

***Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Avatar: The Way of Water:
Unveiling Environmental and Cultural Struggles***

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*"One who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth
and one who gives gifts to the rich—both come to poverty."*

- Proverbs 22:16 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the postcolonial ecocritical dimensions of James Cameron's *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), focusing on the tension between the Na'vi (colonized) and the Resources Development Administration (RDA) (colonizer). Drawing on Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence and Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's (2002) analysis of imperial dominance, using a qualitative method, the study explores how the film portrays cultural erasure, environmental harm, and resilience. The Na'vi exemplify spiritual connection and ecological respect, while the RDA's militarized extractive practices reflect unchecked capitalist exploitation. Through a synthesis of film analysis and theoretical insights, this article reveals the broader implications of postcolonial ecocriticism for understanding cultural survival and environmental justice. As the results: **1)** The Na'vi endure cultural erasure and ecological harm yet demonstrate resilience through a deep spiritual bond with their environment. **2)** The RDA embodies destructive imperialism, deploying militarized technology to extract resources without regard for cultural or ecological welfare. **3)** The film's portrayal of conflict fosters critical reflection on postcolonial ecocriticism, underscoring the need to address the interlinked crises of environmental exploitation and cultural marginalization. By examining *Avatar: The Way of Water* through a postcolonial ecocritical lens, this study highlights the urgency of integrating cultural and environmental advocacy. It is anticipated that these findings will encourage further scholarly discourse on how literary and cinematic narratives can galvanize both academic and public engagement in dismantling exploitative power structures and championing ecological stewardship.

Keywords: *Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, Environmental Exploitation, Cultural Resilience, Imperial Dominance*

INTRODUCTION

Literature, particularly children's and young adult storytelling, has long been a critical medium for shaping perspectives and understanding complex societal and global challenges. Children's literature often serves as a gateway to introduce important topics like environmental conservation, cultural identity,

and resistance to oppression. It enables young audiences to grasp nuanced issues through engaging narratives that spark empathy and critical thinking. Films adapted for younger audiences, such as **Avatar: The Way of Water**, offer an imaginative yet meaningful exploration of these themes. These narratives not only entertain but also educate by encouraging conversations about pressing real-world issues such as colonial exploitation and environmental degradation, which remain central to global debates today.

The themes explored in *Avatar: The Way of Water* are deeply connected to ongoing real-world crises. Environmental degradation, often exacerbated by industrial and colonial exploitation, poses significant threats to the survival of ecosystems and the communities that depend on them. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), over 30% of global ecosystems face severe threats due to deforestation, resource extraction, and pollution. Indigenous and marginalized communities, in particular, suffer disproportionately from these issues, as their traditional lands and ways of life are often undermined by the pursuit of economic gain. The narrative of *Avatar: The Way of Water*, which portrays a technologically advanced but exploitative colonial force threatening an indigenous population's survival and culture, resonates strongly with these real-world dynamics.

The object of this analysis is *Avatar: The Way of Water*, the highly anticipated sequel to James Cameron's groundbreaking 2009 film, *Avatar*. Released by 20th Century Studios on December 16, 2022, the film continues to explore the intricate world of Pandora, expanding its rich ecological and cultural narrative. *Avatar: The Way of Water* is a cinematic masterpiece designed to appeal to audiences aged 13 and above, with a PG-13 rating ensuring its accessibility to young adults and older children. As a blend of science fiction, fantasy, and environmental drama, the movie offers a unique narrative that intertwines advanced visual storytelling with profound socio-political themes. Garnering critical acclaim, it has earned multiple awards and nominations, including recognition at the Academy Awards for its stunning visual effects, immersive world-building, and innovative sound design. By crafting a story that addresses themes of environmental preservation, cultural identity, and resistance to oppression, *Avatar: The Way of Water* stands out as not just an entertainment medium but also a thought-provoking work that reflects and critiques real-world issues.

