necessary to attack. But the forest of Pandora is connected to the network of forefathers. Na'vi are unwilling to migrate from their ancestral land. Franz Fanon states in the book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, "The violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of indigenous social fabric" (5). Making the Na'vi move away from the forest makes them detached to ancestral bond. The trees of the Pandora communicate the spirit of ancestors. If the tribe is compelled to move away, their ancestral tie is lost. The Na'vi do not have idea about the value of minerals under the trees.



In the movie there is a statement, “...offered various human infrastructures, but just find out what the blue monkey want, I mean, we try to give them medicine, education, roads but no... no... no...! They like mud”(.....). We can find racist and capitalistic statement in this ‘all in one’ package of quote. There is the trend of changing indigenous people’s way of life in the name of modernity by dominant power. They say they want to build schools, roads, churches, infrastructures in the name of civilization without even taking the consent of natives. Behind the scene, they conspire to steal valuables things that belong to native people. Sully knows the secret of the forest, creatures living there and the people and is aware that he cannot move native away, thus rather assimilates with them which is deception for imperial eyes. For him, it is the freedom to natives and himself.

The importance of native culture and native land conservation accompany the film. The protagonist of the movie, Jake Sully, has been used by RDA for its mission. His twin brother, who was working as a scientist in the mission to get ‘Unobtainium’ reaching Pandora in the form of Avatar, has already been killed for a bit of money. This incident shows the grimy picture of capitalism. After the death of his brother, Jake Sully was searched by the mission. Millions of Dollars has been spent to form ‘Avatar’ fusing the DNA of natives of Pandora called ‘Na’vi’ and human in this earth. As DNA of Sully matches with his twin brother, RDA wants to use him though he is crippled. Sully was an ex-marine soldier. He was injured in the war causing his body below the waist paralyzed. Even the paralyzed body has been used for making him Avatar to exploit the resources from the Pandora. He could walk again in the Avatar state. His payment for his duty would be given an expensive surgery to restore movement of his legs. Scientists working in RDA could not work as per their freewill. They were used by capitalist and imperial power to expand their influences. Poor people were used for military force to invade the indigenous life. Previously, Dr. Grace Augustine, the scientist, was sent in the Pandora. She established school to teach English there. She tried to learn their weak points to capture the resources as instructed by chief of the mission Parker Selfridge. Augustine seems sympathetic to the indigenous people but her sympathy does not work because she is not independent. She is the part of the mission getting salary from it. Unlike his twin brother and Dr. Augustine, Sully takes the people and nature in Pandora on his favor despite various aversions, falls in love with Neytiri. He faces with the moral choice to continue his work with the team and destroy the sacred native land or join the natives and wage war against his own team. Ultimately, he saves the land and its natives making a permanent transition from his human body to able-bodied Avatar. Thus revealing his true self for his attachment to people and land in Pandora, he makes the scheme of the mission to capture the resources a failure.

New identity of hero has been explored. The hero of the movie is controlled by the mission. Spectators of the movie

may assume that the hero will work with Na’vi and convince them to seize their “Unobtainium” in diplomatic way which is ‘soft power’ for imperial eyes. This assumption is proved wrong. Manohla Dargis wires in the New York Times in the topic *A New Eden, Both Cosmic and Cinematic* “Jake is himself an Avatar because he is both a special being and an embodiment of idea, namely that of the hero’s journey... he has signed on with a corporation that intend on extracting a valuable substance, a great Whitsitt that is an emblem of humanity’s greed and folly” (n. p.). Sully is in the journey that is not his choice. His legs were paralyzed in war while working as marine soldier. Soldiers learn chain of command than other professionals. The head of the mission Mr. Parker Selfridge wants to use Sully as a loyal soldier to carry out the tasks assigned by the mission. Sully’s recognition as the loyal soldier is not constant in course of time. The concern of livelihood compels people to serve for the vested interest of imperial forces. Human journey may not be determined by will as people are compelled to make journey for their livelihood. Sully’s journey is not only physical journey but spiritual elevation which could not be estimated by the mission that is human folly. Dargis further writes “The first part of Jake’s voyage- a boy’s rocking adventure- takes him from a wheelchair to 10-foot blue-skinned Na’vi body” (n. p.). Sully is thankful to human invention as he can walk but this ability is gained by a contract with RDA. Dargis again writes, “Although physically emancipated, he remains bound contractually and existentially, to the base camp, where he works for the corporation top scientist, Dr. Grace Augustine, even while taking order from its head of security, Col. Miles Quritch, a military man turned warrior for hire” (n. p.). In imperial world, diplomats, scientists, warriors, spies all are hired and they function on the pre-determined tasks. They are not away from their adherence to mission. However, Sully breaks an entanglement of corporate body using the folly of mission itself. In Avatar form, he gets strength. He uses the strength for the benefits of indigenous in the distant planet which was against the imperial motives. Thus, Sully’s identity is not as ‘yes man’ but as a rebellious force making him hero in another world and villain for the imperialists.

