

## PATRIARCHY, ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND OPPRESSION OF WOMEN: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF JAMES CAMERON'S AVATAR

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### Abstract

*Anthropocentrism or human- centred bias is an ever-present issue in the modern society which is rarely addressed and urbanization has fastened the pace of this process. Equivalently, women have also been unjustly oppressed by men because the latter think they are the superior beings. The subject of this paper is to analyse how patriarchy has lead to anthropocentrism and oppression of women in the film Avatar (2009), and how the women characters resisted these oppressions consequently reforming their society. The film is analysed through Ecofeminist theory in the light of a concept of patriarchy. Ecofeminist analysis study the connection women have towards nature and the interconnection between exploitation of nature and domination of women resulting from patriarchy. The paper attempts to reaffirm this interconnection. It also stresses a need to analyse patriarchy, and power dynamics with an understanding that all living beings are essential to the well being of a planet and humans; or rather men are not separate or superior to anyone.*

**Key words:** *Ecofeminism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, domination, nature, women, reformation.*

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**I**n a traditional patriarchal society that is dominating the lifestyle of humans; male members would leave their family and work in an industrial field whereas, women, as consumers, reproducers, and caregivers did the traditional social roles of managing family, resources and food. The demand for resources and energy increased with the advent of industrialization in the modern society. Consequently, this excessive use of natural resources and the amount of waste emission has led to ecological crisis. The social division of labour made women suffer greater at the time of ecological crisis. Women were told to remain in the kitchen whereas men engaged in the decision making, income generating and thereby occupied a higher status or position within the family and consequently within the society, thereby making it a male dominated one. Men's power to reproduce and his ability to sow the earth are the prime factors behind this menace.

Fifty centuries ago, women played an important role in the field of agriculture and men believed that women were impregnated by God. However, 'with the discovery of his dual power i.e. agriculture and procreation - men seized control of the soil (fertility) and women's womb (fecundity)' (Ghosh 111). The overexploitation of the two by men has resulted in overpopulation and destruction and degradation of the environment. It is believed that Ecofeminism emerged in such a context. Before the 1960s, ecological movement and women's liberation movement had always been studied as two independent

entities. The term Ecofeminism or Ecological Feminism was first proposed by French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in her work *Feminism or Destruction*, 1974. American feminist scholar Rosemary Ruether states,

'Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movements to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relation and the undying values of this society' (Das 22).

According to feminists, it was a war against nature and therefore against women. However, this does not imply that only women are innately linked to nature than men. There are men who devote themselves to defending the environment. Nonetheless, it is statistically true that women are the majority in the environmental movements. *The Second Sex* (1952), a ground-breaking work by Simone de Beauvoir remarks that both women and nature are seen as 'other' in the patriarchal order. To think and write this in her work published in early 50s suggests that there was already a need for a deeper ecofeminist analysis along with other feminist discourse.

*Avatar* (2009), directed by James Cameron is a film set in the year 2154 about human's group, RDA Corporation, with great political, economic and military might, who explores a planet in Alpha Centauri star system called Pandora to obtain a rare mineral called unobtainium. Shortly, the RDA force start attacking as the Na'vi, the native residents of that planet are unwilling to let the humans destroy their land, resulting into a large dramatic battle with casualties on both the sides of the humans and Na'vi. At the end of the film, the

battle is won by the Na'vi warriors forcing the RDA survivors to leave the beautiful sacred moon.

### **Oppression of Women:**

Patriarchy is the systematic, unjustified domination by men because of the power and position they hold in the society. In a scene at the beginning of the film, Jake is in a club and a muscular man on a barstool slaps the woman he is with. During this scene, Jake narrates, 'You want a fair deal? You are on the wrong planet. Strong prey on the weak. That's just the way things are and nobody does a damn thing' (00:02:13). But Jake went up to them, pulls off the stool and that man falls on the floor. This scene followed by the narration explicitly states the oppression by the dominant and set a floor for the complexity of power dynamics that plays one of the major role throughout the film.

Throughout the history, a woman that challenges authority always pays a high cost for being a challenger. To ensure that they do not compete with the masculine ideal, they are silenced or killed by an authoritative male. The women adopting masculine attitudes and taking on power in traditional male-reserved domains is thus portrayed as 'abject' in Julia Kristeva's sense (Kapell et.al 157). She is simultaneously captivating and terrifying- and must therefore be eliminated. In the film, Grace is a female with masculine traits, she leads the team on Pandora at first and later it is Colonel and Parker Selfridge who takes charge. In a world that is completely absorbed by patriarchy, it is unacceptable for a man to take orders from a woman. Thus, a male forcefully outgrowing a woman is something ordinarily prevalent. In a scene where Grace, Norm and Jake are in prison; Trudy courageously breaks the crew out of the prison. As they attempt to escape by helicopter to the mobile avatar link area, it is discovered that Grace has been

shot through the stomach by the Colonel leading to her death. When Colonel realised she is defying all his orders and trying to go against his mission, he decided to kill her as he could not let a female overpower him.

