Postcolonial Study of Cameron's *Avatar*

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James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010) is a movie based on the experiences of different paradigms of post colonialism which emerge as a reaction to the colonial discourses in the history of theory. Post colonial discourse aims at re-reading any text that "… directly addresses the experience of Empire" (Mcleod 2007: 33). It is also "concerned with the workings and legacy of colonialism" (Mcleod 2007: 33). *Avatar* has been screened with the realities of the colonial history where we discover two groups--oppressors and oppressed. Post colonialism, with its multifarious characteristics, enables us to examine the movie in multi-dimensional ways. It looks at the colonial discourse as designed by the invaders in the movie and at the same time, it is also critical to the colonial discourse.

In order to develop my article, I will use two leading postcolonial theorists namely Edward Said and Franz Fanon. Before analyzing the post colonial characteristics of the movie, I will discuss the development of the colonial discourse as these two discourses are inseparably connected.

Now let me show what colonial discourse contributes to the formation of its theories and how these theories are employed for structuring the imperial paradigm. John Mcleod, in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2007), asserts that colonial discourse tries to explore the methods of "representations and modes of perceptions" (17) done by the colonizers with a view to keeping the colonized groups subservient to them. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism* (1978), shows how their representations and perceptions about the colonized groups are hegemonic in the sense that the colonized groups cannot but auto-consent to the ideologies of the colonizers. In order to make the point clear, we can say that the colonizers' attitude to the colonized is that " it is right and proper to rule over other peoples, and by getting colonized people to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things is a process which we can call 'colonizing the mind' (Mcleod 2007: 18). Franz Fanon is very renowned for his analytical study of the psychological colonization of the colonizers over the colonized groups. On the other hand, Edward Said (1936) " looked at the divisive relationship between the colonizers and the colonized" (Mcleod 2007: 21). According to him, this relationship between these two groups is nothing but a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony" (Said 1978: 05).

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Now let me concentrate on the fact how Cameron's *Avatar* can be a colonial discourse. James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010) is a movie that can be analyzed in different ways. In the movie, Cameron has screened two worlds namely the people from the plain, and the Navi people. The screenplay of the plot is technologically absolute where Cameron has not compromised at all in employing the most modern technologies, namely, virtual reality with extreme degree of special effects. The plot of the movie says that the military, working for the mine-corporation, has been deployed to uproot the peace-loving tribal group of Pandora, an exotic area where the Navis live. Their objective is to get the precious mineral which is thought to be available under the tree-village where the tribal people of Pandora – Navis – live.

Apart from all of the technological achievement, the movie has incorporated some theoretical aspects of colonialism and postcolonialism. It would be more appropriate to quote Mcleod in order to clear the objective of the people from the plain (whom I will be calling the colonizers) where he says, "colonialism was first and foremost part of the commercial venture of the Western nations" (2007:07). So *Avatar* can be taken as a venture undertaken by the colonized group for fulfilling their commercial purposes. The expeditors in the movie are looking for a valuable mineral which they find out under a tree-village in Pandora where a group of tribal people, namely Navis, lives. In order to fulfill their commercial venture in Pandora, they undertake a project of sending a clone Navi to the locality so that they can come to know more about them.

Colonial discourse affirms the fact that the colonizers must attain proper knowledge about the colonized group in order to implement their perception on them. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism* shows how the colonizers invest money and knowledge for knowing the target group. In *Avatar*, the plain dwellers have invested more money and intellectuality for discovering the Navis. Said says that the colonizers invest materially and intellectually to gain knowledge about the colonized groups. In *Avatar*, we also discover the same trend. In order to discover the Navis, the invaders manage to create a biometrical Navi namely Jake who is expected to go to the Navi village and come to know about them more authentically which will help them uproot the tribes easily. So gaining knowledge about the tribal group is the main concern behind the scientific mission undertaken by the mine seekers. This mission will lead them to the successful materialization of their dreams.

