

Avatar: A Cinema Speaking about Extractive Capitalism and Contemporary Imperialism

*Maidul Islam**

Films can speak about their times and articulate politics and reflect upon philosophy as well.¹ James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster, is not an exception in this regard. I am not an expert to comment on the artistic process of the film and know very little about the aesthetic questions like the texture of the film, the production and the montages. Hence, I shall instead limit my analysis mostly at the symbolic level of the narrative in the movie.

Avatar is a critique of contemporary imperialism along with various extractive forms of capital accumulation. The film is set in the year 2154 and is a speculative science fiction movie. It shows how an American corporate with the help of US marines has come to a different planet called the Pandora in search of a grey rock called unobtainium. Pandora is inhabited by a local indigenous humanoid population—the extra-terrestrial blue monkey-like creatures called the Na'vi. While completing the film, in an interview, Cameron said that his film's title was “inspired from the name suggested for incarnation of one of the Hindu gods taking a flesh form.” He argues, “In this film what that means is that the human technology in the future is capable of injecting a human's intelligence into a remotely located body, a biological body...The lead character, Jake, who is played by Sam Worthington, has his human existence and his avatar existence” (Keegan 2007). The film shows that a team of scientists can transform human species into a Na'vi species, and the job of such a planted agent

* The author is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

would be to convince the Na'vis of the Pandora to relocate to extract unobtainium from their planet. This entire expedition to the Pandora is called the "Avatar programme."

According to Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi), the corporate boss of the entire Avatar programme, "unobtainium sells for \$20 million a kilo." Parker is unapologetic about the fact that his sole motive is to get the unobtainium which "pays for the whole party, and pays for the science" when he was arguing with Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), head of the scientific team in Avatar Programme in the very early part of the film. He shares his irritation with Grace, "those savages (Na'vi) are threatening the whole operation. We are on the brink of a war, and you are supposed to be finding a diplomatic solution." This remark of Parker by describing the Na'vi as a 'savage', which is resisting the corporate plunder of their habitat, is important since this exposes the antagonistic relationship between the white American colonizers and the 'savage' Na'vi at the very beginning of the film.

Hollywood science fiction movies often portray the *alien* as something threatening to human existence. The 'science' that is being used in the genre of science fiction movies along with the structure, themes, dramatic devices, distinctive narrative tropes, conventions of storytelling is "particular constellations of Western thought and history and projects these Western perspectives on a pan-galactic scale" while distinguishing "the West from all other civilisations" (Sardar 2002: 2). The creators, contributors and significant section of the audience of science fiction are largely drawn from the West with a foundational epistemological separation between the "instrumental rationality" of the West and the "superstitious" Rest (Sardar 2002: 2-3). James Cameron's *Avatar* is a break from such trends—a paradigmatic shift from the 20th Century Fox distributed *Alien* series comprising of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), David Fincher's *Alien 3* (1992) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien Resurrection* (1997). In analysing Cameron's *Aliens*, Stephen Mulhall made an insightful observation:

Cameron has more than once acknowledged that he conceived [it]...as a study of the Vietnam War—in which a high-tech army confident of victory over a supposedly more primitive civilization found itself mired in a humiliating series of defeats that added up to an unwinnable war. [T]his analysis allows Cameron to criticize certain aspects of American culture—its adoration of the technological, its ignorance of alien cultures, its overweening arrogance. At the same time, however, the generic background of his film, together with its

specific inheritance of the alien narrative universe, ensures that the structure of his criticism works only placing the Vietnamese in the position of absolute, and absolutely monstrous, aliens; and it rewrites the conflict it claims to analyse by allowing the Marines to win the war by destroying the planet in a nuclear explosion. It thereby supports the vision of American political hubris and xenophobia that it claims to criticize (Mulhall 2008: 65-66).

Cameron's first film, *The Terminator* (1984), also in the science fiction genre, "concerns a threat posed to the future of the human race by the unintended evolution of a species of machines which respond to a threat to their own survival from their creators (who try to unplug Sky Net, the self-aware strategic defence computer who 'fathers' this species) by trying to annihilate them—first by nuclear war, then by genocide" (Mulhall 2008: 47). Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), a sequel to Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), portrays how the human race is threatened not only by a single alien but by a species of aliens and hence the emphasis on the "plural form of the film title" (Mulhall 2008: 62). In *The Abyss* (1989) set towards the end of the cold war, Cameron portrays two enemies of US navy—the Soviets and underwater creatures having non-terrestrial intelligence (NTI). In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), a sequel of *The Terminator*, Cameron continues the story of his 1984 film to show how the female protagonist in the film deals with the threat posed from the machines of the future. In *True Lies* (1994), with the absence of the Soviet enemy and a little change from the science fiction genre to an action-comedy film, Cameron finds a new enemy in the *terrorist*, who threatens the security of United States with a nuclear weapon. In *Titanic* (1997), Cameron showed the great tragedy of a gigantic ship and its fellow passengers that got sunk and how social classes played an essential role between life and death in such a moment of crisis.

