MYTHIC ENCOUNTER OF SCIENCE WITH THE SACRED: VEDANTIC CYBORGS AND THE POSTMODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Philosophy is an attempt to see through the world and arrive at a greater understanding of the nature of reality i.e. to satisfy man’s desire for knowledge and aesthetics through the study of art attempts to reveal man’s such acquired knowledge and understanding in front of the world. Philosophical speculations of the highest order often find natural manifestation and greater fulfillment in Aesthetic representation or to put it the other way Aesthetic representation of the highest magnitude often is a natural manifestation of the artists’ deep understanding of the philosophy of life and the nature of reality. The case which I thus build is that; as with any other art form so with the films taken up for study namely Avatar and The Day the Earth Stood Still, the films are not merely experiments in Aesthetics but also happen to be the solid attempts to reflect upon the true meaning of life in light of the Vedantic or the Upanishadic Philosophy and thus enhance our understanding of the true nature of reality in an attempt to give us a new direction to think and ponder upon. In this paper I have attempted to study the above-stated films carefully and arrived at the conclusion that they very markedly suggest and highlight the fact that we are now moving towards a new phase of civilisation where the amalgamation of the east and the west is being looked forward to with hope; in an attempt to bring about the restoration of faith in the meaning of life and existence.

Key Words: Upanishadic Philosophy, Science Fiction Films, Science And Technology, Detachment, Knowledge, Bliss

Affinities and correspondences between the eastern and the western world, ancient and the modern world has been a phenomenon consistent throughout the history of civilization; for artists and scholars, since ages, have been turning all around for inspiration and understanding; and, therefore, it is no wonder that we find affinities and correspondences between the Vedantic Philosophy of the east and many of the contemporary postmodern science fiction films of the west like The Matrix Trilogy, Inception, Avatar, The Day the Earth Stood Still, Minority Report and so on and so forth. But what is significantly remarkable in this regard is the fact that this affinity and correspondence displays a much more deeper understanding, a much more deeper faith into the Vedantic Philosophy and with such power, that it forces us to reconsider and try to see for ourselves afresh in new light for if the consideration that films are a reflection of our own society is taken to be true then
they mark the beginning of a new age in the history of civilization.

Avatar is a science fiction film written and directed by James Cameron, set in the year 2154 on Pandora, a fictional Earth-like moon in a distant planetary system. Humans, in the film, are engaged in mining Pandora’s reserves of a precious mineral known as Unobtanium, while the Na’vi — the sapient and sentient race of humanoids indigenous to the moon — resist the colonists’ expansion, which threatens the continued existence of the Na’vi and the Pandoran ecosystem. The film’s title refers to the remotely controlled, genetically engineered human-Na’vi bodies, which may be understood as cyborgs (cybernetic organisms) used by the film’s human characters to interact with the indigenous population. Jake Sully one such Cyborg goes to the Na’vi people or Omaticayans and through them learns the true meaning and significance of life. Spiritually transformed Jake Sully helps the Na’vi’s to save their land but is fatally wounded. Na’vi’s restore life in his genetically engineered body and thus a real Avatar comes alive revealing the secret power of nature and strength of faith, hope and compassion in life. The films indigenous people and Humanoid Avatars not only draw their color of skin from Indian Avataar Krishna as revealed by James Cameron himself in an interview given to Koel Purie Rinchet of India Today but also seem to have taken inspiration from the Vedantic philosophy of life.

