

Beyond Anthropocentrism: Recalibrating James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) from the Perspective of Ecological Posthumanism

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Abstract

The formulation of human history in terms of the “interiority” of the “Self” as contrasted to and by the “exteriority” of the “Other” is a direct result of the shift towards anthropocentrism. Posthumanism and the Anthropocene, as two fundamental conceptual indicators of current environmental discourses, have emerged from symmetrical developments in terms of their respective academic origins. While the concept of the Anthropocene is borrowed into the humanities from the natural sciences, particularly geology, the basic principle of posthumanism is constructed within the humanities themselves as a critique of their own innate cultures. Hence, ecological posthumanism, in contrast to the notion of anthropocentrism, blurs the binary of human and nonhuman in a post-dualistic, post-hierarchical manner to embrace the notion of “intrinsic value”, which approves the notion that nature possesses inherent value regardless of its usefulness to humans. The present paper explores James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009) from the perspective of ecological posthumanism to raise certain questions against the notion of “instrumental value” that treats nonhumans as commodities for the use of humans. The article also delves into Cameron's portrayal of the anthropocentric mindset of the RDA administrator, as well as the destruction of “Home tree”, the spiritual and physical home of the “Na'vi”, with a view to promoting the symbiotic relationship between human and nonhuman. The focus will also be given on how Cameron's advocacy of a post-anthropocentric worldview may address the ecological disaster of the contemporary world by dismantling the binary between nature and culture through the deep association between “Na'vi” and trees.

Keywords: Anthropocene, dualism, instrumental value, intrinsic value, Posthumanism

The connection between human history and natural history has been periodically examined and analysed by different Hegelian and Marxist schools of investigation. Paul Crutzen argues that the Anthropocene era is a classification of geological time that recognises human activity, particularly after the Industrial Revolution, as a significant driver of geological change. This proposal highlights the clear connection between human actions and the state of the environment. The escalating carbon footprints caused by anthropogenic activities and the exploitation of biological resources by corporate entities have led to significant ecological damage by separating human from the rest of the nonhuman. The connection between the future of humanity and the planet has become increasingly uncertain. Hence, it is now much easier to envision a bleak future for Earth without humans and other animals, rather than imagining a scenario where humans successfully prevent the imminent climate catastrophe.

In *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human* Hans Moravec argues that human identity is primarily an informational pattern rather than a physical embodiment. He further suggests that “within the next century they (computers) will mature into entities as complex as ourselves and eventually into something transcending everything we know” (1). This undermines our understanding of human identity, particularly within the framework of liberal humanism, which posits a hierarchical relationship between the human intellect and body in the cartesian plane. The human mind, with its capacity for cognition, volition, and response, is the defining characteristic of our humanity, rather than our physical form. Bodies are commonly regarded as mere vessels for existence and, in reality, they confine and tie us to this transient, physical existence. Moravec argues that machines have the potential to serve as a storage for human consciousness in the near future. This raises questions about the subjective and distinct identity of the human.

In their book *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Karolina Lummaa, and East Varis emphasise the ethical dimension of posthumanism in relation to marginalisation and exploitation. Their perspective suggests that critical and methodological approaches should be driven by practical, epistemological, and ethical concerns (3). Within this particular framework, the discussion revolves around the political identity of the liberal humanism.

Before exploring the intricacies of the politics of marginalisation, it is necessary to examine several fundamental observations made by researchers who belong to the domain of “post-anthropocentrism” (Ferrando 17). Rosi Braidotti asserts that humans are already “fully immersed in a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations” (193). Hence, the concept of the human, as we perceive and comprehend ourselves, is not inherently natural or predetermined, nor is it solely a manifestation of our existence. Pramod K. Nayar in this context perceives that the post-human self is an assemblage that coevolves with robots, animals, and congeries (87). It is important to note, that the concept of the “human”

as both the subject and object of knowledge is an epistemological notion developed within the humanist knowledge system during the Enlightenment. In the concluding paragraph of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault discusses the historical emergence of the concept of “man” in a very vivid manner. In this context, he states:

[I]t was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some events ... were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of classical thought did, at the end of eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea. (387)

In *What Is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe discusses the conceptualisation of the human and the underlying political implications. The philosophical and theoretical frameworks employed by humanism in an attempt to fulfil these obligations perpetuate the same type of normative subjectivity - a particular understanding of what it means to be human - that forms the basis for discrimination against animals and disabled individuals in the initial stages (17). Wolfe’s phrase “a specific concept of the human” not only pertains to the notion of “human” as a product of knowledge (as opposed to anything innate), similar to Foucault’s perspective, but also places this construction inside a specific historical framework. Hence, it is important to recognise that the politics of the humanist knowledge system involves not just shaping our understanding of the “human” as the focus of knowledge, but also of the Nonhuman. The concepts of “human” and “nonhuman” were intentionally and concurrently established in order to categorise them inside a binary equation. The concept of “human” is defined by its negation or even opposition to the “nonhuman”. The act of categorising humans and nonhumans into a binary equation has led to the emphasis on the distinctions between the two. This emphasis is often used as a justification for discrimination.

The traditional meaning of the term humanism prioritises the “human” as the central focus of knowledge, relegating the nonhuman to a marginalised and sub-human category due to its binary relationship with the human. This is a continuation of the study of the knowledge that originates from the concept of the “great chain of being”. According to this concept, humans hold a unique position in the hierarchical structure of Western beliefs, which symbolises divine creation. In this context, it is pertinent to remember that human and nonhuman represent distinct epistemic frameworks inside the posthumanist, postmodern knowledge system. The postmodernist approach to knowledge distinguishes itself from the Modernist/Humanist knowledge system through one of its significant points of divergence.

In his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Jean-Francois Lyotard emphasises that in the postmodern era, knowledge is no

longer centralised in the system of knowledge production. Postmodern knowledge challenges the anthropocentric meta-narratives that define the concept of human. It removes him from the central position in the knowledge system, where he is the sole subject and object of knowledge, and from any specific privileged position with regards to meaning, information, and cognition. There is no epistemological framework at the knowledge centre that considers non-human entities as inherently opposed to the concept of human. The philosophy of Posthuman perceives the relationship between humans and non-humans as neither binary nor hierarchical. Hence, this post-dualistic perspective blurs the boundary of human and the nonhuman with a view to advocating the intrinsic value of all forms of life in the biosphere.

It is pertinent to mention that the Environmental challenges have become a growing source of inspiration and motivation for both academics and artists. It serves as a source of inspiration for numerous authors and filmmakers, who incorporate the subject into their creative endeavours. Film, along with other literary forms such as poetry, prose, short story, play, or drama, captures contemporary issues and presents them using the essential components. Movies and narratives are consistently the most effective means of conveying ideas to others and highlighting issues that require attention, such as the environment. This artistic expression harnesses the delicate interaction between illumination and darkness, manipulates the depth of objects, and emphasises dynamic visuals with intricate patterns of movement. Film conveys its message not only through visual elements such as imagery, metaphor, and symbol, as well as through action and gesture, and dialogue, but also directly through visuals and sounds. Besides, cinema has the ability to manipulate time and space, allowing for unrestricted movement inside its expansive boundaries.

Avatar (2009) is a movie that revolves around a group of humans known as the RDA Corporation, who embark on an expedition to a planet named *Pandora* in the Alpha Centauri star system. Their purpose is to extract the valuable mineral known as *unobtanium* through mining operations. However, in order to accomplish that, they must gain the affection and trust of the indigenous inhabitants known as the Na'vi, who are towering at a height of 9 feet and have a distinct blue appearance. The scientists create avatars, which are hybrid bodies formed by combining human DNA and local DNA, in order to establish a closer connection with the indigenous people. The Na'vi in this film are classified as non-human alien characters who are deeply associated with all forms of life around them.

