

AVATAR AS A PARABLE

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I should clarify from the beginning that this is not a film review of *Avatar*; more a comment on its politics, and on other commentaries on its politics.

The plot is simple. In the year 2154, a colony of humans has been set up by RDA corporation, headed by Parker Selfridge, on the distant planet Pandora, with the intention of mining its reserves of the incredibly valuable mineral unobtainium. But the indigenous inhabitants, the Na'vi, are an obstacle to this goal, since the unobtainium lies beneath the forest they inhabit, with the biggest deposit beneath their ancestral Hometree. Dr Grace Augustine heads the Avatar programme, which blends the DNA of individual human beings with that of the Na'vi to create Na'vi avatars which can be controlled by the mind of the human. Through this, they can establish contact with the Na'vi, find out about them and their habitat, and hopefully persuade them to cooperate with the company. But should they fail, the military wing under Colonel Miles Quaritch is poised to remove them by force.

Jake, a paraplegic ex-marine, gets involved in the avatar programme because his twin brother, a scientist originally involved in it, was killed in a mugging. But as the mission proceeds, Jake, like his colleagues Grace and Norm, comes to appreciate the culture of the Na'vi even as he provides strategic information about them in his debriefing sessions; moreover, he falls in love with Neytiri, a Na'vi female, and she falls in love with him. Selfridge and Quaritch get impatient and give Grace and Jake just one hour to convince the Na'vi to vacate their habitat, failing which the military will swing into action. In attempting to carry out this mission, Grace and Jake have to reveal their part, upon which the Na'vi accuse them of betrayal and tie them up, but at this point the onslaught on Hometree, in which many Na'vi are killed, begins. The human avatars of Grace, Norm and Jake are held captive by Quaritch for treason, but Trudy, a security force pilot disgusted by all this violence, flies them out, along with their laboratory, to the jungle. In the crucial battle, these four as well as another scientist, Dr Max Patel, fight on the side of the Na'vi, and Grace and Trudy are killed by the security forces, along with hundreds of Na'vi. But the attack

is finally repelled, and the invaders sent back to their depleted planet earth. Jake, Norm and Max remain with the Na'vi.

Frederick Alexander Meade accuses the film of promoting White supremacy because its hero displays physical, intellectual and spiritual superiority over the Na'vi (Meade 2010). Reading this, anyone who has not seen the film would never imagine that Jake, in his White avatar, spends his time throughout the film seated in a wheelchair or lying in a machine; he cannot stand or walk, much less fight or conquer. At the end of the film, Neytiri has to save him from imminent death by despatching Quaritch with her bow and arrows. It is only in his Na'vi avatar – which is far superior to his White one – that he can match the indigenous beings physically. Furthermore, he starts off naïve and sufficiently uncritical of his own culture to participate in a project aimed at displacing the Na'vi by any means required; it is only when his eyes are opened to the criminal enterprise in which his employers are engaged that he switches sides.

It is true that near the beginning, Neytiri refrains from killing him because a sacred seed lands on her arrow when she is about to shoot him. Does this signify, as Meade suggests, that he is their 'redeemer'? One would hardly think so from the way in which Neytiri proceeds to berate him! As her mother, who is the spiritual leader of the clan, seems to confirm, the seed is simply saying, 'Don't kill him, give him a chance, he can change.' Again, he does succeed in mounting the flying Toruk, which only a few members of the community have ever been able to do. But he does this in a desperate bid to win back their trust after they have cast him out for betraying them, because he needs their help to heal Grace, who is dying. And it is surely perverse to think that Eywa, the deity, responds to his prayer for help because he is spiritually superior to the Na'vi, and not because she wants to save them from extermination! Would she have answered his prayer if he had prayed for the company's mission to succeed? Surely not.

What has occurred here is a conversion, but in the opposite direction to the one sought by the invaders. Jake and his

friends risk their lives to stand by the Na'vi, and two of them are killed in the process. Throughout, the Na'vi are portrayed as being superior to the White invaders physically, intellectually and spiritually; only in terms of military hardware are the invaders superior, and here the solidarity offered to them by Jake and Trudy is critical. Only someone who is quite insecure in his or her coloured skin could read this as a White supremacist narrative.

George Monbiot's take on the film is more perceptive (Monbiot 2010). He describes the film as 'profound' because it is a metaphor for the American Holocaust, the worst genocide in human history, in which some 100 million indigenous people of the Americas and Caribbean were exterminated by European invaders. He notes that the Right hates *Avatar*, recognizing the subversive potential of a film which encourages its viewers to 'root for the defeat of American soldiers', and concludes that the film "speaks of a truth more important – and more dangerous – than those contained in a thousand arthouse movies." Yet he also describes the film as 'profoundly silly' because it has a happy ending which does not reflect the reality; and here, possibly, he may be wrong. At least, let us hope so, because the drama it depicts has not yet been played out.