The story of *Avatar: The Way of Water* follows Jake Sully and Neytiri, who, along with their children, must navigate a new chapter of survival in Pandora's lush underwater ecosystem. Fleeing from the relentless pursuit of the Resources Development Administration (RDA), the family finds refuge with the oceanic Metkayina clan. As they adapt to the ways of the water and build alliances, they face challenges that threaten not only their family but also the ecological and cultural integrity of Pandora. The narrative serves as an allegory for real-world struggles, such as the displacement of indigenous communities and the environmental destruction caused by neo-colonial and capitalist forces.

This analysis employs the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, a critical lens that emerged in the late 20th century. Postcolonial ecocriticism examines the intersections between colonial histories, cultural oppression, and environmental exploitation. By focusing on the ways colonial powers exploit land and people, the theory reveals the lasting socio-ecological consequences of colonialism. This framework is particularly relevant to *Avatar: The Way of Water*, where the colonizers' relentless extraction of Pandora's resources mirrors the real-world exploitation of indigenous lands for profit.

While many studies on *Avatar* have explored its technological advancements, groundbreaking visual effects, and its role as a pioneer in cinematic storytelling, there remains a significant gap in understanding its socio-political commentary. Existing analyses have largely overlooked the film's critique of neo-colonial practices and its commentary on the interconnectedness of cultural and ecological crises. This study addresses this gap by applying postcolonial ecocriticism to analyze how the film portrays resistance to imperialist ideologies and advocates for harmony between cultural identity and environmental preservation.

Postcolonial ecocriticism provides the foundation for this analysis, combining insights from postcolonial theory and ecological studies. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" highlights the long-term and often invisible harm caused by ecological exploitation (Nixon, 2011, pp. 1–4), which disproportionately affects marginalized communities. In the context of *Avatar: The Way of Water*, this concept is crucial to understanding the RDA's exploitation of Pandora's resources and the resulting harm to the Na'vi people and their environment. Additionally, theories on hybridity and resistance offer a framework for analyzing how the Na'vi adapt and resist the imperial forces threatening their culture and environment, such as "eco-imperialism" and "biocultural resilience" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, pp. 120–122). Further support the argument that the film critiques colonial exploitation while promoting sustainable and respectful coexistence.

Based on the above issues, this study dives into the exploration of cultural resilience and environmental sustainability as depicted in *Avatar: The Way of Water*. It reveals how the film critiques imperialist ideologies and advocates for ecological and cultural harmony, inspiring critical conversations on these pressing global issues.

Binary Opposition Table

The Colonized (Na'vi People)	The Colonizer (Colonial Forces - RDA)
The Na'vi endure cultural erasure and ecological harm from exploitative forces yet maintain a deep spiritual connection to their land, exemplifying resilience in the face of oppression. As Nixon (2011) observes, "Slow violence is a violence that	The RDA, driven by capitalist greed, employs militarized power to exploit resources without regard for cultural or ecological well-being, epitomizing imperialist domination. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) note, "imperial forces'

occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (p. 47).	dominance through the exploitation of land and culture” is reflected in the RDA’s actions on Pandora (p. 121).
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METHOD

This analysis implemented qualitative approach to explore and dig deeper about the postcolonial with ecocriticism theory and to explore the environmental and cultural struggles presented in the film *Avatar: The Way of Water*(2022) live-action movie, using Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s theory of *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (Huggan & Tiffin, (2006). Huggan and Tiffin’s idea on postcolonial ecocriticism provided helpful ways to think about *Avatar: The Way of Water*, especially when it comes to how the film tackles issues like colonialism, environmental destruction, indigenous resistance, and cultural representation. The way the Na’vi fight to protect their environment from human colonizers ties directly to the theory’s focus on how colonialism and environmental harm are linked. Key aspects of postcolonial ecocriticism explored in the movie include: the exploitation of Pandora’s ecosystems by human colonizers, reflecting the historical link between colonialism and environmental degradation. A thematic analysis will be used to identify and examine key themes such as colonialism, indigenous knowledge, environmental degradation, and hybridity. The film was watched multiple times, and key scenes related to these themes are noted. The identified themes were analyzed in detail, the representation of the film’s visual and narrative elements was considered.