In the first five films of Cameron's directorial career along with his last directed movie, *Avatar*, it is always the Americans who are threatened by an external enemy, either from aliens or machines or terrorists. We can call this threat perception as insecurity of powerful imperial states. This vulnerability is a feature of an empire, because it is aware of the historical wrongs and injustices that it has been committing on other people while feeding its population. Before the making of *Titanic*, Cameron's films were reflective about the self-obsession of American power and an insecurity of the American *self* that culminated into mistrust with the *other*. However, *Titanic* represented the change of such an American attitude from *distrust* with the other to *guilt* for the other with social tensions between rich and poor representing a class antagonism in the background of the film. In this

respect, it reflects remorse for the poor white population in the Anglo-American world. But *Titanic* did not address the question of other injustices apart from the class one like racism and imperialism that *Avatar* seeks to explore. In *Avatar*, Cameron also corrects his mistaken approach in *Aliens* as previously pointed out by Mulhall.

Avatar is a film about aliens but it also treats humans as aliens. In this regard, it is scripted from the perspectives of both humans and the Na'vi. At the end of the film, there is an interesting dialogue: "the Aliens (humans) are going back to their dying world." For the Na'vi, it is the humans who are aliens, while for the humans, the Na'vi are aliens and these relative designations of each other as aliens can be witnessed on several occasions in the film. Cameron's portrayal of the American marines and the corporate as representative of the so-called "civilized" human race is interesting. Since America is a superpower and its imperialist hegemony and technological superiority is unparalleled, the portrayal of white Americans as the representative of the "civilized" human race was aptly strategic when it would face defeat at the hands of the Na'vi, whom the Americans think as a culturally backward and technologically inferior race. Since, in this film, Americans are portrayed as a technologically superior race as opposed to the 'savage' Na'vi, the Americans actually become a synecdoche of human master and Na'vi becomes the same for an inhuman savage. The civilized can wipe out an entire habitat with a lethal weapon of huge explosives by just pressing one button at his fingertip but cannot respect the different culture, norms, and forms of the 'savage' Na'vi life. Therefore, it is not the savage who is barbaric as the civilized wants to believe, but the civilized can equally or even become more barbaric than the savage. As Walter Benjamin proclaims, "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1970: 258).

This critical assessment of savage-civilized dichotomy as presented by *Avatar* can be also seen in the dialogues of Satyajit Ray's *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1991). In this respect, *Avatar* prescribes for acknowledging difference and respecting alternate ways of life. On that count, the film tries to push an anti-Orientalist politics against the Orientalist approach of several Hollywood movies. It tries to break away from the image of the white colonial stereotyping of the damned "other".² The question of savage-civilized dichotomy, self and other along with superiority complex of the power of American technology, the white colonial paranoia of self-obsession and mistrust with the other, the master's consciousness of Americans and

its forgetfulness about the servant (the Na'vi) in Nietzschean terms is well represented in the film. As we can learn from Nietzsche (2003) that the master always thinks his values (the master's morality) as good while that of the servant is equated with "low", "plebian", "vulgar", "bad", "barbarian" and "evil". Since the master has the authoritative right to describe what is "good" or "bad", it should be mentioned in the context of our discussion on the film that the savage does not know that (s)he is a savage, rather the civilized master gives her the name "savage", while (s)he is unaware of it. While the master is immersed in his "goodness", he forgets the "bad" (slave, servant and the savage). Naturally, the master is not bothered about the servant precisely because of his superiority complex. This forgetting of the slave by the master only makes him unaware of the world of the servant. His ignorance about the slave follows from his forgetfulness of what he thinks to be evil. Such ignorance of the master leads to being unaware and underestimation of the servant or the savage. This underestimation of the slave or the savage by the civilized master eventually turns out to be a sudden encounter with resistance from the savage or the servant seeking vengeance. In this respect, the film portrays an antagonism, rooted in the very power structures of an unequal world resulting into a conflict between the so called civilized master and the savage servant in Nietzschean terms.

The relationship between the American forces and Na'vis as depicted in the film is antagonistic and not agonistic as the Americans do not recognize the *legitimacy* of its opponent, the Na'vi. In fact, the Americans are dismissive about the Na'vi, as if Na'vi's power does not exist and as if the Na'vi is living on the mercy of the American might, since the Americans believe that they can destroy the entire Na'vi habitats within minutes. Here, it should be borne in mind that while *antagonism* is a friend/foe relation which is "the limit of all objectivity" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 122) and a "struggle between enemies, *agonism* is struggle between adversaries" (Mouffe 2000: 102-103). As Chantal Mouffe points out that while

Antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries' not enemies. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which conflict takes place (2005: 20).

The context of the American master's dismissive attitude towards the servant Na'vi and its unawareness of the servant's world create possible conditions for a successful resistance by the servant against the master towards victory. Before the final attack by the American marines on the Na'vi habitat, the film's male protagonist, Jake Sully (Samuel Worthington), Trudy Chacón (Michelle Rodriguez)—a Marine combat pilot assigned to support the *Avatar* Programme and Jake's friend, Norm Spellman (Joel David Moore), another human *avatar* like Jake, had all become rogues. They changed sides to assist the Na'vi in resisting the corporate plunder of Pandora. Jake tells his comrade-in-arms, Trudy and Norm, that the American marines do not know the Pandora well and "their instruments, won't work here...and if they bring the fight to us, then we have the home field advantage." This "home field" as depicted in the film is very similar to Freud's totemic society and a space of the non-capitalist mode of production.

Reflecting a Totemic Society and the Non-Capital 'Other'

It is interesting to notice how the Pandora and the Na'vi community were similar to Freud's description of the primitive totemic society. Freud's primitive society was guided by a system of "totemism" that filled up lack of religious and social institutions, and the primitive tribes were divided into several clans "each of which is named after its totem" (2001: 3). According to Freud, as a rule, a totem is,

An animal (whether edible and harmless or dangerous and feared) and more rarely a plant or a natural phenomenon (such as rain or water), which stands in a peculiar relation to the whole clan. In the first place, the totem is the common ancestor of the clan; at the same time it is their guardian spirit and helper, which sends them oracles and, if dangerous to others, recognizes and spares its own children. The clansmen are distributed in different localities and live peacefully side by side with members of other totem clans (2001: 3).

