

COLONIAL DOMINATION AND INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE IN AVATAR (2009): A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of colonial domination and indigenous resistance in Avatar through a postcolonial perspective. The film portrays the conflict between human colonizers and the Na'vi as a reflection of historical patterns of colonial expansion and resource exploitation. This research employs postcolonial theories proposed by Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to interpret the ideological structures embedded in the film. This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design. Data were collected through systematic observation and documentation of selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements that represent colonial practices and indigenous responses. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis by categorizing patterns of colonial discourse, resistance strategies, and hybridity. The findings are presented descriptively and interpreted based on postcolonial concepts. The analysis reveals that the human corporation represents colonial domination, economic exploitation, and cultural imperialism, while the Na'vi embody indigenous identity, ecological harmony, and collective resistance. Furthermore, the character of Jake Sully illustrates hybridity, as his transformation from a colonial agent into a member of the indigenous community challenges the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized. This study concludes that Avatar (2009) functions as a postcolonial narrative that critiques imperialist ideology and highlights the significance of indigenous resistance, cultural identity, and environmental balance in the context of colonial and neo-colonial practices.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Colonial Domination, Indigenous Resistance, Hybridity, Qualitative Film Analysis*

1. Introduction

Cinema has become one of the most influential cultural forms in the modern era, shaping public perceptions of history, identity, and social relations. Films not only reflect political and ideological conflicts but also construct

narratives that reinforce power relations and cultural hierarchies. Consequently, film studies have increasingly engaged with postcolonial theory to examine how colonial ideologies continue to influence representation, identity, and cultural discourse. Recent ecocritical studies

further show that cinematic narratives frequently link environmental destruction with colonial and capitalist exploitation, positioning ecological crises as extensions of imperial power structures (A. Nur Fikriyyah Fathinah, Asyrafunnisa, 2024)

Colonial ideology often portrays colonized communities as primitive or inferior in order to justify domination and resource exploitation. In film and literary texts, these hierarchies are commonly represented through conflicts between imperial forces and Indigenous communities are frequently positioned at the center of narratives involving environmental exploitation and cultural resistance (Dutta et al., 2025). In this context, *Avatar* presents a futuristic depiction of such dynamics through the corporate exploitation of indigenous land on the planet Pandora. The Resources Development Administration (RDA) functions as a dominant corporate entity that seeks to extract valuable natural resources from indigenous territory, thereby illustrating the intersection of environmental destruction and imperial domination (Lamsal & Pokharel, 2024). Beyond its technological achievements, the film foregrounds themes of cultural conflict, identity preservation, and resistance, emphasizing the struggle of indigenous communities to defend their land, traditions, and ecological values against external forces (Martin et al., 2025). Recent postcolonial scholarship has increasingly examined the intersection of colonialism and environmental crisis, emphasizing how indigenous land-based knowledge systems function not only as ecological alternatives but also as forms of resistance against settler colonial structures and extractive capitalism (Ranjan Datta & Acharibasam, 2025).

Although *Avatar* has been widely studied, most research focuses separately on environmental symbolism

or political critique. Few studies integrate colonial power, indigenous resistance, and hybrid identity within a unified analytical framework (George & V, 2024). A more integrated approach is therefore necessary to systematically connect representations of colonial power, indigenous resistance, and hybrid identity within a coherent postcolonial ecocritical framework, particularly by engaging recent scholarship (2023–2025) that examines the intersections of ecology and neo-colonial structures.

Therefore, this study analyzes colonial domination, indigenous resistance, and hybrid identity in *Avatar* through a postcolonial framework. The research addresses the following questions:

1. How is colonial domination constructed through the practices and ideology of the human corporation in the film?
2. What forms of resistance are employed by the Na'vi in response to colonial intrusion?
3. How does Jake Sully's transformation reflect the concept of hybridity in a postcolonial context?