Trudy is another masculinized female character who is shot at with guns. In the final battle scene, Trudy opens fire at the RDA aircraft especially the one Colonel was in. Upon discovering her, Colonel states, 'light her up' (02:30:39) to his crew member who then obey him and shoot her to death. As they succeed, he offers words of encouragement and praise. This is another instance from the film which depicts that a female has to be under the dominating male and follow their orders.

There is an emphasis on assignment of tasks to women or men based on gender role representation rather than individual abilities. This distribution is hierarchization of masculine activities over female activities. This assignment of task is not only limited to the Sky People but also the Na'vi. All female blue figures on Pandora occupy overly familiar roles: family, education, spirituality and dependence upon men for the 'serious' matters such as survival and politics and role of an educator is classically reserved to women. Neytiri is cast in the role of a an educator of Jake until he is ready to take place within the Na'vi society. The division of ruling in Na'vi society is like - Eytukan, the clan leader, is in charge of political and military decisions, while his wife, Mo'at is the *tsahik*, the spiritual leader who interprets the signs of the deity Eywa. In a conversation between Grace and Jake, she discloses Tsw'tey will be the next clan leader and Neytiri, next Tshahik. As Eytukan had no male heir to be the next clan leader, it is decided Tsw'tey will take the legacy forward who is going to be his son-in-law. Although Na'vi is a complete different world than the humans', there too exists a similar patriarchal rule.

## Oppression of Nature:

Pandora is a beautiful, often bioluminescent and lushly vegetated moon circling planet in the Alpha Centauri. The Hometree, the sacred Tree of Souls and Tree of Voices are the three important totem plants on Pandora and the Pandoran ecology forms a vast neural network into which the Na'vi and other creatures can connect. The Na'vi believes all life is sacred and should be honoured. However, humans or the Sky People; as they are called in the film do not view nature as a sacred entity. Selfridge Parker represents the economic perspective promoting capitalism through nature. He is of the belief that people should take as much as they can for their own profit thus; he wants to extract mineral unobtainium. Parker aggressively explains Jake in a scene that it is Unobtainium which pays for the whole operation they do on Pandora since it is sold for twenty million a kilo on the earth.

At the beginning of the film, even before the protagonist is introduced; a shot where traffic light changes and the city crowd crosses the road subtly hints at the intense destruction of nature that humans have caused on earth. Those people have worn face mask to protect themselves from the toxic air. A shot focuses Jake sitting on bed watching television news report. The reporter reads, 'The Bengal tiger, extinct for over a century, is making a comeback. These cloned tiger cubs at Beijing zoo are' (00:02:13). Jake switches off the channel before listening to the complete report. The news report mildly provides an information to the viewers about the disrupted ecosystem and the artificial ways humans are trying to procure it through science. At the time of climax, as avatar Jake moves to magnificent Mother tree, he bonds with its tendril and starts talking to the tree. He requests the Mother Tree to look into Grace's



memories and look at the world that Sky People have come from. He says, 'There is no green there. They killed their Mother, and they're gonna do the same thing here' (02:22:48). All these scenes allude to deforestation and climate change on Earth. The capitalist economic system is often seen as an impetus of anthropocentric thinking and environmental degradation. Profit drives the average human's existence. Social ecology sees environmental abuse, exploitation as a result of the domination of groups of human beings by other groups of humans – intra-human domination (Cudworth 17).

In most of the Western religious and philosophical tradition, the non-human world is thought to exist for the sake of human beings. The anthropocentrism sees that human beings have needs and non-human world exists to satisfy these needs (Romadhon 35). These beliefs lead humans to explore and exploit Pandoran land. In the film when viewers get to see Pandora for the first time, the aerial shot first displays the place on Pandora where humans live, dark and dusty and a plane is passing over the land that is barren due to mining in the middle of the green land. As a comparison, another aerial shot portrays very different scenery of Pandoran forest. It looks extremely unlike to the landscape where humans lived. The land is still unattacked, magnificent fertile land. The viewers can assume human activity and the damage that they bring to the new found land.

Colonel Quaritch leads a squad of troopers wearing breathing masks and carry big weapons and heavy machines escorted by armsuit. He positively encourages his team to shoot anything they find moving. Trees are slashed down by plasma cutters, terrified animals flee before the onslaught, power suits and Troopers stride through the ravaged forest, blasting anything that moves. King argues, natured domination results from a

socially constructed mind set based upon dualism, that 'has its material roots in the domination of human by human, particularly of women by men' (qtd. in Cudworth 26).

