

Reproducing Colonial Ideologies in Decolonization:

Reading Masculinity in James Cameron's Avatar

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ABSTRACT: Though James Cameron's 2009 box office sensation *Avatar* overtly criticizes colonial capitalism, its conventional masculinist narrative reproduces ideologies that support colonialism. This essay analyzes the film using several post-colonial theorists to display its inability to engage in anti-colonial critique. In doing so, I outline the importance of considering the complexity of gender in the literature that addresses colonial violence. Building upon the work of other scholars who have examined representations of gender in *Avatar*, this paper specifically addresses the masculinity of the protagonist, Jake Sully. Initially, I employ the work of Edward Said and Ann Laura Stoler to consider how the film reinscribes a stereotypical gender binary in its depiction of colonial contact between humans and the Na'vi, thereby negating the intricate relationship between gender and colonialism. The paper then shifts to focus on the anti-colonial efforts of the Na'vi led by Jake in his *Avatar* body. Frantz Fanon and others assist in defining *Avatar*'s problematic appropriation of decolonization into Jake's masculinity complex. This analysis determines that for creative works to consider colonial violence without contributing to it, they must avoid replicating dominating masculinity tropes formed within the contexts of colonialism.

KEYWORDS: *Avatar*, colonialism, masculinity, Post-Colonial Theory

James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* problematically reproduces, without critical engagement, romanticized heteronormative gender roles. Scholars who have written about the significance of gender roles in *Avatar* often discuss the implications of gender roles in colonial discourse, but usually in ways that support feminist analyses of the text rather than centrally engaging the relationship between sexual politics, masculinity, and colonialism. In "Hegemonic Masculinity and Tropes of Domination: An Ecofeminist Analysis of James Cameron's 2009 Film *Avatar*," Lydia Rose and Teresa M. Bartoli outline the ways the film reproduces masculine stereotypes. The authors consider the relationship between racial and gender identity formation by outlining the representations of the feminized "other" and masculinized colonialists. Jennifer P. Nesbitt similarly guides her analysis of Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) in "Deactivating Feminism: Sigourney Weaver, James Cameron, and *Avatar*" through a feminist lens. This essay provides significant engagement with post-colonial scholars, focusing on how *Avatar* replicates feminist texts that contribute to colonial violence by relying on "white heteronormative standards" (Nesbitt 22). In this paper, I will expand upon the critiques of stereotypical gender roles in *Avatar* that these authors provide by analyzing how the film's depiction of masculine dominance re-inscribes colonial ideologies. By studying the text in this way, I will outline the relationship between heteronormative gender roles and colonialist discourse and identify the need for creative texts to engage in this relationship when critiquing colonialism. The film attempts to develop an anti-colonial narrative by highlighting the devastation of extractive capitalism but fails to acknowledge the significance of sexual politics in colonialism. Utilizing Edward Said's theories about the ideological conditions that support and develop alongside colonialism and Ann Laura Stoler's descriptions of sexual politics in colonial relationships, I will examine the representation of the protagonist Jake Sully's (Same Worthington) masculinity in the film. Due to the depiction of stereotypical gender roles which re-produce colonial distinctions of difference, Jake Sully is rendered useless to the colonial cause in his human body because he is unable to assert militarized masculine dominance as he uses a wheelchair. He becomes useful to the colonizers when he gains knowledge by exerting virility in a Na'vi body, but because he is only able to assert masculinity in the Avatar, he abandons the colonial cause and leads the revolution. Drawing on Frantz Fanon and others, I will conclude my analysis by detailing the film's perpetuation of colonial relationships in its depiction of decolonization. Because hegemonic gender roles that are implicated in colonial ideologies are central to the plot, the film is

unable to sufficiently address colonial violence. Instead, the film appropriates decolonization as an opportunity for a white man to re-assert his masculine dominance.