The film shows that the Na'vi clan, Omaticaya, lives in harmony with nature, worshipping a mother goddess called Eywa. The Na'vi clan has three important totem plants, Hometree, the sacred Tree of Souls and the Tree of Voices, the latter being destroyed by a bulldozer during the human invasion. The Na'vi stays with other neighbouring totem clans. In the film we also see the skeleton of a totem animal Toruk who was the common ancestor of the Omaticaya. Jake tames a Toruk, a powerful flying beast that only five Na'vi have ever tamed, which gives him a license to be the clan leader of Omaticaya with the new title of Torukmaktu. Jake prays to

Eywa, via neural connection to the Tree of Souls, which sends 'oracles'. This is similar to Freud's description of totem beliefs as the 'guardian spirit and helper' of the clan. Omaticaya has a spiritual leader called the T'shaik or Mo'at (C.C.H. Pounder), mother of film's female protagonist Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), who got attracted to Jake because of his bravery. The Na'vi has a clan leader in Eytukan (Wes Studi) and an heir to the chieftainship of the tribe in Tsu'tey (Laz Alonso). All these only reflect upon a totemic society which was close to the version given by Freud.

The film also reflects upon a non-capitalist mode of production and the moments of capitalist encounter with the *non-capital other*. The film tries to expose the inhumanity of (post)modern³ capitalist ventures and how capital uses science and technology for its interests by imposing violence on the non-capital other. The film refers that why it was impossible for the indigenous Na'vi to relocate or in the words of Parker, "move away" from their habitat to another place for the corporate mining project to take place. In this regard, Jake confesses that the Na'vi will not leave the Hometree since the humans have nothing to offer them. Jake says, "What are we going to offer them, blue jeans or light beer. We have nothing that they want." This is because the Na'vi does not have an idea of private property and is not interested in capital accumulation. The Na'vi not only protects its environment and land but also it cannot understand the language of capitalist mode of exchange under market rules. In other words, capital always faces difficulty in making a *deal* with the non-capital "other" (in this case, an indigenous tribal population as portrayed in the film) since the latter is beyond the grasp of capitalist form of commodity exchange. Thus, the film seeks to locate the *humane* in the non-capital other, while exposing the ravages of the (post)modern capitalist subject. In fact, the film gives a direct message to the (post)modern subject for not threatening the forms of non-capitalist life with its own capitalist civilization mission. It tells that *let us not impose our (capitalist and late capitalist) way of life to someone who is different. Let us acknowledge the other by recognizing the other way of life. Let us take lessons from our past mistakes of authoritarian imposition from above to a population who are unwilling to identify with our lifestyle and our sense of (post)modernity, progress, and development.*

In this film, the Na'vi clan has its own mode of gift economy, clearly distinct from both the capitalist modes of production and exchange. Kojin Karatani argues that, while the capitalist market economy is based upon the mode of exchange by money within the general formula of M-C-M, as

Marx showed in *Capital* (vol. 1), a principle of gift economy was present only in the “band societies of nomadic hunter-gatherers” that had existed since the earliest times and that preceded the “clan societies” (2014: x-xi). According to Karatani, in such primitive societies of hunter-gatherers, “it was not possible to stockpile goods, and so they were pooled, distributed equally. This was a pure gift, one that did not require a reciprocal counter-gift. Also, the power of the group to regulate individual members was weak, and marriage ties were not permanent. In sum, it was a society characterised by an equality that derived from the free mobility of its individual members” (2014: x). This principle of a pure gift economy based on equality seems to be very close to the Na’vi species who are “hunter-gatherers with technology equivalent of Earth’s Palaeolithic epoch” as portrayed in the film.⁴

However, the director has conflated the nomadic hunter-gatherers with the clan societies of the Pandora. The Na’vis were portrayed as one of the clans settled in a particular place in the Pandora and not a nomadic hunter-gatherer group, in a technically correct sense. This is because the one way pure gift economy of equal distribution that was shown to represent the Na’vi life was not present among clan societies. The clan societies followed the reciprocal principle of gift and return, much like the mode of exchange among the agrarian community (Karatani 2003: 276), which was based on “mutual aid” (Karatani 2003: 12). According to Karatani, although gift and reciprocity, “is arguably the ‘oldest’ mode of exchange, rooted in the earlier human communities; it consists in nothing more than the generalized expectation of give-and-take. It is a means of reciprocal exchange, one that creates community, everywhere governed, of course, by traditional norms (religion, patriarchy, gerontocracy), boundaries around the recognizable community (belonging and exclusion, or friend and enemy), and so on” (2012: 38). The gift and reciprocity principle was only a feature of ‘clan societies’ after ‘nomadic bands took up fixed settlement’ (Karatani 2014: x). Both nomadic and clan societies have no difference as shared ownership of the means of production was an essential feature among them. But Karatani argues that “when we view them in terms of modes of exchange” than mode of production, there is “a decisive difference—the difference, for example, between the pure gift and the gift based on reciprocity” (2014: xi).