DISCUSSION

It's imperative that James Cameron's *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) be assessed through a postcolonial ecocritical lens. Postcolonial themes exist within—colonialists trying to take over a nation, an imperialistic approach by missionizing and diaspora, environmental devastation and misuse of the planet's resources, yet also, vengeance upon the colonizers by the indigenous with the stronghold of nature and culturally intersectional elements at the same time. “*Slow violence is the cumulative, often delayed destruction that unfolds out of sight, undermining communities long before it becomes a spectacle.*” (Nixon, 2011, p. 47) it emphasizes that slow violence is a gradual process often hidden from conventional view. Thus, using a postcolonial ecocritical perspective will enhance understanding of the film as both an externally imposed critique of such colonial, imperialistic endeavors and an internally directed homage to such intersectional natural and cultural holds. Therefore, various scenes, sounds, etc. will be utilized for visual and evaluative purposes.

1. The Re-Arrival of the ‘tRDA: Colonization Redux (00:15:30)

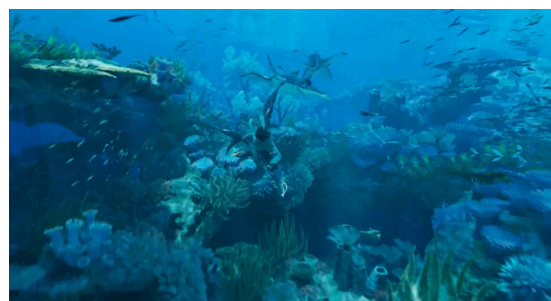
The re-entry of the Resources Development Administration on Pandora marks a new, more intense phase of colonial aggression. Whereas in the first film, the RDA was primarily interested in mining unobtainium, this sequel uncovers a more insidious agenda: the transformation of Pandora into a new home for humanity, driven by Earth's ecological collapse. *"Visibility is a trap that subjects individuals to the disciplining gaze of power."* (Foucault, 1977, p. 91). It points out how systemic power structures and societal norms make the gradual impacts of slow violence less visible. This shift reflects the colonial mindset of expansion and domination, where new frontiers are endlessly sought to sustain unsustainable practices. The cinematography in this scene magnifies the destructive power of the return of the RDA. With wide-angle shots, huge flying spaceships descend upon Pandora and scorch the land, sending away vegetation. Native fauna runs away in terror, painting a bright picture of how these colonial incursions disrupt a system.



"Slow violence unfolds in the margins of visibility, its cumulative impact remaining largely imperceptible to mainstream observers." (Davies, 2022, p. 2). The cold metal hues of the RDA machinery stand in stark contrast against Pandora's lush greens, an image that symbolizes this clash between mechanized exploitation and natural harmony. General Ardmore's statement, "This time, we make Pandora ours," encapsulates the colonial ethos of entitlement and conquest. Foucault's power explains that mechanisms of surveillance and discipline can obscure certain forms of violence, while Davies highlights that slow violence's effects are often unnoticed by those not directly affected. This reflects historical patterns of settler colonialism, where indigenous lands were appropriated and reshaped to serve the needs of colonial powers. As postcolonial theorist Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, "imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale," often through violence and ecological devastation (Said, 1993, pp. 22–24). This transformation of Pandora into a site of conflict mirrors historical realities wherein the land is at once both prize and casualty of colonial ambitions.

2. Seeking Refuge: Indigenous Displacement and Adaptation (01:05:45)

After being driven from their forest home by the RDA's relentless assault, Jake Sully and his family seek asylum with the Metkayina, a reef-dwelling Na'vi clan. This subplot shows one of the major themes of colonial