Jake's impotence in the society of the colonizers exemplifies the film's superficial adaptation of colonial ideologies that distinguish an inherent difference between colonizer and colonized into a stereotypical gender binary. In his seminal text *Orientalism*, Edward Said claims that "to have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it" (32). The colonial knowledge of the subjugated group that Said is referencing consists of a notion of distinction between us and them, the colonizer and the colonized. It also entails a fabricated justification for the colonizer to dominate the colonized because the former is able to survey the latter and determine what is supposedly best for them. The scientists on Pandora led by Dr. Grace Augustine primarily produce knowledge about the Na'vi. However, they are not explicitly associated with domination over the territory as Said would suggest they should be due to their efforts to systemize information about the planet (which is notably funded by the Resource Development Agency for the purpose of more efficient capital extraction). Domination is instead aligned with the military presence on Pandora, led by Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) and overseen by the head of the Resource Development Agency, Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi). The divide between the two groups becomes evident when Jake, who is not a scientist or able to serve in the military, causes an argument between Grace and Parker (00:12:28-00:14:00). Parker's gesture to "this little rock" of unobtainium attempts to center the film's critique on destructive capitalism, posing the biological scientists as allies with the Na'vi people because of their similar respect for and desire to protect the natural environment. However, the division between the feminized scientists (who are represented by the female Dr. Augustine and aligned with the Na'vi and their goddess Eywa), and the masculine military based on gender stereotypes highlights the text's superficial engagement with colonial discourse. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann Laura Stoler determines that sexuality and gender are centrally embedded in the "overlapping set of discourses that [have] provided the psychological and economic underpinnings for colonial distinctions of difference" (46). *Avatar* does not engage gender in a critical way that considers its role in colonial discourse as Stoler suggests is necessary. Instead, it appropriates Said's conceptions of colonial notions of difference into a heteronormative gender binary. More than just replicating stereotypical gender roles, by representing Jake as a protagonist, the film champions asserting masculin-

ity as a form of dominance and reinscribes the colonial ideology of one group dominating a subjugated other. Jake is defined by his identity as a veteran who is no longer able to assert his masculinity in his human body. In the colonial space, he is considered to be useless because he cannot assert dominance within the confines of the pre-inscribed gender roles. His only potential use in the colonial cause lies in his ability to inhabit a colonized body and re-assert his virility within it.

As Jake regains his utility for the colonial cause in a colonized body, he perpetuates the colonial ideologies of dominance and masculine performance in the colonized space. When Jake inhabits the Avatar his ignorance of Na'vi culture has not changed, but he is no longer a "moron" as Grace describes him (00:13:06-00:13:10) and is instead called a "baby" (00:38:55-00:39:10). In the Na'vi body he begins the new life he is offered at the beginning of the film (00:02:40-00:03:05), becoming a "White Messiah" who learns the ways of the Na'vi through a sexually mediated relationship with Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). Stoler notes that beyond Said's use of heteronormative gender roles as metaphors for colonialism, sexual relationships between European men and colonized women were direct, material strategies and implementations of colonial violence (44). Jake's military background has aligned him with the human army on Pandora, but he has not yet proven

useful to their colonial cause. The knowledge of the Na'vi he gains from his relationship with Neytiri is the only way he becomes valuable to the masculinist military. As Jake exerts his virility in a colonized body, he challenges and undermines the masculine authority of the Na'vi male next in line to be head of the tribe, Tsu'tey (Laz Alonso). This disruption of Na'vi marital practice reflects Gayatri Spivak's notion of "[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men" (93). In this new body, Jake is able to use knowledge as a form of power and domination (which Grace was unable to, because her interactions with the Na'vi were not mediated through sexual relationships). However, the only reason Jake gives information to the Colonel is because the use of his legs, his ability to assert virility in his human body (a more ideal solution than remaining Na'vi), is constantly held over him. He only fully commits to existing in just the Na'vi body once the Colonel and Parker discover that Jake poses a potential revolutionary threat, and he realizes he will never be given his human masculinity back. As this body becomes the only way for Jake to assert his masculine dominance, the "white man's burden" to "save" the colonized through colonial domination, governed by the notion that the colonizers know what is best for the colonized and are inherently superior to them, is inverted into the "white saviour complex." Because Jake knows the Na'vi people but has no potential in the colonial cause, it be-

¹ The New York Times columnist David Brooks most notably criticized *Avatar* using this term, comparing the film to *Pocahontas* and *Dances with Wolves* that portray the same problematic narrative structure (Hillis).