This research interprets *Avatar* (2009) as a cinematic allegory of both classical colonial domination and contemporary neo-colonial exploitation. By applying postcolonial concepts such as orientalism, hybridity, and the subaltern, the study examines the ideological structures embedded in the conflict between humans and the Na'vi (Man, 2023), (Vipul & Nilima, 2025)

The novelty of this research lies in integrating classical postcolonial frameworks with recent discussions on environmental colonialism and Indigenous ecological knowledge, highlighting ecological resistance and relational environmental ethics within the film's narrative (Ranjan Datta & Acharibasam, 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Postcolonial Theory: Concepts of Power, Identity, and Resistance

Postcolonial theory examines the cultural, political, and ideological legacies of colonial domination and the ways these structures continue to shape representation, identity, and global power relations. Contemporary scholarship highlights its continued relevance in analyzing global media, transnational dynamics, and the persistence of neo-imperial power formations in the twenty-first century. (Sajed, 2024), (Prabhakar et al., 2025) In this context, postcolonial theory functions as a critical lens for interpreting asymmetrical power relations in cultural production.

This study specifically draws on the theoretical framework of Edward Said, particularly his concept of Orientalism. Said argues that Western discourse systematically constructs the “Other” as inferior, exotic, and culturally backward in order to justify domination. This perspective is especially relevant for analyzing *Avatar* (2009), where the Na’vi are represented through a lens that reflects both romanticization and marginalization, while human characters embody a rational, technologically advanced, and dominant worldview. By applying Said’s framework, this study critically examines how cinematic representation reproduces hierarchical distinctions between colonizer and colonized. This approach is widely applied in contemporary film studies to analyze how cinematic representation reproduces or challenges orientalist narratives within global media industries (Figueiredo, 2025).

Homi K. Bhabha further expanded postcolonial theory through the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space, which emphasize the instability of colonial authority.

Hybridity refers to the emergence of new cultural identities formed through colonial encounters, challenging rigid distinctions between colonizer and colonized. These hybrid identities disrupt hierarchical power relations and reveal the negotiated nature of cultural identity in global narratives.

Another important contribution comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak through the concept of the subaltern, referring to marginalized groups whose voices are excluded from dominant discourse. Contemporary research revisits this concept in relation to indigenous activism, environmental justice, and the representation of marginalized communities in media (Benjamin, 2025), (Panicker, 2024). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide an analytical foundation for examining power relations, cultural identity, and resistance within cinematic narratives.

2.2 Postcolonialism and Environmental Colonialism

Recent scholarship has increasingly explored the relationship between colonial power and environmental exploitation. This perspective, often referred to as postcolonial ecocriticism, examines how imperial expansion and extractive capitalism have historically relied on the exploitation of natural resources in colonized territories (Hussain, 2024) Colonial and neo-colonial practices frequently transform ecosystems into economic commodities while disrupting indigenous relationships with land and nature (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010).

In contemporary contexts, environmental colonialism often operates through multinational corporations that control natural resources and influence economic policies in developing regions, reproducing patterns of neo-colonial dependency within the global economy

(Nwosu, 2023),(Yange, 2024). Recent studies also emphasize the significance of indigenous ecological knowledge as an alternative framework that promotes sustainable environmental relationships and resists environmental dispossession (Rasmussen, 2023), (Sas et al., 2024). These perspectives highlight that environmental issues cannot be separated from colonial power structures and must be understood within broader debates on climate justice, land sovereignty, and ecological resistance (Dorji et al., 2024)

2.3 Postcolonial Film Studies

Film has become a significant medium for representing colonial encounters and cultural conflict, not only through historical narratives but also through speculative and fictional worlds. Postcolonial film studies examine how visual narratives reproduce, negotiate, or challenge colonial ideologies within global media culture. Contemporary scholarship suggests that cinema frequently reflects global power imbalances and cultural negotiations, making it an important site for postcolonial analysis(Kanojia, 2025),

Although *Avatar* (2009) is a fictional and futuristic narrative, its depiction of corporate expansion, resource extraction, and indigenous displacement closely parallels historical and contemporary forms of colonialism. As argued by Edward Said, colonial discourse operates through systems of representation that construct hierarchical distinctions between the colonizer and the colonized, regardless of whether these are grounded in real or imagined contexts. In this sense, fantasy settings do not weaken postcolonial analysis; rather, they provide a symbolic space in which colonial ideologies can be rearticulated, intensified, and critically examined.