histories: the displacement of indigenous communities and the need to adapt to pressures from without. The Sully's story is emblematic of the wider context of an indigenous people being displaced from their ancestral lands due to colonization, industrialization, or environmental degradation. *"Hybridity is a critical space where the binary oppositions of colonial discourse are dissolved, giving rise to a 'third space' of cultural negotiation."* (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). It implies that the concept of hybridity challenges the fixed categories imposed by colonial discourse and creates a dynamic *"third space"* for cultural negotiation. Visually, the shift between dense, green forests and wide, open blue oceans was jarring, underscoring how varied Pandora's ecosystems are and how specific its cultures are. Cameron deploys underwater cinematography to enjoin the viewer with a sense of immediacy in this world of the Metkayina. He takes fluid, even camera movements, emulating the natural undulations of water, while the richness of life in the sea, radiating bright, bioluminescent organisms, draws a strong counterpoint to the destruction wreaked by the RDA. The resistance of Tonowari to granting refuge to the Sully family exhibits the stresses within and across indigenous groups imposed by the colonial power. His comment, *"You are forest people; you do not belong here,"* therefore, underlines the problems of cultural adjustment and identity preservation in the face of displacement, *"The subaltern cannot speak."* (Spivak, 1988, p. 66) used as the persistent silencing of marginalized groups. The eventual acceptance of the Sully family, however, reflects the adaptability and solidarity of indigenous communities, a recurring theme in postcolonial narratives. This is in line with the work of ecocritical scholar Rob Nixon, who in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* contends that often displaced communities find innovative ways to resist and adapt, preserving their cultures and ecosystems despite systemic violence (Nixon, 2011, pp. 45–50).

3. The Tulkun Hunt: A Metaphor for Capitalist Exploitation (01:55:20)

The brutal hunt for the tulkun, a sentient whale-like species venerated by the Metkayina, is perhaps one of the film's most poignant critiques of capitalist exploitation. The RDA hunts the tulkun for their brain enzymes, which are believed to stop human aging—a practice that echoes real-world parallels to whaling, ivory poaching, and other extractive practices driven by



luxury markets. *"Environmental degradation, as a form of slow violence, challenges conventional narratives by exposing the gradual accumulation of harm over time."* (O'Lear, 2016, p. 11) This connects the scientific understanding of environmental harm with its political implications, reinforcing the idea that

slow violence disrupts standard crisis narratives by its gradual and cumulative nature. The scene opens with the Tulkun being hunted through the oceans of Pandora by the RDA's highly developed hunting machinery. First, there are close-ups of the tulkun's eyes to show how smart and emotionally deep they are, while the wide shots show the hunters in relentless pursuit. The shaky, handheld camera work during these final moments of the hunt amplifies the chaos and brutality, further making the audience complicit in the violence. The callousness of the hunters comes into full flower in their dialog, "Payday, boys," in celebration of the kill. This markedly contrasts with the Metkayina response, more specifically Tsireya's grievin' lamentation on losing a Tulkun matriarch. As for the Metkayina people, the tulkuns are not simply animals, but spiritual relatives, as these creatures show the qualities the Metkayinas possess: being reciprocal and in complete harmony with nature. This dichotomy reflects what scholar Val Plumwood terms the "*dualism of human/nature*," (Plumwood, 1993, pp. 30–32) whereby capitalist systems devalue ecological relationships in favor of commodification.

4. Family as a Microcosm of Indigenous Struggles (02:10:00)

The Sully family's story is a mirror of the greater struggles from which indigenous communities have historically suffered under colonial oppression. Jake, having been once human, has now taken on full Na'vi identity and symbolizes well the transformational power that comes with cross-cultural solidarities. Neytiri is the spiritual emotional core of the indigenous resistance, who will stop at nothing to protect her family and land from the colonizers. A particularly powerful subplot involves Lo'ak, the Sully's second son, who bonds with Payakan, an outcast tulkun. *"Postcolonial texts 'write back' to the imperial centre, exposing the exploitative dynamics of colonial power through innovative linguistic and cultural strategies"* (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 121). It shows how postcolonial impacts challenge the dominant imperial discourse and reclaim cultural agency. Their relationship serves as a metaphor for solidarity among marginalized beings. Lo'ak's recognition of Payakan's pain and resilience is reflected in his words, *"You're not just a killer; you're a survivor."* This sentiment highlights the shared struggles of those who are ostracized, whether by society or colonial systems, and the potential for mutual healing. In those bonding scenes, the underwater cinematography is ethereal: soft light and vibrant color hues establish a place of serenity and trust. The repetition of Lo'ak and Payakan swimming together treads deep into their connective tissue and the ability of different life forms to coexist, a big point of postcolonial ecocriticism.



