

AVATAR: EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF NATURE AND HUMAN PSYCHE - AN ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Afra

III Bsc Psychology

Stu_afra_jm@cttewc.edu.in

Environmental psychology is an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the interaction between human beings and their physical environment. It examines how the environment affects human behaviour, emotions, cognitive processes and psychological well-being. The study reviews "Avatar," the 2009 science fiction film directed by James Cameron. The film, set in the mid-22nd century on the fictional planet of Pandora, explores several themes related to environmentalism, biophilia and the interconnectedness of all living things, all of which have significant implications for psychological well-being. The symbiotic relationship between the Na'vi people and the vibrant, bioluminescent flora and fauna exemplifies the restorative power of nature, highlighting the importance of preserving natural environments in the real world to support human mental health.

Keywords: Environmental Psychology, Avatar, Psychological Well-Being, Basophilic, Environmentalism, Interconnectedness

Avatar, the 2009 science fiction film directed by James Cameron, emerged as a cinematic landmark upon its release, captivating audiences worldwide with its breathtaking visuals and compelling narrative. Beyond its entertaining value, the film delves deeply into the complex relationship between people and nature, aligning with Environmental Psychology, a discipline that focuses on the interaction between human beings and their physical environment. The concept has been portrayed in various forms of literature across different genres.

The movie embarks with Jake Sully, the protagonist, narrating his experiences of being a paraplegic military veteran. Wheelchair-bound, he has come to terms with the unfairness and discrimination of earth. Shortly after his brother's death, Jake is assigned as a replacement on a mission to "Pandora," the Earth-like extrasolar moon that presents a lush, vibrant world teeming with diverse flora and fauna. The planet inhabits the indigenous Na'vi people who live in harmony with their environment.

Through the character of Jake Sully, James Cameron illustrates the psychological impact of immersing oneself in a natural environment and how transformative it can be. Jake becomes an 'Avatar' – an artificial body crafted by the combined DNA of both humans and the Na'vi – and explores Pandora. Environmental psychology suggests that contact with nature can enhance mental well-being, reduce stress, and improve cognitive function. Jake's experiences on Pandora exemplify these psychological benefits and further explore the transformative power of nature. At the beginning of the film, Jake Sully approaches Pandora with a human-centric and utilitarian mindset, viewing nature merely as a resource to be exploited but there is a stark gradual change as he becomes part of the Na'vi community, Jake learns their ways, their respect for nature, and their spiritual connection to Pandora.

His exposure to biodiversity and nature fosters a deep appreciation for the intrinsic value of every living being, reinforcing the importance of preserving each species and its habitats. He particularly resonates with the phrase expressed by the Omaticaya, a Na'vi tribe, when greeting. "I see you." This expression symbolizes acceptance, empathy, and a deep spiritual connection. It implies that the speaker recognizes not just the external appearance of the individual but also their inner being, their struggles, hopes, and emotions.

Moreover, operating his avatar provides him with a newfound sense of purpose, freedom, and a connection to nature that he had lost on Earth due to his disability, so much so that he starts prioritising his avatar over his own natural human body gradually throughout the movie, a feeling that becomes mutual amongst all the avatar operators, emphasising the need for ecological conservation for the physical as well as psychological benefits that it reaps.

In accordance with the biological and spiritual interconnectedness of nature where all life is interconnected and dependent on one another for survival, the Na'vi share a strong belief in the continuous flow of energy between all living things. They place a special value on the concept that every action has a reaction and that all living things are interwoven in a single, uninterrupted cycle of energy exchange. Their deep respect for the natural environment and its inhabitants is driven by this fundamental belief, which also fosters a strong feeling of responsibility and mindfulness in their interactions with it. Therefore, they take life only when absolutely required and not for sport. Even then, they carry out a small ritual as a sign of adherence to and respect for nature's laws.

The ritual entails the recitation of a prayer: “I see you, brother. Thank you. Your spirit goes with Eywa, your body stays behind to become part of the People.” The beginning clauses indicate the cultural acknowledgement and recognition of all living beings including animals, whilst highlighting the gratitude towards the taken life for its contributions to society. The following words “Your spirit will now be with Eywa” imply a belief in a cyclical view of life and death, where individuals return to the spiritual essence of the natural world after death. This belief promotes a profound respect for nature and its cycles, encouraging harmony with the environment rather than exploitation. It reflects a holistic understanding of life, acknowledging the importance of every living being in the grand scheme of existence.