Recent studies in postcolonial film criticism highlight three major themes: the representation of indigenous identity and resistance, critiques of corporate-driven environmental colonialism, and the emergence of hybrid cultural identities in globalized societies. These perspectives demonstrate that postcolonial cinema not only revisits historical colonialism but also engages with contemporary forms of neo-imperial power, even within speculative narratives.

2.4 Previous Studies on Avatar

Since its release, *Avatar* has attracted extensive scholarly attention. Early research primarily focused on the film's technological innovation and mythological narrative structure. However, recent studies increasingly examine its postcolonial dimensions, particularly the representation of indigenous resistance and ecological consciousness (Koh, 2023), (Hibatur Rahman, 2024).

Several scholars interpret the Na'vi as symbolic representations of colonized communities resisting territorial dispossession and cultural domination (Yosua Tunas Wicaksono, Daniel Ginting, 2023). Other studies analyze the Resources Development Administration (RDA) as a metaphor for corporate-driven environmental exploitation and global capitalist expansion (Hibatur Rahman, 2024).

Despite these contributions, most studies analyze environmental issues, indigenous identity, or hybridity separately. Few studies integrate these elements within a unified postcolonial analytical framework, indicating the need for a more comprehensive approach.

2.5 Research Gap and Novelty

Recent postcolonial scholarship has expanded beyond its traditional focus on cultural representation to

address environmental colonialism, indigenous epistemology, and global capitalism (Azam, Muhammad Afzal Arhamna, 2025). Scholars increasingly argue that colonial power operates simultaneously through ecological exploitation and epistemic marginalization (Nirjharinee, 2025)

Although *Avatar* has been widely analyzed, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus on environmental destruction without fully situating it within broader colonial power structures (Hibatur Rahman, 2024). Second, while the “white savior” narrative has been discussed, fewer analyses examine Jake Sully’s transformation through the lens of hybridity and the ambivalence of colonial identity (Andreas et al., 2024). Third, previous research often treats classical postcolonial theory and environmental postcolonialism as separate analytical frameworks.

Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in proposing an integrated analytical framework that synthesizes classical postcolonial concepts orientalism, hybridity, and the subaltern with contemporary debates on environmental colonialism and indigenous resistance (2023–2025). By integrating ecological critique with identity politics, this research demonstrates how cultural domination, environmental exploitation, and hybrid identity formation operate simultaneously within structures of neo-colonial power.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using a postcolonial critical approach. Qualitative research was selected because the object of analysis is a cultural text in the form of a film, which requires interpretative and contextual

examination rather than statistical measurement. Qualitative approaches are widely used in literary and film studies to explore symbolic meanings, ideological constructions, and representational politics within cultural texts (Nasta, 2025), (Kartikawati & Aryanto, 2023).

The analysis was guided by postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of Orientalism proposed by Edward Said, hybridity developed by Homi K. Bhabha, and subalternity articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. These theoretical perspectives were applied to examine how the film constructs colonial power, indigenous resistance, and hybrid identity. Contemporary postcolonial scholarship also supports the continued relevance of these classical concepts in analyzing neo-colonial capitalism and environmental imperialism in modern cultural texts (Siddiqui, 2024).

3.2 Research Object and Data Source

The primary data source of this research was the film *Avatar*. The film was selected purposively because it presents a clear narrative conflict between human colonizers and the indigenous Na’vi community, representing themes of territorial invasion, environmental exploitation, and cultural resistance. The data consisted of:

1. Dialogues revealing ideological assumptions and power hierarchies.
2. Narrative events depicting colonial expansion and indigenous resistance.
3. Visual symbols and cinematic imagery representing colonial ideology and ecological spirituality.
4. Character interactions illustrating identity transformation and cultural negotiation.