Another important aspect of the colonial discourse is the perception of the supremacy of the colonizers. This supremacy, as the colonizers thought, is a hegemonic one which makes them automatically superior to the ruled class. Said claims that the "culture is to be found operating within other persons' works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent" (Said 1978: 07). This consent is what we call hegemony. In *Avatar*, the white invaders expect to get

their expectation fulfilled with the auto consent of Jake because of their thought of superiority. This is not only cultural superiority but also ideological superiority that leads them to possess hegemonic attitude that Said has truly observed as "the Empire must be wise" (Said 1978: 37). Said, in his *Orientalism*, has quoted two greatest imperial agents namely Arthur James Belfour and Lord Cromer who served the British Imperial Government with their able hands and contributed enormously to the well-established British colonies in different corners of the globe. In order to ensure the English superiority over the Egyptians, Balfour declared "England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows" (Said 1978: 34). So the colonial paradigm is constructed with this kind of view of supremacy over the peripheral groups. This kind of one dimensional thought of the invaders in *Avatar* leads them to design their project of uprooting the Navis without asking them or consulting them. In this way, the colonial discourse spreads over to the construction of the divisional world which is later challenged by post colonial reaction.

The imperial paradigm designed by the colonizers portrays a divisional world where the colonizers are always superior and the colonized are inferior. Even they establish a division in the geographical locations where they live. According to Said, the land of the colonized group has been "since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1978: 01). Moreover, for describing the inhabitants of these areas, he uses a series of negative words which are mostly coined by the colonizers such as "irrational, depraved, childlike, different" (Said 1978: 41). We would find this same analysis in Cameron's *Avatar*. Cameron has screened the Navis as a tribal group in his movie who are ten feet tall, blue skinned and unbelievably powerful. Physically they are, not favourable to the white invaders. On the other hand, the land of the Navis is also portrayed as an exotic land full of strange animals with which only exotic beings can deal with. So the representation of the Navis by the white invaders clearly proves the fact that the movie aims at portraying a world where two distinctive nations live and where a nation must be ruled by another. Here the white people are with the clear knowledge that the Navis are to be uprooted for the mineral because they are born to be wiped out. In this way, the colonial discourse makes way for the rulers so that they can materialize their ideologies smoothly. Homi K. Bhaba's comment on the objective of the colonial discourse becomes very appropriate where he says that the colonial discourse tries to "construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origins, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhaba 1994:70). In *Avatar*, we come across this phenomenon absolutely.

But imperial invasion is not a universal reality. With the changing of the political history, the oppressed groups get empowered and resist the ruling class's oppression. Now let me focus on the resistance of the oppressed group which is a

phenomenon opened to the colonial discourse by the theoretical paradigm namely post colonialism. The historiography of the colonial masters is not ready to accept this particular paradigm because of their imperial hegemony I have discussed above. But the West, in course of time, is compelled to accept the truth that the peripheral groups will bounce back as reaction to their oppression. In *Avatar*, Jake is sent to Pandora so that he can manage for them the quitting of the tree-village. In the jungle, he is rescued by Neytiri, the Navi leader's daughter from the wild beast and thus they become friends to each other. This opens privilege for Jake to go to the tree-village. After much discussion, he is adopted in the clan and given to Neytiri for educating him the culture of the Navis. Gradually Jake becomes one of them. His naturlization with the main society of the Navis is an inevitable one as he is made to be one of them. In the factory of the invaders, he is taught about their purpose. But after going to Pandora and becoming one of them, Jake shakes off his master's characteristics.

Now let us see what the post colonial theory has to do here. Peter Brooker, in his *A Glossary of Cultural Theory* (2003) introduces an important point regarding the practices of post colonialism by telling that it tells about "a commitment to liberation struggles on behalf of the masses through violent revolutionary action" (Brooker 2003:199). *Avatar* is a movie whose destiny is decided as a postcolonial production when Jake is compelled to be one of the Navis by the producer. He becomes the savior of the Navis. Some factors are responsible for his transformation from an agent of the invaders to one of the Navis. We can think of class consciousness as advocated by Karl Marx which states the fact that an individual from a proletariat class must feel for another individual of his class. Even his activities are also framed considering the interest of the people of his own class. So, Jake, though a biochemical production, feels an inseparable tie with Neytiri for the identicality of their physical status. This unity dormantly approves Marx's conception that all proletariats will be under the same umbrella for their own interest. Here Jake's transformation as a Navi is one of the turning points where post colonialism has to do a lot. Because of this transformation, the Navis could fight back against the white invaders.