Critique of Imperialism, Capitalist Accumulation and ‘War on Terror’

In an interview, Cameron has acknowledged that it is a film about “imperialism” (Ordoña 2009). As previously mentioned, the film shows

how humans want to extract a precious mineral called unobtainium by a mining operation in a different planet called Pandora, while the Na'vi—a race of indigenous humanoids and one of the several inhabitants in Pandora—successfully resist this imperialism that poses a threat to the existence of Na'vi and Pandora's ecosystem. This mining operation in another place with a precious mineral reminds us about colonialism, contemporary imperialism in search of oil or corporate plunder of water, forest, and land in various parts of the world. This imperialist plunder in the form of colonialism in search of “gold and silver”, “the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population”, “looting” and “commercial hunting of black-skins” were already noted by Marx as the “idyllic proceedings” and “the chief momenta of primitive accumulation” (1976: 915). Thus, Marx concluded that “capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (1976: 926).

For Marx, violent forms of “primitive accumulation”⁵ as the primary or original accumulation were “the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital” (1976: 875). As a result, orthodox Marxists with a teleological and an economic deterministic view see this process as a necessary condition for the transition from the pre-capitalist feudalism to the capitalist stage of development that happened in the late middle ages in Western Europe much like the classical political economy (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2009; Perelman 2000). However, such a mode of plunder of natural resources, associated with primitive accumulation, inherently linked to the question of displacement of indigenous population, is an ongoing process of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003: 137-182) and “accumulation by encroachment” (Patnaik 2008: 108-113).

The entire mining operation in Pandora can also be seen as a metaphor of corporate-led neoliberal model of development. Such a model proposes an Orientalist mode of development with subtle racism, and an underpinning of a civilizational project where the master-servant relationship is enforced by an “urbocentric” cum “capitalocentric”⁶ model of development, either by coercive “dislocation” or “resettlement” of the original inhabitants.⁷ Before becoming the Na'vi *avatar*, when Jake asks why “we” (humans/Americans) are negotiating with the Na'vis for relocation and rather should use force, Parker tells Jake: “Look we can't kill the indigenous as it would be politically incorrect besides giving a bad press and bad name.” The corporate boss is, however, bewildered by the fact that even if he is interested in offering money, roads and schools—the Na'vis are still unwilling to relocate and instead resist the mining operation.

In this way, the film aptly captures the *modus operandi* of contemporary global capitalism. Global capital often speaks the language of *compensation* and *resettlement*, and it speaks the language of maximum possible *consent* of the affected people before coercive evacuation. Here, capital speaks the language of transaction and business rather than explicitly forced displacement. Therefore, capital would argue that it is *just and fair to the dislocated population as it is offering monetary compensation and not forcefully evicting them*, which can be regarded as a process of entitlement to private property rights in the libertarian lexicon of acquisition of holdings by the principle of transfer (Nozick 1980: 150-151).

In this regard, I would argue that such logic is technically different from the classic Marxian primitive accumulation of capital. It is also different from the “non-classical form of primitive accumulation” that involves “changing one or more of the conditions of existence” due to setting up of modern capitalist enterprises, dismantling the economic livelihood of a rural neighbourhood such as altering the ground levels of water that negatively affects the agrarian population and creates conditions for its slow dislocation, “block by block” (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2009: 173-198). This process of non-classical primitive accumulation is a reversal of the Maoist strategy of enveloping the urban with the rural, by epitomising “the encasing and the enfolding of the rural by the urban” (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2009: 198). By re-reading Marx’s late encounter with the Russian *mir* and the correspondences with Vera Zasulich, Chakrabarti and Dhar’s insightful “*ab-original*” reading of the original Marxian rendition of primitive accumulation (2009: 16-156) makes a case for “a micro and perhaps mundane mode; surreptitious, silent and secret form” of primitive accumulation that is “non-classical” in character, and involves indirect dislocation (2009: 178). However, in the case of compensatory transaction, although *primitive accumulation* as a “historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx 1976: 875), accompanied by “terrible and arduously accomplished expropriation” and “a whole series of forcible methods” (Marx 1976: 928), is present, “merciless barbarism” (Marx 2002: 928) is missing due to transaction involved between the land possessor (indigenous inhabitants) and the land buyer (capital). I would term it as a “combined accumulation of capital” by replacing the Marxian idea of “primitive accumulation”.

I would argue that primitive accumulation takes place *outside* the production relations where transaction is absent and direct extra-economic coercion is present, whereas, in combined accumulation of capital, a subtle coercion

can be located *within* or *inside* the production relations in the name of compensation. In other words, it is business transaction at gunpoint, a feature of extractive capitalist accumulation with the veiled threat from the state, capital and the rented agents (extra-legal extortionists, strong men, etc.) of both state and capital. In the classic primitive accumulation, Marx argued about transforming the land held by the expropriated to private property as a commodity. But in the combined accumulation, land is already being seen as a commodity by capital. In this way, it is also different from the process of non-classical forms of primitive accumulation that indirectly dislocates people due to the negative impact on the surrounding neighbourhood as part of the modern capitalist ventures. In short, combined accumulation of capital is a form of coercive accumulation that takes place *inside* production relations with the lack of bargaining power of the individual seller of private property or the inhabitant in a property either owned collectively or individually. This form of coercion is witnessed during land acquisition for mining, big industry, infrastructural development, real estate projects, etc., with active collaboration of the state and the rented agents of both state and capital. In the combined accumulation of capital, the state projects itself as the collective bargainer on behalf of both the capital and the inhabitants, who have to choose between resistance and compensation. In the phase of global capitalism, *land* is scarce and, therefore, becomes one of the principal sites of emerging contradictions and vast inequalities among various classes. This is unlike the Lockean period of mercantile capitalism and colonialism where land is being seen as infinite and thus plenty left for others to acquire (Locke 1988: 291). Such a condition leads to emerging contradistinctions where, on the one hand, the peasant/inhabitant either wants to save her/his land or demands land as part of the rehabilitation package from the state while, on the other hand, the capitalist also demands land from the state to mine or set up industry. In these circumstances, the *choice* is thus given only by the power bloc to the people⁸ and formal consensus is built around that *given* and *overdetermined choice* in front of the *people* — to resist capitalist accumulation or perish.