Quaritch and his armed team attack the Hometree with forty millimetre rocket launchers. The inside of the Hometree erupted with multiple explosions of teargas leading the Omaticayas to cough and gag. As the Omaticaya watch the sight in horror; the Hometree hits the ground like the end of the world raising a great cloud of dust and pulverized debris. Quaritch acknowledges the team work and next they plan to target the Well of Souls and destroy their racial memory. Anthroparchy as a new term shed light to explain this distinctly. The term is derived from two words - anthropocentric and patriarchy. The term interconnects with other systems of oppression based upon class, ethnicity and gender.

### **Resistance and Reformation:**

Nature is always feminized by the calling it 'Mother Nature'. Mother Nature or sometimes known as Mother Earth is a Greco-Roman personification of nature, one of the major reasons being, it is seen as possessing the same qualities as women. Eywa is also regarded as mother or goddess on Pandora. This alludes to the interconnected relationship shared between nature and female.

Max, a scientist colleague, described Dr. Augustine as someone who likes plants better than people. Norm calls her a genius for writing a book on Pandora's plants. She is being admired for being able to understand and write a book on nature of a completely alien world and she continues to learn more. Throughout the film she has tried to understand nature and protected it. Women have expressed a deep connection with nature and challenged men who tried to destroy nature. Neytiri's sister, Sylwanin was furious at the humans because she had



witnessed the clear cutting of Pandoran forest. She decided to withstand along with few other hunters against hostile humans. However, the troopers killed Sylwanin and others for meddling into their mission. Trudy, a pilot who refused to defy Colonel's order in the beginning of the film even though it meant to save a life, stated at a war that she is unable to continue flying the helicopter and witness the destruction of nature and life. In the final battle scene, she opens fire at the RDA aircraft. However, she too was shot to death. Dr. Grace was another female who offered her life to protect nature. All these women and their sacrifice of life to protect nature legitimize their connection, love and respect towards nature.

Neytiri is a brave, loyal and strong-willed Na'vi woman. She teaches Jake their ways of life and customs – create *tsaheylu*, language, how to use bow and arrow; kill an animal with appropriate respect, etc. As the Hometree is destroyed by the high-explosive rocket fire, and many Na'vi are killed or crushed under the tree, Neytiri finds her father, Eytukan, impaled on a shard of wood. Before he dies, he hands his bow and tells her to protect the clan. This scene symbolically shows the transfer of role and power from Eytukan to Neytiri.

Eytukan manifests complete faith in his daughter as she has always fought for her people and nature. When all things seem bleak, she proves her capabilities by bravely standing with Jake and Tsw'tey. Neytiri bonds with a thanator, indulges in a battle with Colonel. As Quaritch attacks avatar link units containing Jake; leaving him gasping for air, Colonel picks him up from his hair and is about to kill him. Neytiri, standing up in a classic archer figure, nocks two arrows at Colonel's chest from her father's bow. Colonel dies with an ironic laugh and Jake is saved. Along with the defeat of Colonel, Neytiri puts an end to his domination on women and nature. The remaining humans were sent back to earth as Jake narrates, 'The aliens went back

to the dying world' (02:49:28). He rightly calls Sky People aliens as they tried to encroach and control Pandora for their selfish needs. Despite the degrading condition on environment as hinted in the film, the humans did not learn to conserve nature.

### **Conclusion:**

Ecofeminist analysis of the film *Avatar* (2009) helps to understand male superiority, also reflecting the connection of women to environment. Although *Avatar* is set in a futuristic fictional world, it strongly possesses patriarchy, oppression of women as well as on nature that is present even today. The depiction of women in this film is different from the stereotypical portrayal of weak women in most of the films. Although Grace and Trudy were shot dead, their contribution and sacrifice of life didn't go meaningless. Neytiri reformed the Pandoran world where the Sky People were no more allowed to oppress anyone. The battle that they fight is not only against the men and their power but also the social system and patriarchy that the society follows. They reject anthropocentric or human centric perspective and encourage eco centric or earth centred life.

This analysis stresses the need for a more interdependent world view and a consensus understanding that all living things are essential to the well being of the planet and that humans or rather men are not separate or superior to anyone. As a result, there is a need to understand and uproot social structures for the betterment of human and non-human world. Though great care was taken to not miss out any traces of oppression with reference to patriarchy in the selected films, it may be probable some may have gone unnoticed. The theory of Ecofeminism can be further studied with reference to Greek mythology, Indian mythology and the Bible.

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