5. Neytiri's Fury: The Rage of the Oppressed (02:45:00)

During the turning point of the clash, Neytiri feels the dual horror of loss and rage and directs her fury towards the RDA and its forces. The violence portrayed isn't only barbarism - it means the violence of native resistance against colonialism.

“Postcolonial ecocriticism reveals the interdependence of environmental and cultural crises, urging us to reconsider how literature



reflects and resists ecological degradation” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2006, p. 16). Both issues reflect ecological harm and serve as a site of resistance against environmental injustice. The filmmaker captures her concentration through a constantly moving camera that swings around with ease or zooms rapidly in on faces, lighting as well as action and set composition elements. Her rage remains manifest in her battle cry: *“You will never have our world!”* which embodies the unapologetic resolve of indigenous peoples to obediently give their lands and identity to colonizing powers. This completes those postcolonial feminist critiques of Neytiri's character that place specific emphasis on women's agency in the anti-colonial struggle. Her feelings of loss and mourning for Neteyam highlight the impact of colonialism on communities, while her thoughts and actions resist submission to oppression.

6. Eywa's Redemption: Ecological and Spiritual Unity (03:00:27)

In the end, again the filmmakers passionately claim that it is Eywa, the living network of the planet, that connects all life in Pandora Island. Cheavon's image in Eywa of Jake's expression of Neteyam suggests the Na'vi's faith in life's recurrent sequences and the unification of every human. This eco-spirituality questions the anthropocentric perspective of RDA which



perceives natural resources in terms of profit and capital. *“Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale, often through violence that is both visible and insidious”* (Said, 1993, p. 23). Said's insights reveal the enduring impact of colonial power on cultural identities that the

legacies of imperialism are integral to slow violence. The last image presented by Cameron is the image of the shining oceans of Pandora bursting with bioluminescent life which speaks only of an eco-friendly harmony. The gentle lighting and the still color scheme make a stark contrast with the clean and clinical extermination of the RDA that spurs a sense of hopefulness. As Jake buoyantly said, ‘The way of water connects all things,’ adds a conclusion to what this film wants the audiences to take away: the respect for nature and other living beings.

The Way of Water is a powerful statement on colonial expansion and the ravaging of nature, stressing multiple dimensions of culture and ecology. *“The dualism of human and nature, entrenched in capitalist thinking, devalues ecological relationships in favor of commodification”* (Plumwood, 1993, p. 31). It shows how the division between human and nature underpins environmental harm, reinforcing the idea that capitalist frameworks contribute to the systematic undervaluing of both ecological and cultural well-being. The film also depicts damage caused by colonialism while depicting how indigenous people have managed to live on in the face of invasive ideologies through its stunning visuals, expansive world-building, and powerful narrative. For Cameron, the solutions are respect and a readiness to live together, rather than systems of domination. At the same time, postcolonial ecocriticism reminds one that there is a specific way to look at such themes through the lens which one may rightly argue is greatly missed while trying to understand our being in the world.

CONCLUSION

“Avatar: The Way of Water” is a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of colonial exploitation and environmental degradation, themes that are highly relevant to contemporary global issues. Using a postcolonial ecocritical lens, this analysis shows how the film critiques imperialist ideologies and advocates for ecological and cultural harmony. The film’s narrative reflects real-world struggles, such as the displacement of indigenous peoples and environmental degradation caused by neo-colonial and capitalist forces. The RDA’s relentless pursuit of Pandora’s resources echoes the real-world exploitation of indigenous lands for profit. This exploitation is further emphasized by the film’s depiction of tulkun hunting, which draws parallels to real-world practices such as whale and ivory hunting.

The film also explores the concepts of cultural resilience and environmental sustainability. The Na’vi, despite displacement and oppression, demonstrate their resilience and determination to protect their culture and environment. Their connection to Eywa, the interconnected planetary web, emphasizes the importance of ecological harmony and the interconnectedness of all living things. In conclusion, Avatar: The Way of Water is not only a good and entertaining watch, but also a powerful commentary on

the negative impacts of colonialism and environmental exploitation. By examining the film through the theory of ecocriticism, we can gain a deeper understanding of its socio-political themes and how they relate to contemporary global issues.

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