As the recent UN Report on the State of the World's Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2010) reminds us, there are still 370 million indigenous people in the world, and many are still being subjected to displacement and dispossession, and suffer physical abuse, imprisonment, torture and even death if they try to assert their rights. Nowhere is this more true than in India's forest belt, where the Adivasis (indigenous people of India) are being displaced from their traditional habitats by the pursuit of 'development', of late driven mainly by commercial interests including mining. As an official report notes, 'As tribal areas are also rich in mineral resources, the mining projects proposed such as in Orissa, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh threaten the very existence of tribal people' (Government of India 2008: 15).

Indeed, the heart-breaking moment in *Avatar*, when the ancestral Hometree of the Na'vi is destroyed and many are killed while the rest are displaced, could well be a metaphor for what is happening in the state of Chhattisgarh in Central India, where the security forces of a fascist state government, together with a state-sponsored, largely tribal militia (Salwa Judum), have driven tens of thousands of Adivasis out of their villages and destroyed them. In the process, many have been injured, tortured, raped and killed. One non-tribal activist fighting against these injustices, renowned Dr

Binayak Sen, was arrested and kept behind bars for over two years on false charges (Wajihuddin 2009); another, Himanshu Kumar, had his Gandhian ashram destroyed, and has suffered continuous harassment (Gautam 2009). Journalists and human rights activists trying to investigate and report on the situation have been assaulted physically and kept out. Inordinate effort was needed to get Sodhi Sambho, a young Adivasi woman who was witness to a massacre, the medical treatment she needed for her bullet-shattered leg; yet even in hospital she remained a virtual captive of the state police, effectively cut off from journalists and even from her lawyer in the case pertaining to the massacre. Three other witnesses were detained by the police, who are the alleged perpetrators: the very opposite of a witness-protection programme (Jha 2010; Iqbal 2010; Sethi 2010).

Some Adivasis have joined the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (also known as 'Maoists' or 'Naxalites') in order to fight the state security forces, even though the goal of the CPI (Maoist) (capturing state power) and its methods (destruction of schools and infrastructure, recruitment of child soldiers, summary execution of those labelled as informers, etc.) are inimical to the welfare of the Adivasis and their own demands (Human Rights Watch 2008). The central government is supporting a military attack on the Maoists, despite the fact that many unaffiliated Adivasis will be caught in the crossfire, even though its own report (Government of India 2008) makes it clear that so long as unchecked violations of the legal and constitutional rights of Adivasis continue, they will continue to be pushed into the ranks of the Maoists. It is probably in recognition of this fact that the government is considering legislation that will restrict mining by private sector companies in tribal areas, and take into consideration constitutional provisions for the protection of tribal communities and their rights. Mining companies are already lobbying against this proposed restriction of their access to our earthly equivalents of unobtainium (Narayan 2010). Unless there is even stronger counter-lobbying by tribal rights, human rights and environmentalist groups, it is unlikely that this legislation will ever make it to the statute books. Poor implementation of the otherwise laudable Forest Rights Act (2007) demonstrates that pressure for implementation is equally important.

Similar events are occurring in other countries, and the bows and arrows of the indigenous people are as ineffective against the firepower of the invaders as they were in the time of Columbus. Yet they do have weapons that were not available

in 1492: legal and constitutional rights, environmental laws, international law, greater knowledge of the devastating environmental impact of deforestation and militarism, and modern information and communication technologies. Struggles in the real world are more complicated and messy than the clean-cut fight between good and evil in the world of *Avatar*: the invaders are not necessarily White; some of the indigenous people may collaborate with them, while others may join groups like the Maoists whose interests clash with their own; indigenous people belonging to different tribes may fight each other for control over the same territory; some tribal customs may be extremely oppressive, especially to women; for many indigenous people, their biggest problem may be the discrimination and exclusion they face in mainstream society; and all these actors have to share the same planet, in some cases the same country. But is it profoundly silly to think that the surviving indigenous people of the world can win sufficient control over their lives and habitats to secure freedom from poverty, indignity and violent abuse? The happy ending of *Avatar* encourages us to hope that it is not.

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ETERNAL MEMORY

For Eva Ramweera

Not event
 Became event
 Through your fertile mind
 Knit in phrases
 With deft hands,
 Exceptional your creations
 Like a war hero's.
 Unique the skill and power within
 To reach the intended goal,
 In no other but you alone
 Have I seen

Mala Dassanayake
 ('Translation')