Jake Sully is the protagonist of the film and also serves as the narrator. He is a disfigured former marine who arrived to *Pandora* as an avatar operator, taking the place of his deceased scientist twin brother. During the initial expedition into the untamed wilderness of *Pandora*, Jake, inhabiting an avatar body, becomes disoriented and loses his way in the forest. However, he is saved by a female indigenous person named Neytiri, who receives a signal from her deity, Eywa. Subsequently, she escorts him to the *Omaticaya* clan, where he is granted

permission by the leader to immerse himself in their way of life. Jake Sully provides updates on his actions to Dr. Augustine, the head scientist, and Colonel Quaritch, the leader. Augustine provides a detailed account of the Na'vi's actual existence and their harmonious relationship with the environment. Quaritch is informed of the status of unobtanium and attempts to diplomatically remove the native population from the area in order to exploit the resources and minimise any potential victims.

The Na'vi people have a profound spiritual connection with their surroundings which blurs the boundary of human and the nonhuman. They have a strong reliance on nature, particularly on the revered tree known as the "Trees of Soul". They think that their mother goddess, Eywa, resides there along with their ancestors and the spirits of the deceased. The *unobtanium* that humans seek is located directly beneath this tree. The film depicts how humans perceive the untamed environment or nature as a threat and an unpleasant place. They perceive nature as a hostile force that must be conquered. They equip themselves with advanced technology imported from Earth in order to carry out an invasion and establish authority over them. In the very beginning of the film, the Colonel greets them by cautioning them about the dangers of the planet and it has been depicted in the following manner:

Colonel Quaritch: You're not in Kansas anymore. You are on Pandora ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact, every second and every day. If there is a hell you might wanna go there for R-&-R after a tour on Pandora. Up there beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies or squads in the mud want to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes. (00:06:16)

Cameron's representation of the Colonel foregrounds the anthropocentric bias of considering humans as the central of all discourses, as Alan Brownjohn depicts in the poem "The Rabbit". His sole objective is to exert control over the surroundings through the use of force. The environment, in his perspective, is similar to the traditional understanding of nature for humans that considers the nonhuman as mere commodity to be exploited. This concept separates humans from the rest of nonhuman by creating a hierarchical structure. In the era which is dominated by the concept of anthropocentrism, nature is often personified as feminine, while women are perceived as objects of conquest, representing wilderness that needs to be subdued, possessed, and dominated. This anthropocentric perspective has been depicted through the portrayal of Colonel.

Dr. Augustine describes Max, her scientist colleague, as a plant lover who is completely different from the Omaticayan Na'vi. Her deep association with the world of Pandora foregrounds the notion of "intrinsic value" as Amitav Ghosh depicts in *The Living Mountain* (2022). However, most importantly, humans recognise that nature is a valuable resource that holds great significance for them, if they are able to utilise it. Hence, it shows how nature has been commodified by disrupting its intrinsic value:

Parker: I care what I care.

Parker (to Augustine): This is why we're here, unobtanium. Because this little gray rock sells for 20 million a kilo. That's the only reason. It's what pays for the whole party. It's what pays for your science. Comprendo?

Now those savages are threatening our whole operation. We are on the brink of war, and you're supposed to be finding a diplomatic solution. So use what you've got, and get me some results. (00:13:00)

Parker Selfridge embodies the anthropocentric worldview that holds the view that nature serves as a source of economic prosperity. This perspective advocates the view that humans have the right to extract resources from nature to maximise their personal gains, as nature inherently exists to serve human needs. Parker asserts that *unobtanium* is the primary source of funding for their entire business on Pandora. Therefore, the crucial factor is the *unobtanium*, which generates a substantial amount of wealth. The *avatar* program conducted by scientists clearly indicates the anthropocentric view of the superiority of human over the nonhuman by disrupting ecological harmony. This concept of human exceptionalism has been depicted by Cameron in the following manner:

Parker: Their damn village happens to be resting on the richest Unobtanium deposit within 200 clicks in any direction. I mean. Look at all that chatter.