I would also argue that this phenomenon of combined accumulation of capital is specifically related to global capital and has become an important feature of contemporary global capitalism. This is because the redundant surplus population as capital's constitutive outside being separated from the means of production as a process of primitive accumulation instead of being the reserve army of labour, waiting to be employed by the capitalists (Sanyal 2007) is not just a feature of primary accumulation in the post-

colonial world but also that of combined accumulation of capital associated with global capitalism. In fact, in combined accumulation, both forms of “accumulation by dispossession” and “accumulation by encroachment” are possible but the mechanism of such combined accumulation involves the *combined processes* of extra-economic coercion and monetary exchange. In other words, combined accumulation of capital is a combination of both coercion and transaction. The process of combined accumulation involves taking land from indigenous peasant population by big corporations and the state. Such combined accumulation, characterized by business transactions with a veiled threat, also creates redundant surplus population as capital’s constitutive outside. At the same time, it reduces the price of the land and other means of production for the capital. This has been noticed in the cases of Special Economic Zones, big mining, commercial agriculture, renewable energy and industrial projects in parts of Asia, Africa and South America.

Interestingly, land acquisition in parts of Asia, Africa and South America by corporates do not only belong to the United States but also to China, India, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia all of which find a place in the top ten investor countries according to the Land Matrix data.⁹ Thus, combined accumulation as a feature of contemporary global capitalism has been a *modus operandi* of several Chinese and Indian companies as well.¹⁰ This is evident from the mining project of an Indian corporate giant in Australia’s Queensland (Pathak 2017) and increasing Chinese investments in Australia (Lannin 2017). Since new imperialism uses tactics of both consent and coercion *aka* Harvey (2003), when consensual methods like compensation and negotiation do not work, capitalist hegemony is established via coercion as aptly shown in this film. *Avatar* subtly showed the peculiar complexities of corporate control over land and natural resources that are justified around concepts of compensation and resettlement or necessary *collateral damage* like dislocation for the sake of capitalist development.

The film shows that the mining operation is jointly carried out by an alliance of American corporate giant—the metonym of capital and US marines—the metonym of state. This connivance between state and capital is currently witnessed in the case of contemporary phase of extractive capitalism, where vast tracts of land are being concentrated in few hands of big corporates, and the state facilitates mining operations for the interests of capital. In line with the classic Marxist-Leninist formulation, the film shows how the state is subservient to capital’s interests; managing its affairs

and providing security while forcibly evicting a population that is resisting capital's onslaught.¹¹ The film also shows that the corporation was initially willing to offer money and build roads (infrastructure) to the indigenous instead of forcefully evicting them. But the corporate boss gets perplexed when he realizes that the Na'vi does not want any compensation and will never abandon Hometree under which huge deposits of precious unobtainium are laid. The corporate becomes surprised to see that the Na'vi just wants to protect its environment and habitat without being lured by the compensation package for resettlement. In other words, the Na'vi is happy with its own ways of life and wants to protect his land from the external aggressors.

We can describe this Na'vi life as a life of Lacanian *jouissance*,¹² which connotes both enjoyment and suffering. *Jouissance* means "that excitement whether correlated with a conscious feeling of pleasure or pain" (Fink 1995: 60). The Na'vi enjoys her life in close association with nature, and a life with strong sense of community feeling, bond and interdependence but carries the pain and hardship of a hunter-gatherer life. In an overall analysis, the Na'vi does not want to reject her lifestyle. Instead, (s)he would take the pain to protect the neighbourhoods from powerful invaders. This is the moment when capital becomes hostile and takes the path of coercion and forceful eviction for it cannot understand the *language* of the protestors, who want to protect their land. As capital thinks itself as the *master* and is self-obsessed, it cannot think beyond its own interests, say the interests of those, which it describes as the "savage". It cannot understand why a population is just happy with their own existence of non-capitalist primitive way of life and why they are rejecting the *rationale* mindset of the capital. It is this inability to come to terms with the feelings, beliefs, opinions, culture, and existence of the non-capital other that capital takes refuge in applying force through an authoritarian imposition of its project from above to a set of population, which does not want the so-called civilization of capital. Since capital always thinks about itself as an enormous power, it has an inbuilt narcissism: *how can someone challenge me? How can someone resist me? How can someone disagree with me?*

Another welcome move was that the film has critically questioned America's war on terror project and made passing references to the rhetoric that was used during the US imperialist onslaught in the Iraq war. For example, indigenous resistance with technologically inferior bows and arrows to imperialist aggression with bombs and rockets was termed as *terror* by

the US Colonel, Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang). The reference to imperialist tactics of pre-emptive warfare with “shock and awe campaign” and using dialogues such as “fight terror with terror” by the US colonel, the head of the mining operation’s security team can be witnessed in the film. After noticing the Na’vi mobilizations for resistance with bows and arrows, Miles convinces Parker to give him permission for a pre-emptive strike on the Tree of Souls, reckoning that the destruction of this hub of Na’vi religion and culture will demoralize them into submission. At this juncture, one is reminded merely about what Chomsky talks about “state-sponsored terror” as “weapon of the strong” against “the weak” (1988; 2001). This form of state-sponsored terrorism or what Marx called “ruthless terrorism” (1976: 895) is often used as a coercive strategy during the moments of both primitive and combined accumulation of capital. The quantum and magnitude of such forms of state terror and intimidation by agents of both state and capital, of course, vary and is contingent upon the stakes involved and the nature of resistance towards such coercion.