In The Day the Earth Stood Still (2008) (the contemporary reinvention of the 1951 science fiction classic of the same name), directed by Scott Derrickson, a renowned scientist Dr. Helen Benson finds herself face to face with an alien called Klaatu, an emotionless extraterrestrial, who travels across the universe to warn of an impending global crisis. When forces beyond Helen's control treat the extraterrestrial as a hostile and deny his request to address the world's leaders, she and her estranged stepson Jacob quickly discover the deadly ramifications of Klaatu's claim that he is "a friend to the Earth." which means they are to end the race of mankind. Helen tries to convince Klaatu that mankind is worth saving and that mankind is capable of changing and therefore must be given its own chance to change itself by making him understand the fact that it is only in the moments of crisis that change is possible and that as it is a moment of crisis probably mankind would change for better. Although it is already a bit late but Klaatu succeeds in deactivating the mechanical swarm which was engulfing the humans and their creations into it, and the giant sphere in which he and his robot had come; leaves the Earth with the hope that we the mankind would change in time for better. Klaatu’s philosophy completely resembles the philosophy of life as specified in the Upanisads.

Upanisad are the highest and the purest expression of the speculative thought of the Indian philosophy. The Upanisad emphasize the importance of the union of the contemplative and the active life for ascending the heights of contemplation where we develop a sort of calm, stable and poise. Upanisadic philosophy very emphatically reveals upon us the proposition that all things have come out of one and the same Universal soul. This Universal soul has been defined as the ‘anand rupam’ where anand is defined as the state of bliss. The realization of the existence of this bliss, which is the same in all of us, takes us to the state of transcendental, eternal, infinite or for that matter deathless joy. That all things come from the anand can be understood from the situation that even in our daily life in spite of all complications, confrontations and contradictions the joy of life always remains.

In the film The Day The Earth Stood Still we find that the human civilization has reached a state where they are straightaway heading towards a calamity or disaster; a disaster which is self-inflicted and we see another civilization, a superior one coming from the space to rescue earth and life forms available on it from human beings. What is important here is the fact that possibly now we have reached that stage of scientific and technological advancement where we have become slaves in its hand and we ourselves are completely incapable of checking our steps to save us and the Earth. Since we have lost faith in ourselves and therefore it is only some external force or some Avataraar, some divine intervention which can possibly take us in the right direction. So the need of the hour is that
Avatar which Lord Krishna talks about to Arjuna in The Bhagavadgita in the following sloka:

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिभवति भारत।
अभुधानमोक्षस्य तदात्मानं सृजायतम्॥17॥

(whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bhārata) then I send forth (create incarnation) Myself (The Bhagavadgita, 178)

Klaatu can be compared to Avatara for like Ram and Krishna his skills and understanding of life are also far superior to that of all the human inhabitants of the earth and many times also beyond their comprehension. Klaatu too like Avatar has come on earth to save it and is finally in a position to save the earth and the mankind from disaster. Klaatu seems to be a postmodern Avatar coming from a hybrid civilization which puts forth a combination of the highest level of both philosophy of life and technological advancement in it. Klaatu’s emotionless disposition has been questioned by many of the unsympathetic western critics. Klaatu’s observation of reality is the cause of our suffering and bondage (unending cycle of birth and rebirth) and liberation from these cannot be achieved without the knowledge of reality. Klaatu’s dialogues throughout the film represent in themselves the highest ideals the philosophy of life as manifested in The Bhagavadgita and Upaniṣads. For instance, let us observe the following dialogue between the officers and Klaatu in the very beginning of the film when the officers are interrogating him to find out reasons of his arrival on earth:

Are you human?

My body is.

Do you feel pain?

My body does. ( The Day The Earth Stood Still 38:54 – 39:06)

What is highlighted here is the fact that ‘I am not the body’ a concept which is very deeply rooted in all our Vedas and Upanishads. Dr. S Radhakrishnan in Principal Upaniṣads while reflecting upon the skill, the depth and maturity of mind of the Upaniṣadic seers observes that “we cannot help being impressed by the exceptional ability, earnestness and ripeness of mind” (preface PU pg 6) of them all. If we go thoroughly through all the dialogues of Klaatu then we find that the observation of Radhakrishnan perfectly applies to the civilisation of Klaatu; for the civilization, Klaatu is representative of reflects and reveals the highest ideals of a civilization represented in nothing less...
than the Vedas and the Upanishads. In fact, Klaatu and his people seem nothing but the postmodern reincarnation of the Vedic or, for that matter, Upanishadic seers. A similar instance can also be seen in the film *Avatar* where while acquiring teaching from Neytiri and while practising to hunt Jake Sully in Na’vi language observes (English translation of the same is given through the subtitles):