These elements were treated as textual data within the interpretative tradition of film studies, which views cinema as a narrative discourse open to critical analysis (Bahafid, 2025).

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through close viewing and systematic documentation. Close viewing is a qualitative strategy commonly used in film analysis to examine narrative structure, visual symbolism, and ideological representation in depth (Yunus & Aswar, 2024),

The data collection process involved several steps:

1. Repeated viewing of the film to understand narrative structure and character development.
2. Scene identification, focusing on sequences related to colonial domination, indigenous resistance, and identity transformation.
3. Transcription and description, in which relevant dialogues were transcribed and significant visual elements were documented.
4. Thematic coding, where selected data were categorized according to the postcolonial concepts of orientalism, hybridity, and subalternity.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis within a postcolonial framework. This method systematically examines textual and visual materials to identify patterns of meaning, ideological structures, and representational politics within cultural texts (Fazeli et al., 2023).

The analysis followed three main stages:

1. Data selection, focusing on scenes and dialogues related to colonial power, indigenous resistance, and hybrid identity.

2. Theoretical coding, where the data were categorized according to key postcolonial concepts orientalism, hybridity, and subalternity.
3. Interpretative analysis, examining how narrative structure, character positioning, and visual imagery construct colonial discourse and resistance.
4. The findings are presented thematically, focusing on how cinematic representations in *Avatar* (2009) illustrate key dimensions of colonial domination, neo-colonial capitalism, and environmental imperialism. The analysis highlights specific scenes, dialogues, and visual symbols that demonstrate the practices of resource extraction, the marginalization of the Na'vi, and the ecological consequences of corporate expansion.

3.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility of the analysis, several strategies were applied. First, repeated close viewing of the film was conducted to ensure comprehensive understanding of narrative development and visual symbolism. Second, theoretical triangulation was employed by applying multiple postcolonial concepts orientalism, hybridity, and subalternity to interpret the same data from different analytical perspectives. Third, the interpretation was grounded in recent scholarly discourse (2023–2025) to maintain conceptual relevance and theoretical rigor.

These procedures ensure methodological transparency and strengthen the reliability of the research findings.

4. Result and Discussion

This study analyzes how the film *Avatar* represents colonial power,

indigenous resistance, and identity transformation using a postcolonial analytical framework. The findings indicate that colonial domination in the film operates through interconnected mechanisms of military control, economic exploitation, ideological discourse, and ecological domination. At the same time, indigenous identity is portrayed not merely as a cultural category but as a form of political and ecological resistance. Through the concepts of Orientalism, hybridity, and subalternity, the film simultaneously reproduces and critiques colonial ideology within a contemporary context shaped by global capitalism.

4.1 Representation of Colonial Power

Colonial authority in *Avatar* (2009) is represented by the Resources Development Administration (RDA), a powerful transnational corporation responsible for extracting the valuable mineral unobtainium from Pandora. Unlike classical colonial regimes based on territorial expansion by nation-states, the RDA reflects a contemporary form of corporate imperialism driven by economic profit, technological superiority, and militarized control. This is explicitly articulated by Colonel Quaritch when he describes Pandora as a hostile frontier and frames the Na'vi as obstacles to resource extraction, stating that they are “hostile” and must be controlled to secure corporate interests. This dialogue reinforces the normalization of military intervention as a necessary tool for economic expansion.

The discourse used by the colonizers closely resembles historical colonial narratives. The Na'vi are repeatedly constructed as primitive and irrational, as seen when Parker Selfridge refers to their land primarily in terms of the economic value of unobtainium, reducing indigenous space to a commodity. Such representations

correspond with the framework of Edward Said, in which colonized societies are positioned as inferior “Others” to legitimize domination. The film visually reinforces this hierarchy through contrasts between the technologically advanced human base and the organic, nature-based environment of the Na'vi, emphasizing a binary opposition between “civilized” and “primitive.”