Hero plays the role of caretaker instead of taker. In capitalist world, in imperial and colonial race, heroism is taken as an act of taking resources, capturing land, controlling other and imposing superiority undermining the culture of others. Disconnecting from indigenous people, we have lost our connection to nature, indigenous worldview and culture. Modernization, deceptively turning away from our connection to nature, drifted away in the name of civilization. Joseph Campbell states in *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*, “The hero has died as the modern man; he as eternal man – perfected, unspecific, universal man- he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore is to return then to us, transformed, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed” (15). Colonel Quaritch, while simultaneously attempting to infiltrate the Na’vi with the use of Avatar and

preparing military attack if an infiltration attempt fails, both 'soft power' and 'hard power' of imperialists one after another, is merely in the role of taker. While Sully begins to bond with the natives and falls in love with aliens learning their skill of existing in wilderness. Sully is in the role of caretaker giving up the mission of his team. As Sully is found connected to the alien indigenous, the restless Colonel moves forward with warriors, machine guns, the pilot armored bombing on native land which can be taken as an allegory of imperial politics. In surface, Sully seems submissive person running away from the mission, falling into the trap of aliens. In depth, he is the hero unwilling to destroy the originality of natives. He is accepted in another planet that is not easy task. His submission is for a great purpose of respecting natural order. Joseph Campbell states, "The hero is the man of self-achieved submission" (11). Sully uses his consciousness to take care of aliens in the Pandora using the strength he got as an avatar and the support he gets from the people and creatures in the Pandora. When colonel is about to kill Sully, an arrow thrown by Neytiri pierced the chest of Colonel Quaritch, symbolically piercing the chest of exploiters.

The movie *Avatar* is more than hypothetical fantasy about the distant aliens in the Pandora; it is a reflection on hero's humanity. In course of imperial and colonial race, exploiters who are cynical and bloodthirsty attack indigenous lives just because they are not ready to handover their land and resources. Jake Sully fully abandoned his corrupt human body and turned one of pure noble Na'vi. If the aliens in the Pandora were another advanced race, his alignment to Na'vi could be taken as his deception to his team for personal benefits. Though Na'vi are nature respecting and peace loving tribe, they seem to be like warrior race for their defense at last. The magical power is reflected in the Pandora where every creature is a fighter. Animals and birds supporting Na'vi to fight against the invaders in the Pandora show balanced reciprocal relation between creatures and tribes, even the trees carry the soul of ancestors and connect people. The book *Companion to literary Myths, Heroes, and Archetype* refers, "Various magic aids accompany the hero and assist him to rise to power" (1054). Jake Sully rides the bird to fight against the invaders. In Hindu mythology too, avatars appear riding in animals and birds. The human made avatar was not for the rescue and support of people but for exploitation. Nevertheless, due to the flaw of science that turned against imperial desire. Thus, Sully in avatar form, with magical supports combats for the humanity challenging imperial force.

Human rights violation by imperialists is overwhelming on the earth. Cameron wants to show that in the future it may expand to other planets too. The film can be assimilated with real incidents in the life on the earth. When indigenous Papuans resisted the world's largest gold and copper mine, which was taken by American Freeport Company in Papua Island after the deal was made in 1960s and 1970s with

Indonesian dictatorship government, people had to suffer in the following way according to the report by Abigail Abrash, consultant for Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, on his report *Human Rights Abuses by Freeport in Indonesia*:

Torture, rape, indiscriminate and extrajudicial killing, disappearance, arbitrary detention, surveillance and intimidation, employment discrimination, severe restriction on freedom of movement, interference with access to legal representation, violation of subsistence and livelihood rights resulting from seizure and destruction of thousand acres of rainforest and contamination of water supplies and fishing grounds, violation of cultural rights including destruction of mountain and other spiritually significant sites held sacred by the Amungme, forced settlement of communities and destruction of housing, churches and other shelters (7).