Technological Weakness and Anti-Imperialist Resistance

The film shows that Grace has been working with the Na’vis to make them learn English, so that the Americans can communicate and negotiate, hoping to convince them peacefully for a resettlement. Parker argues with Grace, “Look, we are supposed to be winning the hearts and minds of the natives. Isn’t that the whole point of your little puppet show? We look like them, then talk like them, and they start trusting us. We have built them a school, we teach them English, but after what, how many years, relationship with the indigenous are getting worse.” Grace replied, “Yes, that is going to happen when you use machine guns on them.” In this way, the film at the very onset describes the age-old colonial policy of educating the indigenous to reap benefits out of the entire process of imparting colonial education to the colonized. Thus, colonial education has a motive to serve the interests of the colonizers and not a charity to the colonized. It invests in educating the indigenous colonized to produce a new class of brown/black orientalists¹³ that would serve the purpose of colonialism. These black/brown orientalists would become native informants to the colonizer, collaborate with the colonizer and would carry forward the agenda of colonialism. In contrast, the Na’vi, which hates the human outsider, is more inclusive by making the human Na’vi (Jake) learn the tactics of savage warfare to prove that he can be a true and legitimate part of the clan.

At the same time, the Na'vi is sceptical about this process of conversion, which can be seen in the doubts of Tsu'tey towards Jake. Similarly, when Jake asks the T'shaik to make him learn the Na'vi way of life, she says that "we cannot fill up something which is already full." This statement is crucial as it connotes several meanings. One is that the Na'vi simply does not want to make its enemy learn about their ways, for she is doubtful whether the enemy would take advantage of her knowledge in decimating the Na'vis. Secondly, it also implies ironically that since humans (Americans) are so *full* of them while thinking so high about their own capabilities that they don't look upon others to know more.

The Na'vi is satisfied with its own world. It does not go to capture the world of humans (Americans). The Americans are hungrier than Na'vi—hungry for power, money and glory and thus have come to capture Pandora. In such circumstances, the Na'vi has no other choice but to defend their land from such American aggression. When Jake was arrested by the Na'vi leader Tsu'tey, the Omaticaya clan leader Eytukan—Neytiri's father and Mo'at's mate—says that "we need such a human warrior." This is a clear example of a strategy of survival by resisting the enemy by absorbing the knowledge and technology of the enemy. The Na'vi knows that they are threatened by human (American) invasion, and thus it wants to use the knowledge and skill of its enemy to resist the enemy. This is the precise limit of colonialism. The colonizer comes to the territory of the colonized, but at the same time, the colonized is also aware of the motive of the colonizer and hence tries to learn from its enemy in order to defend its own territory.

Before the final battle between the human species with the Na'vis, Jake gave an inspiring speech while addressing the entire Omaticaya clan. He said, "The sky people (humans/Americans) have sent us a message that they can take whatever they want and no one can stop them. But we would send them a message. You tell the other (Na'vi) clans to come together, and we would show the sky people that they [humans/Americans] cannot take whatever they want. This is *our land*." In this respect, the film has wonderfully shown the victory of Na'vis (savage people) against the white superpower. This history of successful local savage resistance is often put into oblivion by cultural propaganda, conservative academic discourses and publicity by mainstream western media. Such campaigns emphasize more on the white power bloc's victory and highlights less or at best keeps silent on the victories of black, brown and yellow population against the white power bloc.

The instances of limits of technology of the white power bloc in countering the successful resistance of so-called technologically inferior

populace are many. The glorious saga of successful indigenous people against civilized power—ranging from the excellence of *tribal* Ekalavya against *Aryan* Arjuna in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the anti-colonial struggles of Algeria and India, down to Vietnamese victory against America, several Latin American victories against attempts of CIA sponsored counter-revolutions, and contemporary resistance to military invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan, just to name a few. In all these examples mentioned above, the savage has always learnt the technology from the *civilized* from a distance, right from the days of Ekalavya. This learning of technology from a distance and then using it for savage's own resistance against the *white power bloc* is extremely well portrayed in the film. Jake successfully combated the big spaceship with the biggest flying dinosaur-like animal (Toruk), while other Na'vi fighters take the help of another flying animal (Banshi), as opposed to fighter planes, and on the ground a rhino-like creature combated the tanks. The history of revolutions also shows us that the plebs and the underdogs have always won those epochal victories against the power bloc even with their technological weaknesses. In this regard, we can be reminded of the Spartacus slave revolt, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the Chinese Revolution and decolonization.