Colonial power in the film operates through three interrelated dimensions: military domination, economic exploitation, and ideological superiority. Military domination is evident in the violent destruction of the Hometree, a pivotal scene that symbolizes the forced displacement of the Na'vi. Economic exploitation is reflected in the prioritization of unobtainium extraction over indigenous rights and ecological balance. Ideological superiority is embedded in the colonizers' belief in their right to control and “develop” Pandora. Through these mechanisms, the RDA embodies a form of neo-colonial corporate power that reproduces patterns of exploitation and displacement within contemporary global capitalism.

4.2 The Na'vi as Indigenous Subjects

The Na'vi are portrayed as an indigenous community whose identity is inseparable from the ecological and spiritual landscape of Pandora. Their cosmology emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between humans, nature, and the sacred network embodied by Eywa. This worldview contrasts sharply with the mechanized and industrial logic of the human colonizers, reflecting what Edward Said describes as a binary opposition between the “civilized” West and the “primitive” Other, a distinction that sustains colonial hierarchies through cultural representation. The Na'vi's ecological and spiritual connection to Pandora is constructed in opposition to

the exploitative, profit-driven logic of the human corporation, reinforcing this ideological divide.

However, this representation also contains a degree of ambivalence. While the Na'vi are depicted as environmentally harmonious and spiritually connected to nature, such portrayals risk reproducing the colonial trope of the “noble savage,” in which indigenous communities are romanticized as pure yet culturally static (Said, 1978). This tension reflects what Homi K. Bhabha identifies as ambivalence in colonial discourse, where admiration and domination coexist, producing unstable and contradictory representations of the colonized subject.

Despite this potential romanticization, the Na'vi are not presented as passive victims. They actively defend their territory, maintain cultural practices, and organize collective resistance against colonial aggression. This active resistance complicates Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, which questions whether marginalized groups can fully “speak” within dominant power structures. Although the Na'vi possess narrative voice and visible agency, their struggle gains broader recognition largely through the mediation of Jake Sully, thereby creating tension between indigenous autonomy and narrative centralization (Spivak, 1988).

4.3 Jake Sully and Hybrid Identity

Jake Sully represents hybridity, a key concept in Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. Hybridity refers to the emergence of new cultural identities within the “third space,” where colonial boundaries between colonizer and colonized become unstable.

Initially, Jake Sully functions as a colonial agent working for the RDA, tasked with gathering intelligence to

facilitate resource extraction in *Avatar* (2009). This role is explicitly reinforced when Colonel Quaritch assigns him to “gain the trust of the natives,” positioning Jake as an instrument of colonial control. However, through his avatar body, Jake gradually occupies a liminal position between human and Na'vi identities. His immersion in Na'vi culture—particularly his initiation into their social and spiritual practices under Neytiri's guidance—illustrates a process of cultural negotiation and identity transformation.

This transformation can be understood through the concept of hybridity proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, particularly the notion of the “third space,” where fixed identities are destabilized and new cultural meanings emerge (Bhabha, 1994). Jake's shifting allegiance disrupts the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, suggesting that identity is fluid and constructed through interaction.

However, this hybridity remains ambivalent. Jake ultimately becomes the central military leader in the Na'vi resistance, most notably during the climactic battle in which he coordinates the unified attack against human forces. This narrative development reflects the “white savior” trope, in which liberation is mediated through an external figure rather than emerging solely from indigenous agency (Hughey, 2014). As a result, while hybridity challenges colonial hierarchy, it simultaneously risks reproducing forms of narrative centralization that privilege the outsider's role.

4.4 Indigenous Resistance

The film presents indigenous resistance as a multidimensional struggle encompassing physical, cultural, and ecological dimensions. Physical resistance is most clearly represented in the armed confrontation between the Na'vi and the human

military forces, particularly in the destruction of Hometree, which becomes a turning point that galvanizes collective resistance. Despite their technological disadvantage, the Na'vi mobilize inter-tribal alliances and strategic knowledge of their environment to resist colonial aggression.