The report by Abrash is a grimy portrayal of American Corporate Company's human right abuse for gold in Indonesia. Negotiation with the dictatorship government of Indonesia was the 'soft power' strategy of American government. When the people of Indonesia resisted against it, 'hard power' was used at the cost of human rights of Indonesian people. In *Avatar* too, when the 'soft power' failed, home tree is bombarded and hundreds of Na'vi are killed. Incidents are similar but similarities cease at the ending part because Na'vi tribe are reunited getting help from wildlife. They are victorious in repelling imperialist invaders. The report by Abrash is an example. Cases are similar about Red Indians in America and cultures in Africa. By making Na'vi triumphant, Cameron wants to convey the message that in future "cherry picking" valorized science and civilization may be detrimental to mankind. Transcendental love and empathy saves the universe.

Journey of hero in the Pandora as avatar is for justice. James Cameron seems influenced by oriental philosophy from the very word 'Avatar' itself. Times of India writes in movie review entitled *Avatar Movie Review: A Complete Cinematic Experience*:

It is Cameron's cry against the war and violence that makes Avatar an eloquent testimonial to the present... It has the meaningful story that could end up making this Magnus Opus a modern day parable for pacifist, climatologist, humanist, globalist...for the filmmaker openly indicts America for its post 9/11 expansionist policies and clearly states, "When people ate sitting on seats that you want, you make them your enemies. That is the only way you justify taking the stuff away from them! Stuff? Minerals, here oil, in the real world.(n.p.)

Sully is like the avatar of Hindu mythology saving the indigenous people and their land in an imaginary planet 'Pandora'. Avatars seen in the Hindu mythology were the rebirth of holy soul. For instance, Buddha is taken as the

ninth, Ram the eighth, Parshuram the seventh avatars of Bishnu. However, the modern man-made Avatar found in the film is the flaw of science. The locus of human weakness lies within human. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, is a flaw destructive its creator whereas Cameron's *Avatar* is another flaw of science which becomes blessing for the native of Pandora which was not supposed by its creators. Anyway, the hero figure is archetypal in *Avatar* movie as Marshal Fishwick mentions in *Seven Pillar of Popular Culture*, "The hero is archetypal, a paradigm who bears the possibilities of life, courage, love- the commonplace, the indefinable which defines our lives"(59). The hero comes to give meaning to our lives, often winning the war in a deceptive way. A hero for an imperial power may turn to be demon for the native. Sully gets victory over imperial power led by Colonel Miles Quaritch and Parker Selfridge. Though hundreds of natives are killed in the Pandora by the military attack by the RDA mission, RDA is not able to capture the native land in order to seize the resources, mainly 'Unobtainium'. Encountering against well-equipped military force of RDA seems impossible in the beginning. Native people only could not defend themselves. Support from wildlife creatures implies nature is unconquerable. Development at the cost of natural deterioration is the threat to human civilization.

The heroic journey of Jake Sully turns to be courageous and benevolent for the native of the Pandora. He found himself in a changed role in course of life from marine soldiers to crippled one to avatar to savior. His choice to be the savior of the native of the Pandora comes from self-awakening not from the mission he was assigned. The knowledge about the significance of native land and native culture, his continuous quest for liberation, search for new identity, inclination to be caretaker, appeal for humanity and adherence to justice pave the way to counter the imperial force. The Na'vi fight for

their existence while imperialists fight to challenge other's existence and establish their supremacy. The movie *Avatar* questions the supremacy of imperial force and establishes the rights of indigenous culture in the distant planet giving message to live by cooperation and co-existence instead of the invasion.

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Citation: Tek Bahadur Chhetry, "Heroic Self –Discovery against Imperial Force in *Avatar* Movie (2009)", American Research Journal of English and Literature, Vol 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 15-18.

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