The victory of anti-imperialist struggle is dependent on the *united people's resistance* and the willpower of the plebs who fight the imperialist power bloc. The advanced and sophisticated technology is always at the disposal of the power bloc. The possession and control of technology, in fact, creates the division between ruling and ruled/plebeian classes. The ruled classes can never have the sophisticated technology, in which only the ruling classes have a monopoly. However, in epochal moments of history, the ruled/plebeian classes overthrow the ruling classes by overcoming its technological barrier with the united people's resistance. This united people's resistance with a spirited fight against the white imperial power is amply shown in the film where the Na'vi mobilizes other Na'vi clans to combat the American imperialist aggressor. In this connection the film, *Avatar*, has shown that for a successful struggle of the local (subalterns) over the global imperialist onslaught, the local needs to make the broadest possible alliance with all those forces that are not only anti-imperialist but also can provide some organizational coherence.

Ecological Crisis

A few years back, Cameron in an interview said that *Avatar* is an adventure about "how we as humans deal with nature" (Keegan 2007). At one instance

in the film, the Na'vi says, "they [humans] killed their mother [nature]." The film hints at the current ecological crisis by giving the message that if humans declare war against nature, then it would have to face the negative brunt of nature. Thus, in the final stages of the film, one can see the large animals, threatened by the destructive affairs of capitalist enterprise, reacting violently and join the party of resistance. Here, the film beautifully engages with the metaphors and analogies of resistance and ecological crisis. As noted earlier that at the end of the film, when Parker and the remaining corporate personnel are expelled from Pandora, while Jake, Norm, and other scientists are allowed to remain, there is a reference to the "dying world." We can read this "dying world" of humans as a world of ecological crisis where the present capitalist venture of decimating the balance of nature puts the human civilization in a suicide drive by creating its own others—atom bombs, suicide bombers, ecological crisis, that only create conditions of possibilities for the death of the human world. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels pointed out this suicide drive of the capitalists by saying that "the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers" (1969: 119). The historical experience, however, shows that it is not only the proletariat which is a potential death threat to bourgeois order but also other forms of antagonisms that capitalism simultaneously creates. This film has metaphorically tried to give a message that in the current phase of globalized capitalism the ecological crisis is a significant threat to the human civilization.

The Problem of Individual Hero Worship

The film's portrayal of a subaltern resistance to an elite power bloc is, however, similar to the approach of individual hero worship. One can argue that the problematic area of the film is that the ex-US marine, Jake becomes the new *avatar* and the new leader of Na'vi assisted by his "good" human friends: Grace, Trudy and Dr. Max Patel (Dileep Rao), a scientist who works in the Avatar Programme laboratory. More importantly, the film also acknowledges the role of Norm, another human *avatar* in winning the battle in favour of Na'vis. In the film, Norm is an anthropologist who studies plants and natural life as part of the Avatar Programme and has been learning the Na'vi language for five years. He arrives at Pandora at the same time with Jake. Although he is expected to lead the diplomatic contact with the Na'vi, while Jake was supposed to be going to Pandora only as a security escort, it turns out that Jake was more suitable to win the natives' respect. If the film is about a successful resistance of the indigenous Na'vi,

then both Jake and Norm should have played a supporting role in the film and not as protagonists. Such a move would have portrayed a more authentic resistance to colonialism by the Na'vi people. It is one thing to stand in solidarity with a group, which is fighting against colonial plunder and unjust displacement but it is a completely different matter to provide a leadership even being an outsider to the Na'vi community. In this manner, the film seems to distort an authentic politics of resistance. Thus, the colonization of Pandora was restricted by a supposed colonizer—a person who wanted to colonize it but undergo a change of heart, which only pushes forward an image of a “good colonizer”.

However, in defence for the director, one can argue that although the colonizer becomes the leader of Omatiyaya, yet he is transformed into a different *being*, and no more identifies with the crudeness of a greedy capitalist venture. Secondly, the traces of primitivism, aboriginality and tribalism embedded within the modern man as a repressed form only facilitate to make him the savage man. Satyajit Ray's protagonist, Manomohan Mitra in *Agantuk* (1991) also informed us that “it is a matter of great regret that he is not a *jungli* (savage), although he wants to be...that is why he needs field notes to study them as an anthropologist. If he would have been a *jungli* then he would not have needed those.” So, it was that *desire* to find the primitive roots of the human *being* that Jake falls in love with flora and fauna of Pandora, his affection for Neytiri and the Omatiyaya tribe, which were instrumental for switching sides. But not all human scientists in the film wanted to become a Na'vi, and neither most humans in our world would like to become a primitive man in a hunter-gatherer community.

Also, the film is efficiently anchored around the *individual rebel* or *hero* of a subaltern resistance. *Avatar*, while celebrating the ‘savage’ resistance to white power bloc, entirely focused on the heroic fight of four principal leaders: Jake, his lover Neytiri, Tsutey and Norm, while ignoring the collective resistance and participation of thousands of Na'vis. The film shows that all the definitive moments of Na'vi victory were due to interventions of mainly two leaders: the film's leading characters and protagonists—Jake and Neytiri. In this respect, the film fails to highlight the importance of unsung heroes in the collective resistance. But such an approach of individual hero worship is an integral component of the theoretical humanist underpinnings of Cameron's critique of extractive capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. The fundamental flaw in the form of an underlying theoretical humanism that underpins even the more radical pronouncements of the film is particularly

important given the fact that individualistic heroism along with the romanticization and orientalizing of Na'vi and *junglis* (savages) have been one of the privileged ideological masks of the capitalist forms of imperialism with a civilizational mission. However, it does not make it a less fascinating film in other respects like the political message of anti-imperialism, while celebrating the non-capital other. This is precisely the merit of the film, as it is a critique within the western cultural community, a kind of introspection, while showing the barbarism of the western power bloc and displaying both victimhood and victory of the non-western other.