Cultural resistance is expressed through the preservation of ritual practices, communal structures, and spiritual beliefs centered on Eywa. Scenes depicting the Tree of Souls, for instance, emphasize a collective epistemology grounded in relationality and ecological balance, which contrasts with the instrumental rationality of the colonizers. This aligns with postcolonial critiques of epistemic dominance, where indigenous knowledge systems function as forms of resistance against colonial modes of thinking.

Ecological resistance constitutes the most distinctive aspect of the narrative. The interconnected ecosystem of Pandora actively responds to the Na'vi's struggle, most notably when wildlife joins the battle against human forces. This representation reinforces the idea that resistance extends beyond human agency to include environmental and spiritual dimensions, positioning ecology as an active participant in opposing colonial exploitation.

4.5 Neo-Colonialism and Corporate Imperialism

Another significant theme in *Avatar* (2009) is the portrayal of colonialism as a corporate enterprise. The Resources Development Administration (RDA) embodies a form of neo-colonial domination in which multinational corporations replace traditional colonial states as agents of exploitation. This dynamic is explicitly articulated by Parker Selfridge, who prioritizes the economic value of unobtainium over indigenous land, stating that the Na'vi are "sitting on"

valuable resources, thereby reducing their territory to a site of extraction. Such discourse reflects what Edward Said identifies as the construction of colonized space as an object of economic and ideological control.

Within this framework, indigenous land is commodified, sacred spaces are transformed into exploitable assets, and ecological systems are treated as instruments of profit. The destruction of Hometree serves as a key visual and narrative example, symbolizing the forced displacement of indigenous communities for corporate gain. This representation parallels contemporary discussions in postcolonial film studies, which argue that cinema frequently reproduces and critiques global power asymmetries and neo-imperial structures within modern media industries (Kanojia, 2025)

Thus, the film functions as a cinematic critique of corporate imperialism, revealing how economic power reproduces colonial hierarchies and environmental injustice in the contemporary world. Recent scholarship further emphasizes that postcolonial cinema engages with transnational dynamics and evolving forms of cultural domination, highlighting the continuity between classical colonialism and modern global capitalism (Man, 2023)

4.6 Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that *Avatar* (2009) constructs a complex representation of colonial domination, indigenous resistance, and hybrid identity within a framework of corporate imperialism. The exploitation of Pandora reflects orientalist discourse and economic expansion, while the Na'vi embody subaltern agency through cultural preservation, ecological resistance, and collective action. Jake Sully's transformation illustrates hybridity

within the colonial contact zone, consistent with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," where identities are negotiated and reconfigured. At the same time, his central role in the climactic battle introduces the "white savior" tension, indicating that hybridity can both challenge and reproduce structures of dominance. Taken together, these elements position the film as a symbolic critique of neo-colonial capitalism and environmental exploitation, underscoring the continued relevance of postcolonial analysis for interpreting contemporary global media narratives.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that *Avatar* (2009) functions as a contemporary postcolonial allegory that critiques corporate imperialism and environmental exploitation. The Resources Development Administration (RDA) represents a form of neo-colonial power driven by economic interests, technological domination, and resource extraction, while the Na'vi embody indigenous resistance grounded in ecological spirituality and collective identity. The findings further demonstrate that colonial domination in the film operates through military control, economic exploitation, and ideological construction, whereas resistance is expressed through cultural preservation, ecological interconnectedness, and collective action. In addition, Jake Sully's transformation reflects the ambivalent nature of hybridity within colonial encounters, illustrating both the potential for cultural negotiation and the persistence of narrative hierarchies in which liberation is mediated through an outsider figure.

However, this study is limited by its focus on a single film and its reliance on qualitative textual analysis, which

may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to examine a broader range of films within the *Avatar* franchise or other postcolonial cinematic texts to provide comparative insights. Further studies may also incorporate audience reception analysis or interdisciplinary approaches to explore how postcolonial themes are interpreted across different cultural contexts. By integrating key postcolonial concepts orientalism, hybridity, and subalternity with contemporary discussions of environmental colonialism, this study emphasizes that struggles over land, identity, and ecological survival remain central in understanding ongoing forms of global inequality and cultural representation.

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