Post colonialism, as observed by David Macey in his *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2000) is found out to be in inseparable link with the "theoretical discourses associated with postmodernity, or in other words deconstruction, forms of Lacanian psychoanalysis and forms of discourse analysis derived in part from Foucault" (305). This allows us to rethink the canonical perceptions about the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. We can take example from Macey again who shows that "the periphery is in fact present in the center" (Macey 2000:305). I am focusing this statement in order to show the fact that the human beings in *Avatar* think themselves as the center who can control everything. But in reality they look for the mineral in Pandora where the humanoid Navis live. So deconstructive ideologies can be found in the fact that

center cannot hold it anymore. It has to look for the periphery in order to ensure its existence.

On the other hand, Homi K. Bhaba, one of the greatest figures in the theoretical field of post colonialism brings out the alternative power level in the peripheral group. He points out the fact that the colonizers try to produce some mimic men with a view to fulfill their purpose and "to work on their behalf" (Mcleod 2007:54). Macaulay, in his famous writing on the education system of India, advocates for the necessity of mimic men from the Indian society to represent the English in all of their imperial mechanisms. These mimic men not only help to construct the imperial structure but also help to play the role of their torch bearers by promoting their ethics, morality, language, etc. What Bhaba shows is that these mimic men are not "disempowered, slavish individuals" (Mcleod 2007: 54) to carry the ruling class' morals blindly. Rather the ruling class suffers from a type of threat from them which can be harmful for them. In Cameron's *Avatar,* Jake is a mimic man who is created to carry the orders of his masters. But he gradually becomes one of the Navis who strongly fights back against his master using the knowledge he has about his master. In this way, the meaning of the periphery is located in a different way where the empire speaks back to subdue the once masters. "…the Empire writes back to the Center…" (Rushdie)

Post colonialism also highlights the recognition of the periphery. Chinua Achebe (1930), Nigerian writer, deciphers the fact that the periphery can represent themselves culturally, aesthetically, intellectually and linguistically. For this, what they need is to have strong sense of possession of their own culture. He has proved it in his famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1960) where he has shown the strong background of his own society namely Igbo society. This strong affiliation we can discover in Jake and other comrades from Pandora who fight against the invaders for protecting themselves from their hands.

Post colonialism is not a counterpart of colonialism in the field of theory. Rather it is a new perception where wider field of analysis can be possible. This is not to be forgotten that the peripheral women are always an important field of discussion in post colonial era. With the introduction of the post colonialism, the women of the periphery get a particular field to substantiate their ideological existence. They get a particular theoretical paradigm for bringing out their potentialities which are never recognized. In *Avatar*, we also come across this reality. Among the colonizers, we don't find authentic feminine figure who can be paralleled to the male counterparts at least ideologically in the sense that they would be able to realize their peripheral counterparts. But in the peripheral group, we see a balanced distribution of power among both male and female as the law of the nature. In *Avatar,* we come to know about the holy woman who acts as the representative of the god. She is a part and parcel of the Navi society and plays a very important role in determining the do's for the well being of the society. She

works as a parallel force of the political leaders of the clan and we don't find any problem in accepting her in the Navi society. The most remarkable presentation of the woman in the society is Neytiri. She is an empowered character who parallels herself with her male counterparts in all the activities in her own world. She is a great fighter, a good teacher, a compassionate lover and above all a patriot. She possesses all the traits of a great hero. In this way, post colonialism feminism comes into being which affirms the fact that the postcolonial women enjoy more freedom as they are far away from the civilizational parameters. Mary Klages, in her *Critical Theory* says that the women living in the periphery can get more privileges as they are far away form the center where strong and rigid rules are functioning. In this way, post colonialism challenges the canonical perception of the peripheral women and determines a lofty location for them.

The colonizers' structural analysis of the position of the women and men through the binaries is challenged by post colonialism. The colonizers act like the structuralists in positing the women on the inferior side of a binary opposition: man/women. Man is always given upperhand and women are attributed with the inferior position. But postcolonialism, following Derrida's view of deconstruction, is interested in erasing the dividing line and declaims the superior position of the men. In *Avatar*, we get exactly the same view where Neytiri becomes an epitome of a genderless warrior declaring all the colonial structures of binary invalid.

So in this article, I have tried to establish how colonial discourse has paved the way of the making of the film *Avatar* and how the post colonial theoretical paradigm has opened up new challenges for the colonial discourse and incorporated new themes with the movie. James Cameron has rightly chosen the work as it is a common phenomenon of the present world where we the super powers like America are thriving for minerals in different corners of the world. For doing so, the humanist code is constantly violated and human beings are brutally killed by attributing different negative aspects to them.

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