A Film of Liberal American Guilt

The success of the film in the West, however, shows that the western audience perhaps identifies with the liberal American guilt conscience, a guilt which is produced after hundreds of years of destruction to its own indigenous population of Red Indians, the painful, violent histories of western colonialism, and the oppression and exploitation of contemporary imperialism. Moreover, the film was released in a particular political context in the United States where a black president (Barack Hussein Obama) with an Arabic middle name (both 'savage' identities for the white master) had replaced an utterly destructive white President (George W. Bush), who earned a "bad name/bad press" for America with imperialist war, "war on terror" and mismanagement of climatic hazards like Hurricane Katrina. Thus, the liberal American guilt as a critique of the past regime with "new hope" in a new black President is also apparent in the film. It would be better for the collective fate of world population if this guilt is translated into some concrete affirmative steps to rectify the historical wrongs that the American establishment has been perpetrating to make this world relatively just and peaceful. The return of a white supremacist President in the White House, however, has already shown some ominous trends of reverting back to the American mistrust with the other than a guilt for the other.

Notes

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1. The term 'Speaking' is used in this article as a political act.

2. For a robust analysis of the white colonial stereotyping of the 'other' see the path-breaking work of Said (1978).
3. Here I am using the "modern" as conditions of capitalism and "postmodern" as conditions of late capitalism and not arguing on the lines of postmodern epistemological concern about celebration of authenticity, locality, and difference. For such an analysis see Harvey (1989) and Jameson (1991).
4. Information confirmed from <http://james-camerons-avatar.wikia.com/wiki/Na%27vi>, accessed 28 August 2017.
5. In the original German edition of *Capital*, vol. 1, Marx had used the term "*Ursprüngliche Akkumulation*", which could be translated as "original accumulation" or "primeval accumulation". It can be located at the moment of origin of capitalism in general and the capitalist class formation in particular. Therefore, in such a sense, this form of accumulation cannot be regarded as capitalism's past but is contemporaneous with the origin of the capitalist class process. However, "*Ursprüngliche Akkumulation*" was translated as "so-called primitive accumulation" and "the secret of primitive accumulation" in the English editions of *Capital*, vol. 1, published by Progress Publishers, is lost in translation that described this form of accumulation to the past or "pre-history" of capitalism.
6. For a theoretical exposition on these issues see Chakrabarti and Cullenberg (2003).
7. For a theoretical analysis on 'dislocation' and 'resettlement' see Chakrabarti and Dhar (2009).
8. Here I am using the term, *people* in a Laclauian sense of identifying the "people" with "plebs" or "underdogs". As Laclau incisively points out, "traditional terminology—which has been translated into common language—makes this difference clear: the people can be conceived as *populus*, the body of all citizens; or as *plebs*, the underprivileged" (Laclau 2005: 81). Laclau's further clarification regarding "people" also conceptually differs from the usual meaning in the dominant political discourses: "in order to be the 'people',... we need a *pleb* who claims to be the only legitimate *populus*—that is, a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community" (Laclau 2005: 81). This is because those sections of the population who are responsible for the underprivileged conditions of the *plebs* cannot be the legitimate part of the same community ("people" in this case) since the *plebs* are in an antagonistic relationship with a frontier made up by the rest of the population which are part of the dominant power bloc (Laclau 2005: 85-86).
9. Information confirmed from <http://www.landmatrix.org/en/get-the-idea/web-transnational-deals/>, accessed 14 January 2018.
10. Further explanation and analysis of the combined accumulation as a feature of contemporary global capitalism are beyond the scope of this essay.
11. A Marxist analysis of the film has been done by Tang (2011). In contrast, I have tried to follow an eclectic approach by using several sources of academic literature: Marxist and Post-Marxist theories on the one hand and the philosophical and psychoanalytical writings on the other.

12. Alan Sheridan, the translator of several of Jacques Lacan's works, however, says, "There is no adequate translation in English of this word. 'Enjoyment' conveys the sense, contained in *jouissance*, of enjoyment of rights, of property, etc. ... 'Pleasure', on the other hand, is pre-empted by '*plaisir*'—and Lacan uses the two terms quite differently. 'Pleasure' obeys the law of homeostasis that Freud evokes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. '*Jouissance*' transgresses this law and, in that respect, it is *beyond* the pleasure principle." See "Translators Note", in Lacan (1979: 281). Lacan has himself pointed out that "[t]he superego is the imperative of *jouissance*—Enjoy!" and thus made it clear that *jouissance* is closely related to enjoyment (Lacan 1998: 3). Also, *jouissance* has been used as an overlapping term for "happiness" in Lacan (2008: 237-239). In other contexts, it has been used to signify "pleasure" (Lacan 2008: 233), "beyond pleasure" as in a way, it is the "first half-serious step...toward *jouissance*" (Lacan 2008: 228), and "satisfaction of a drive" (Lacan 2008: 258). But Lacan has also used it as "suffering" as he points out "if we continue to follow Freud in a text such as *Civilization and Its Discontents*, we cannot avoid the formula that *jouissance* is evil. Freud leads us by the hand to this point: it is *suffering* because it involves *suffering for my neighbour*" (Lacan 2008: 227) (italics mine).
13. For a theoretical discussion on "Brown Orientalism", see Chaudhury (1994).

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