The ending phrase “but your body will remain for the people.” emphasises the communal aspect of life. It suggests that even though an individual's spirit transcends into the spiritual realm, their bodily presence continues to serve the physical one. This could also be interpreted as a message about selflessness and the importance of contributing to the well-being of the community, even in death.

In addition to that, The Na’vi believe immensely in “Eywa”, their deity composed of all living things in their universe, deeply resonating with the doctrine of Pantheism which regards the universe as a manifestation of God. It embodies the fundamental conviction that nature transcends mere physicality, diving into the spiritual world where all living species are venerated for their interconnectivity.

The Na'vi people’s belief in the supernatural extends to the existence of spirits in the natural world, imbuing Pandora with wisdom and spiritual enlightenment. This spiritual connection with nature goes well beyond personal beliefs for them; it is the foundation of their cultures and the basis of individual well-being. This is illustrated in the film through Neytiri, the daughter of the chief and shaman. She spares the life of the protagonist due to a perceived sign from Eywa, representing human cultures that have a deep-rooted religious belief in the transcending of the environment. This respect for the metaphysical qualities of nature translates into a steadfast commitment to environmental protection, inspiring viewers to contemplate their own spirituality in the context of the natural world, and fostering a greater appreciation for the sanctity of nature.

Avatar also centres around the theme of Biophilia, a term coined by Biologist Edward O. Wilson. He defined it as “The innate tendency to focus upon life and life-like forms and, in some

instances, to affiliate with them emotionally”, describing the inherent human tendency to seek connections with nature. This deep-rooted affinity for the natural world has been an integral part of human evolution, shaping our cognitive, emotional, and social development. It is reflected in the Na'vi culture, they live in complete harmony with their environment, respecting and embracing the diverse flora and fauna around them. Their intimate relationship with the natural world goes beyond mere survival; it's a spiritual and psychological symbiosis, in sharp contrast to the devastating exploitation of the human mining industry.

The director dives deeper into the theme by fabricating actual physical bonds between the flora and the fauna of Pandora. “Tsaheylu” is a physical process where the Na'vi use their queues, a hair-like appendage on their head, to a similar one on the creature. Through this connection, they share thoughts, emotions, and sensations, creating a deep and intimate bond. It serves as a means of mutual communication and cooperation to reach a common goal. The concept of Tsaheylu is central to the Na'vi way of life and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings, it is not about dominance but rather establishing a symbiotic relationship where both parties benefit and share a profound connection.

The film's narrative further unfolds against the backdrop of environmental destruction, highlighting the human greed for monetary benefits and the consequences of ecological exploitation. The former is portrayed through the actions of the organization Resources Development Administration (RDA) which primarily focuses on resources in outer space. The RDA are in constant conflict with the indigenous and even goes as far as to demolish “Home Tree”- the habitat of the Omaticaya tribe- for the highly valuable rare mineral known as “Unobtainium” found underneath the area. The organization bombed and destroyed both abiotic and biotic components of nature, including human and animal lives, paying no heed to the

consequences. This may serve as an allegory to colonization and how the Great British Empire destroyed entire countries and civilisations for their selfish gains without any remorse or feeling and by depicting these events in a science fiction setting, Avatar allows viewers to reflect on the darker aspects of human history and the potential future consequences of unchecked greed and exploitation.

The movie mirrors challenges that exist in real life, where self-interest and the pursuit of financial gain put human welfare at risk, resulting in a decline in worldwide physical and psychological wellness as well as a lower quality of life. Many communities face Natural resource depletion, deforestation, pollution, and climate change, resulting in stressors that have a multidimensional impact on human existence. Studies have shown that environmental destruction has a direct effect on physical well-being and an indirect effect on emotional well-being. Anxiety, despair, and a pervasive sense of detachment from the natural world have grown increasingly frequent in communities struggling with the impacts of environmental decline. Addressing these struggles necessitates not only environmental conservation initiatives but also a collective societal commitment to reviving the human-nature relationship and nurturing a fresh sense of connection and belonging to the natural world.

In conclusion, Avatar serves as a fictional platform in which various psychological concepts have been portrayed including the transformative power of nature, biophilia and interconnectedness. It also focuses on ecological destruction and its consequences, prompting a call to action and encouraging nations to reconsider and evaluate their relationship with each other and the environment. It urges the world to adopt sustainable initiatives, conserve biodiversity, and promote harmony between human beings and nature. By responding to this plea, humanity will not only protect and preserve the balance of nature but also strengthen

their psychological resilience, ensuring a better and more harmonious living for future generations.

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