**JAKE**

(Na’vi)

I See you Brother, and thank you. Your spirit goes with Eywa, your body stays behind to become part of the People. *(Avatar 1:04:43 – 1:05:00)*

This thought of the eternal self that he is not slain when the body is slain corresponds to and is beautifully enumerated in the following shlok from *Katha Upanishad*:

![Shlok from Katha Upanishad](image)

(The knowing self is never born; nor does he die at any tune He sprang from nothing and nothing sprang from him He is unborn, eternal, abiding and primeval He is not slain when the body is slain) *(Principal Upanishad, 610)*

Great parallels are also evidently found between the story of Nachiketa from *Katha Katha* and the film *Avatar*. As Nachiketa is banished from the comfortable home of his father to the abode of Yama, the god of death, a design which he never was aware of so we find Jake Sully a warrior having nothing to do with science landing on Pandora (because of the sudden death of his scientist brother) and going to the people of Omaticaya which also means just like going to the abode of death as evident from the following dialogue between Trudy and Grace when Jake is left all alone in the forest for the first time:

**TRUDY**

Sorry, Doc. He’s just gonna have to hang on ‘till morning.

**GRACE**

He’s not going to make it till morning. *(33:16-33:23)*

Nachiketa reaches Yama, when *Shradhha bhava* is aroused in him to learn true knowledge so, we find that Jake Sully in the film also goes to the Omaticayan people to acquire knowledge, although initially his motif is to acquire the knowledge of their ways so that he would be in a position to communicate with them to negotiate their exit from the place but later on he abandons the idea and heads forward to achieve that which may be understood as real, profound, metaphysical knowledge about the secret workings of nature. To attain self-realization, knowledge first one must be ready, one must be empty of desires so Yama before giving knowledge to Nachiketa, tests him whether he is ready similarly, in the film, as elaborated earlier, Tsahik tests Jake Sully to find out whether he is worthy of being taught, the dialogue which follows this conversation is highly important in this regard:

**MO'AT**

Why did you come to us?

**JAKE**

I came to learn.

**MO'AT**

We have tried to teach other Sky People. It is hard to fill a cup which is already full. *(46:02-46:15)*

Ignorance, pride, and ambition amount to insanity and these must be cured if some learning has to take place. And same is seen happening with Nachiketa as when Nachiketa in the third boon ask Yama to instruct him about the ultimate knowledge, about the ways to conquer re-death; Yama, in order to test his worthiness, proposes to offer him great wealth, long life and all worldly desires:
Thus, Nachiketa has already attained the knowledge which many mortal men fail to see as Yama observes. Nachiketa would not accept the worldly affluence for he already has attained the knowledge that this worldly wealth is transitory in nature and therefore he says:

(Whatever desires are hard to attain in this world of mortals, ask for all those desires at thy will. Here are noble maidens with chariots and musical instruments the like of them cannot be won by men. Be served by these whom I give to thee. O Naciketas, (pray) ask not about death.) (Principal Upanishad, 605)

Yama is pleased with the answer and offers to teach him the ultimate knowledge. After finding Jake Sully worthy Tsahi says 'Learn well, Jake Sully. We will see if your insanity can be cured.' The following shloka from The Bhagavadgita is worth quoting as it explains how all the sins of a sinner are forgotten if he starts to undergo tapas to know the supreme:

(He who knows Me, the unborn, without beginning, also the mighty lord of the worlds, he, among mortals is undeluded and freed from all sins) (Tht Bhagavadgita, 304)

Yama before teaching his able disciple Nachiketa informs him that the real knowledge about the supreme can only be given by one who has seen God, knows the God. Yama warns him that you can never reach the ultimate knowledge unless and until you are taught by the right person.
of forest. And so tells Jake Sully in the following dialogues:

NEYTIRI

That is shahayulu -- the bond. Feel her
Feel her heartbeat, her breath. Feel her strong legs. (52:45 – 53:05 )

There is a way through which we can make connection with all living things because inside we are one having same consciousness running. And therefore Neytiri insists that for the bond, the connection and firm understanding to develop it is important that the soul or the thing should also choose you as you chose it, the philosophy behind it can be understood by the following shloka of Katha Upanishad:

न मेधया न बहुना श्वेतो ।
यमेवेष वृणुतेतन लघ: स्वतः आत्मा
विबृणुतेतनू स्वाम ॥ 1.2.23॥
(This self cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing. He is to be attained only by the one whom the (self) chooses. To such a one the self reveals his own nature) (Principal Upanishad, 619)

As ignorance and wisdom both lead to divergent paths those who are subjected to ignorance are detracted by worldly desires just like Quaritch and Selfridge but those who are guided by wisdom are never blinded by material acquisitions. Like Nachiketa, in the film, Grace and Jake Sully are guided by that wisdom which is vividly depicted in the following shloka of Katha Upanishad:

स लं प्रविष्टप्रवेशः कामानू
अभिभवान्निविशेषः।
नैथा सृजना विनम्रीविवातो यथा मजजित्वत् बहुवाचारः।।1.2.२३॥
(But) thou, O Naciketas, hast rejected (after) examining, the desires that are pleasant and seem to be pleasing. Thou hast not taken to the way of wealth, where many mortals sink (to ruin).} (Principal Upanishad, 609)

And, therefore, they succeed in attaining knowledge finally when they are ready for it. When Jake Sully acquires true knowledge guided by Neytiri of the woods and Ewya then he comes to see the artificiality of his life in the shuttle or the other world and not only rejects the captains offer of transplanting his legs, without a second thought, but also becomes ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of the people of Na’vi. Nachiketa out of compassion sacrifices his life for the sake of his father so we find Jake Sully putting his life at stake for the purpose of people of Na’vi. When Tsahik explains the concept of Ewya, the tree of souls, to Jake sully the description which follows corresponds to the description of the supreme consciousness mentioned in Vedas, Upanisads and The Bhagavadgita:

As we move further in the film we see that as Yama is impressed by Nachiketa in Katha Upanishad so is Neytiri impressed by Jake Sully so much so that she chooses Jake Sully as her soul mate. While Jake Sully is learning the ways of living of Na’vi to become a part of their people in a voice-over he says:

JAKE (V.O.)

Trying to understand this deep connection, the People have to the forest.

They see a network of energy that flows through all living things. She says that all energy is only borrowed--

and one day you have to give it back. (1:04:00- 1:04:20)

Thus establishing the exact thought quoted in the following shloka of the Isā Upanishad which explains that he who sees the essential unity amongst himself and all the creatures of the world is
the only one who would be in a position to see the ultimate truth and therefore would be experiencing that which can be termed as bliss, as is experienced by Dr. Grace and Jake Sully in the film Avatar.