² This is exemplified by the use of only male pronouns in his text: "He is dominated but not domesticated. He is made to feel inferior, but by no means convinced of his inferiority" (Fanon 16). This is not a fault of translation, as in the original French *Les Damnés de la Terre*, the male pronoun *il* is repeated: "*Il est dominé, mais non domestiqué. Il est infériorisé, mais non convaincu de son infériorité*" (Fanon 55).



comes his duty to try and save them from the military attack on Hometree, which would allow him to retain his masculine identity in the Avatar. His involvement in the decolonization rebellion is mediated through this masculinity complex, exerting his own frustrations with impotence in the body of the Na'vi.

The rebellion led by Jake appropriates the violent decolonization that Frantz Fanon deems necessary in *The Wretched of the Earth* (3) and negates its significance by placing the anti-colonial efforts within a masculinist discourse that perpetuates colonial ideologies. Although the Na'vi people attempt to return the violence that has been committed against them to the colonizers when the humans attack Hometree, their arrows bounce off the phallic human ships, and the Colonel sips coffee in comfort while the Na'vi are engulfed in flames desperately trying to escape this massacre (01:38:00-01:45:00). This occurs while Jake is tied up, unable to help the Na'vi. Once Jake becomes the Toruk Makto and leads the anti-colonial revolution, the attempts to attack the colonizers suddenly become successful turning the domination of the Na'vi by the humans into a violent bloody war (02:11:00-02:32:00). The difference between the two rebellions is Jake. He effectively utilizes what Fanon describes as a continuous tension occurring within the colonial body that has constantly been hunted and brutally dominated (16) to successfully overthrow the rule of the colonizers. However, the tension that Jake releases is not from being hunted, but from his inability to exert masculinity in his human body. While Fanon himself perpetuates masculinist discourse in his theories, his conceptions of the manifestations of violence against the colonized body are useful for analyzing masculinity in *Avatar*. Fanon claims that the colonized man is “forever dreaming of becoming the persecutor” (16), just as Jake's *Avatar* life initially feels as if it is a dream. However, the idealized masculine role he is able to exert in that body transforms this dream into his reality. To use the grotesque metaphor for the brutalizing of the colonist put forth by George Orwell in his autobiographical essay “Shooting an Elephant,” “He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it” (34). Jake's face grows to fit the mask of an anti-colonial revolutionary because the binary between colonized and colonizer is problematically reproduced as a heteronormative gender binary. The feminized Na'vi and their land are exploited and oppressed by the masculine human military, and they can only be saved by a white man who is utilizing their anti-colonial rebellion to act out his own masculine fantasies. Jake does not face the same violence as a colonized individual and highlighting the rediscovery of his masculinity not only dismisses the violence that has been and continues to be commit-

ted against colonized men, but completely negates the subaltern women in colonial societies. The problematic appropriation of the decolonization narrative bars the film from engaging in any comprehensive or well-considered colonial critique. As Kevin Ochieng Okoth underlines in “Decolonization and its Discontents: Rethinking the Cycle of National Liberation,” decolonization cannot occur under the circumstances, including binary hegemonic gender relationships and masculine dominance, created by colonialism (22).

Several scholars have noted that the generic romanticized narrative in *Avatar*, which is hinged upon stereotypical gender binaries, has allowed the film to be easily accessible to a broad audience. As this essay has argued, *Avatar*'s replication of a colonial fantasy presented as an anti-colonial critique does not truly suggest any departure from colonial ideals. The question becomes, how can creative works put this idealized colonial ideology of masculine domination critically into conversation with the continuous material realities of colonial violence that disproportionately affects colonized women? The work of Gayatri Spivak, who considers the complexities of gender politics in colonialism and how the subaltern may find a voice in this discourse, could prove useful in conceptualizing how these narratives can be considered together in literature. However, *Avatar* simply appropriates this masculine fantasy that enables and is complicit in colonial violence. The film clearly demonstrates that focusing on ecocritical perspectives of extractive capitalism without considering the complexities of relationships established in a colonial context cannot provide an adequate critique of colonialism.

³ See Ken Hillis, Thomas Elsaesser, and Silvia Martínez Falquina.

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