Jake: You'll get them to move. What if they won't go? Colonel: I'm betting that they will.

Parker: Okay. Look. killing the indigenous looks bad but there is one thing that shareholders hate more than bad press and that's a bad quality statement. I don't make up the rules. So just find me a carat. Then get them to move. Otherwise, this is gonna have to be all stick. Okay?

Colonel: you got three months. That's when the dozers get there. (00:48:05)

Within the majority of Western theological and philosophical beliefs, it is often held that the purpose of the nonhuman world is to serve the interests of human beings. This belief and comprehension prompt humans to engage in exploration and exploitation of other realms or entities outside the human world. In the movie *Avatar*, the initial scene foregrounds the location on *Pandora* where humans reside, as viewers are introduced to the planet for the first time. The film depicts the environmental destruction caused by humans on the planet *Pandora*, particularly in its forests.

It foregrounds some important issues regarding ecological crisis, primarily caused by the anthropogenic activities. The film depicts the vast greenery which is not yet exploited by humans. It foregrounds the trajectory of the plan as it traverses the desolate area resulting from mining activities amidst the lush green landscape. It clearly indicates that humans have a detrimental impact on the ecosystem. Furthermore, the film depicts a desolate, arid, and parched terrain that humans have

chosen as their habitation. Humans require land or a location to construct their barracks, offices, laboratories, and airbase in order to promote and establish their civilisation. However, this development predominantly has a detrimental impact on the environment and it has been depicted in a very vivid manner.

The film shows close association between Na'vi and all forms of life as described in the stories of *The Panchatantra*. After careful examination of the same, we can discern the contrasting environmental and atmospheric conditions between human-inhabited areas and non-human-inhabited areas. The human settlement is depicted as dimly lit, filled with dust, and bustling with activity, whereas the indigenous habitat or forest is portrayed as lush, tranquil, and in perfect balance. It is evident that humans have caused significant harm to the land, resulting in drastic and unnatural changes to the ecology. Hence, this film clearly shows the deep association between the Na'vi and all forms of organisms in the Pandora by advocating the notion of ecological posthumanism.

In contrast to humans, the Na'vi hold the belief that all forms of life have intrinsic value. This attitude encompasses showing reverence towards the plants and animals that are killed in order to provide food. When the Na'vi need to kill an animal, whether it is in self-defence or for the sake of food, they do not just kill them for the sake of fulfilling their greeds. Instead, they experience feelings of sadness and express gratitude for the sacrifice of the animal. The Na'vi engage in a distinctive ritual following the act of killing an animal, wherein they offer prayers for the peace of the slain creature and for their own salvation. This is just one of the many rituals that exist in indigenous culture where nonhumans are not destroyed for the sake of economic prosperity. Hence, the cultural practices of the Na'vi people dismantles the binary of human and nonhuman by promoting the philosophy of ecological posthumanism as Jon Favreau shows in the film *The Lion king* (2019).

Naytiri offers prayers beside each dying wild black dog she kills, in an effort to save Jake. Following his escape from the formidable and savage canine known as *thanator*, Jake found himself disoriented and without direction in the forest. According to Naytiri, when night fell, the wild creatures encircled him due to his boisterous behaviour. Subsequently, Naytiri intervened by eliminating a number of small feral canines to deter their advance, prompted by a divine indication regarding Jake. However, when Jake expressed gratitude towards her, she reacted with anger. She was furious because she believed that those creatures do not deserve to die. This attitude reaffirms their deep association with the world of the nonhuman. Hence, Naytiri's response to Jake plays a very significant role in understanding the philosophy of "intrinsic value" that argues that nature exists for its own sake and humans have no right to exploit nature for fulfilling their greed. This concept has been vividly expressed by Cameron the following manner:

Jack: Hey, wait! I just wanna say thanks for killing those things. Neytiri: Don't thank! You don't thank for this. This is sad. Very sad only. Jack: Ok. I'm sorry. Whatever I did I'm sorry.