Avatar as a film significantly displays two things, first that appearances might be misleading and second that Human beings added by will power and self-realisation have limitless potential. So the weakest of the lot of these mechanic men or cyborgs prove to be the strongest bet and the most inaccessible primitive native beasts turn out to be the ones too full of the milk of kindness, capable of seeing harmonies in all living beings and the entire universe/nature. These people are free from all evil which was inflicted on the human beings in the name of civilization. They eat, sleep, walk and behave like primitive men, very pure in form and its manifestation assimilating well with nature. Na’vi might also mean “new” because these people bring in the concept which is new. The philosophy is new obviously to the people of west but it is strangely familiar to us the Indians for we find the philosophy of this race (Na’vi) at the root of our own civilization. Who not only worship trees but see many of them as being capable of giving power and life and have deeper connection with higher soul. The reason behind the natives being on Pandora is because the pure life is not possible on Earth any more. The name of the metal is Unobtanium that which cannot be obtained and these indigenous are standing on all knowledge which cannot be obtained by human mind. The natives keeps on repeats a particular sentence while greeting each other and that is I see you. This seeing is not just in physical sense rather the deep connection they have among themselves, through which the realization of bhraman, of the essential oneness is established. In a dialogue Neytiri says to Jake sully that ‘No one can teach you to See.’ As self realizations can only occur by oneself people can just tell the path but the follower has to arrive at a universal understanding. And as Jake sully arrives at the realization of the essential oneness through his elevation from personal consciousness to super consciousness the seeds of the sacred tree, very pure spirit choose Jake Sully which also symbolizes the fact Jake Sully is a very pure spirit even Neytiri refers to him like a child.(NEYTIIRI -But stupid! Ignorant like a child!) Free from the lust, greed, adulthood and therefore is the one who succeeds and not any other of his crew members. The seed are reflective of the spirit which comes from the supreme consciousness. Ways of the supreme consciousness are beyond human comprehension and therefore we find Grace saying:

GRACE
(to Jake, getting serious) For reasons I cannot fathom, the Omaticaya have chosen you. God help us all. (49:17-49:23)
Ewya is their goddess made up of all living things, everything they know.
NORM
Who’s Eywa? Oh, only their deity. The Great Mother. The goddess made up of all living things. You’d know that if you had any training whatsoever. (51:27-51:37)
Ewyas is to the inhabitant of Na’vi what supreme consciousness is to us (param brahma) made up of everything:

गतिर्भारते प्रभुः साक्षी निवासः शरण सुहृतः।
प्रभवः प्रलयः स्थानं निधानं बीजमययम्।। (The Bhagavadgita, 9.18)

[(I am) the goal, the upholder, the lord, the witness, the abode, the refuge and the friend. (I am) the origin and the dissolution, the ground, the resting place and the imperishable seed.]

It is there only deity which protects the balance as said Neytiri to Jack Sully in the following dialogue

NEYTIRI
Our Great Mother does not take sides Jake.
She protects only the balance of life.(2:09:29 – 2:09:39)

This dialogue finds its exact parallel in the following shlok of The Bhagavatgita

उद्वाहः सर्व एवं जान्य स्वर्गः सर्वमेवः गतम् वा
आशिष्कः स हि तु भक्ताः मानवतुमाः गतिम वायुः। (The Bhagavadgita, 259)

(Noble indeed are all these but the sage, I hold, is verily myself. For being perfectly harmonised, he resorts to me alone as the highest goal) (The Bhagavadgita, 259)

The films taken up for study significantly highlight the fact that while we look at the world of science and technology with pride, awe, wonder and amazement but at the same time are also intimidated by it. The films mock at our scientific endeavor by presenting before us the highest levels of technological advancement and making them seem too small by significantly highlighting the fact that somehow all technological process, all material knowledge and all science cannot afford us true and lasting happiness i.e. the real happiness and can be understood only as the brahmananda. The films bank upon the gap which we are now feeling in almost everything we are working upon; as if we are nowhere near that which we actually are longing for. The obvious question which is in front of us then is; what is it that we are looking for? What is it that we aspire for, if all the comforts and luxuries of life make us only feel dull? What is it that would give us strength if all the power and weapons make us only feel more weak and miserable? The obvious answer to this proposition would be that we don’t feel satisfied because our problems simply are not physical or material. Problems of human beings cannot be quantified in material terms. It is when we turn to the ancients that we realize that the problems rather are metaphysical and spiritual. And because the metaphysical and the spiritual are way above the domain of the physical sciences; the realization dawns upon us that the science and technology can never supply apt answers to our problems because it fails to express all our needs. Till we remain ignorant about the spiritual needs of the humans, till we keep on denying the existence of our soul i.e the universal soul for that matter we would remain clueless about everything and therefore would remain in disgust. Such understanding is obviously a result of the true understanding of the Upanishadic philosophy and therefore the films displaying the same mark a new beginning in the history of civilization.

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