Neytiri: This is your fault. They don't need to die. (00:36:46)

Na'vi who coexist harmoniously with nature consider the act of killing animals or any beings as superfluous and disruptive to the delicate equilibrium of life that their deity, Eywa, strives to safeguard. They comprehended the notion that even animals possess intrinsic value and it is crucial for maintaining the harmonious coexistence between man and nature. After three months of cohabitating with the Na'vi, Jake has become accustomed to their lifestyle and rituals. When he kills an animal, he offers a prayer for it, similar to Neytiri's practice. By using Na'vi native language, Jake prays "I see you, brother and thank you. Your spirit goes with Eywa. Your body stays behind to become part of the people" (01:05:25). This transformation of Jake subverts the anthropocentric bias of considering the nonhuman as instrument by advocating the philosophy of ecological posthumanism as reflected in Anil Sharma's film *Maharaja* (1998).

It is pertinent to mention that Jake's prayer after killing an animal signifies his remorse for taking its life, yet he is compelled to do so in order to provide sustenance for his clan, *Omaticaya*. The Na'vi believe that killing animals for fulfilling vital needs is justified as it is advocated by the deep ecologists. In the book *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez expresses that the hunter perceives himself as intricately connected to the larger animals he pursues, forming a spiritual bond. The bond entails numerous obligations - towards the animals, towards himself, and towards his family (11). Here, it appears that Jake willingly grants permission for his own killing, while being convinced that his death would serve a meaningful purpose. Furthermore, Neytiri interprets Jake's attitude as a sign that he was prepared to advance to the next level of being a Na'vi warrior. This particular scene subverts the notion of human exceptionalism by advocating the symbiotic relationship with a view to promoting a post-dualistic worldview. The Na'vi venerate the maternal deity, Eywa, whom they believe preserves and generates the spirits of all the Na'vi and various forms of life in Pandora. Cameron shows, "Norm: Who's Eywa? Only their deity. Their Goddess made up of all living things, everything they know" (00:49:25). The Na'vi unquestioningly adhere to Eywa's commands without any scepticism. Eywa communicates instructions and prohibitions to them using a pink, flying organism resembling a jellyfish, which Neytiri describes as the "seeds of the sacred tree" and a manifestation of pure spirituality. This particular practise of the Na'vi people plays a crucial role in advocating ecological posthumanism by questioning the concept of human supremacy.

The sign of Eywa vividly foregrounds the deep association between the Na'vi and all forms of life by subverting the notion of anthropocentrism. As Neytiri prepares to fatally shoot Jake with her poisonous arrow, a seed unexpectedly passes

in front of her. It causes her to delay the action. The presence of seeds is seen by the Na'vi as a signal from Eywa. Neytiri provides a clear and detailed explanation when she introduces Jake Sully to the *Omaticaya* hamlet, in the presence of the chief and all the villagers. Neytiri says, "I was about going to kill him but there was a sign from Eywa" (00:43:13).

The Na'vi exist and thrive in harmony with nature. They use all the resources provided by the forest in a very careful manner to maintain ecological harmony. The colossal tree serves as the habitat for them. They take rest on the intricate web they construct on the branches. The seventh picture shows how they consume the creatures they capture in the jungle, but they are not driven by excessive desire as it is evident in the human culture. In fact, they perform a ritual when taking the life of an animal. They consume water from the foliage and blossoms within the forest. In addition, they enforce their own regulations that take precedence over those of all members, including the use of wood from their own tree.

They depend on the environment for their livelihoods. Therefore, they possess sufficient comprehension of their reliance on nature, leading them to have reverence for and safeguard it, ensuring the continuity of their livelihoods. They come to the realisation that their survival is just as dependent on the planet as the planet is on them. As a result, all forms of life in *Pandora* coexist by depending on each other as Barry Commoner states that everything is connected to everything else (1). Hence, their culture dismantles the concept of human exceptionalism that promotes the notion ecological posthumanism. In this context, it is pertinent to mention the statement of Jack. He says, "I try to understand this deep connection people have to the forest. She talks about a network of energy that flows to all living things. She says all energy under borrowing and one day has to give back" (01:01:34). This statement clearly shows the philosophy of "intrinsic value" by dismantling the concept of human supremacy.

The Na'vi hold the belief that by associating with the world of nature, they can ensure the continued provision of nourishment necessary for their survival. They hold the belief that the energy they possess during their lifetime is merely borrowed, and hence, at some point, they must return it. The Na'vi possess a unique and profound connection that links them to other creatures inhabiting their world. At the end of their braided hair, there is a distinctive connection formed by the nerve extending from their skulls. This bond, known as *tsahaylu*, signifies the interdependence of the Na'vi and other creatures of the forest by questioning the supremacy of a particular species.

The purpose of the *tsahaylu* is to establish a link between the Na'vi and the consciousness of the creatures they wish to control. In order to establish a successful link, Na'vi people must initially synchronise their *tsahaylu* with the *tsahaylu* of the animals they wish to form a connection. It has the ability to issue commands without using verbal language, relying solely on mental intentions to

communicate its desired actions. In this context, Neytiri says, “That is Tsahaylu, the bond. Feel it. Feel her heart beat, her breath. Feel her strong legs. You may tell her what to do inside. For now, say where to go” (00:50:35).

It is also very important to note that the relationship can also be established with the Tree of Voices and the Tree of Soul to enable the Na’vi to communicate with Eywa, their deity and their forebears. Confirming Neytiri’s statement on the voices, Jake connects his *tsahalu* to the tree of voices during the evening following the ritual to join the *Omaticaya* tribe. He is able to perceive the whispers that the Na’vi believe to be the voices of their forebears. In addition, all Na’vi have the ability to completely synchronise their connection with the “Tree of Souls”. The remaining members of the *Omaticaya* tribe, who have lost their home tree due to deforestation, are gathered together in prayer. They link their *tsahaylu* with the roots of the sacred tree known as *Yvetryar Ramounom*. Hence, it indicates their deep association with nature that dispels the notion of speciesism.

Through the relationship, they are able to perceive the sensations of other creatures. They also have a sense of unity with them. Therefore, they possess a greater comprehension of nature than humans. They are both creations of their God and rely on each other to maintain the equilibrium of the planet. Within this intricate ecology, the Na’vi possess an understanding that all the plant and animal life on the world, including themselves, are intricately linked to a fundamental spiritual presence that encompasses everything.

Tsahaylu demonstrates that the Na’vi depend on a close and profound bond with other living beings in order to understand their reality. The relationships in the Na’vi society occur not only among individuals, but also between the Na’vi and animals, as well as between the Na’vi and their ancestors. By maintaining a close bond with their forebears, these individuals possess the capacity to make more choices, enabling them to coexist harmoniously with their environment. This occurs when the Na’vi ultimately permits Jake Sully to reside among them and gain knowledge about their culture. This decision is affected by the auspices of Eywa, their divine spirit, as well as the guidance of *Tsahik*, with whom their forefathers coexist.

James Cameron’s film *Avatar* (2009) takes viewers to a distant world where the Na’vi people hold nature in the highest regard. Cameron’s films often reflect his environmental philosophy, illustrating the detrimental impact of human actions on the planet, particularly through the use of firearms and positions of power. This film emphasises the importance of nature and the conservation efforts carried out by an indigenous tribe. It is a movie that explores the complex connection between humanity and the natural world by questioning the notion of human supremacy. It focusses on a futuristic society that is environmentally conscious, as the story takes place in the year 2054. Through the representation of these visual images, he directs focus towards the polluted condition of the biosphere which is primarily caused by the anthropogenic activities. Hence, this film plays a crucial role in

subverting the notion of human exceptionalism by advocating the philosophy of ecological posthumanism for addressing the ecological crisis of our contemporary world.

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