

A View of Declining of Christianity in America through *Avatar* Movie: A Semiotic Approach

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Abstract

This study delves into the pivotal role of religion in shaping the American narrative, emphasizing the waning influence of Christianity. Originating from the historical context of the Puritans' break from the Church of England to purify their faith, Christianity has experienced significant shifts in prevalence among Americans. While it was once a ubiquitous identity, recent trends indicate a decline, with approximately two-thirds of adults now identifying as Christians. This evolving religious landscape has become a matter of concern for Americans, influencing various literary works. Notably, the *Avatar* film series, encompassing *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water*, subtly addresses issues of religious beliefs. Despite the less overt exploration of religious themes, the presence of a Great Mother figure in the narratives suggests a persistent inclination toward supernatural beliefs. Employing a descriptive qualitative method and specifically utilizing conceptual and associative meanings in the semiotic approach, this study analyzes the nuanced portrayal of Christianity's decline in America within the context of the *Avatar* film series.

Keywords: Associative meaning, Christianity, conceptual meaning, semantics

Introduction

American Puritanism referred to a reform movement within the Church of England that profoundly influenced the social, political, ethical, and theological ideologies of Americans (Miller, 1982). Upon their arrival in America, early colonial writers envisioned transforming the rugged and desolate wilderness, inhabited by wild beasts and indigenous people, into a "city upon a hill" that would capture the attention of all. This vision, articulated by John Winthrop in his lecture "A Model of Christian Charity" in 1630, drew inspiration from Matthew's Gospel, emphasizing the visibility of a city on a hill. This biblical reference became a symbolic representation of the American dream, embodying concepts of mobility, equality, and freedom. The Puritans, adhering to a Christianity that emphasized salvation as a divine privilege, believed in God's sovereignty to choose those destined for salvation and bestow irresistible grace (Purnama & Pursubaryanto, 2018). To achieve this, individuals were required to live according to God's Word, engage in good deeds, and continually confess sins to receive divine grace. Essentially, Puritans advocated for a humble and obedient life, striving to purify their existence in alignment with God's teachings.

Alexis de Tocqueville argued that American democracy was significantly shaped by the hardworking, egalitarian, and studious Pilgrims, who believed in placing their lives in God's hands. The way the Puritans organized their churches without a rigid hierarchy contributed to the formation of later American democracy, as evidenced in the Declaration of Independence, which declared equality and unalienable rights for all.

Beyond democracy, Puritanism laid the foundation for American individualism, a core value deeply rooted in early American Puritan beliefs (Miller, 1982). The Puritans emphasized a personal relationship with God, rejecting the hierarchical structure of Roman Catholicism. This fostered a sense of personal freedom and independence, with individuals viewing themselves as directly connected to God, eliminating the need for intermediaries like the Pope.

Moreover, the concept of wealth in Puritanism revolved around the belief that acquiring wealth through hard work was a sign of God's favor and a means to please Him. The Puritan work ethic, driven by the doctrine of predestination, led to a belief that hard work honored God and would result in a prosperous reward. This work ethic played a role in the rapid development of American capitalism (Xiaoyun, 2023). While Christianity has historically been at the forefront of American political and social discourse, recent research indicates a decline in religiosity. The percentage of Christians in the U.S. has decreased over the past few decades, with a growing number identifying as religiously unaffiliated. This shift is observed across various demographic groups and regions. Literature reflects this declining trend in Christianity, with authors like Barbara Kingsolver, Marilynne Robinson, Ishmael Reed, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Philip Roth critiquing conservative Christian politics in their works .

This article applied *Avatar* film. Released in 2022, "Avatar: The Way of Water" is an epic American science fiction film directed and co-produced by James Cameron. Serving as a sequel to the 2009 hit *Avatar*, the movie follows the blue-skinned Na'vi, Jake Sully, and his family seeking refuge with the aquatic Metkayina clan on Pandora. The *Avatar* film depicts the aftermath of the Na'vi's triumph over the Resources Development Administration (RDA) on Pandora, with Jake Sully, now chief of the Omatikaya clan, facing new threats as the RDA, led by Frances Ardmore, seeks to colonize once again. The use of Quaritch's Recombinants, Na'vi avatars containing memories of deceased soldiers, becomes a pivotal element. In response to the capture of Jake's children during a guerilla campaign, he relocates his family to the Metkayina clan near Pandora's eastern sea. Tensions within the family and the alliance between Quaritch and the RDA lead to raids and massacres, culminating in a climactic battle between the Metkayina and humans. The film explores losses, sacrifices, and the resolve to persist in opposing the RDA. The article also draws parallels between this societal shift and the themes depicted in films like "Avatar" and "Avatar: The Way of Water," exploring the worship of a Great Mother and the pantheistic beliefs of the Na'vi as potential reflections of the declining influence of Christianity in America.

Theory and Method

This research employs semiotic theories to uncover the link between the presence of Eywa, also recognized as the All-Mother or Great Mother, and the acknowledgment of the decline in religious fervor in America. Eywa serves as the biological sentient guiding force of life and stands as the sole deity known to the Na'vi people. According to Griffiths (2006, p.15), semantics, a key branch of linguistic study, is considered the investigation of the 'toolkit' for meaning, encompassing knowledge embedded in language vocabulary and its structures for constructing nuanced meanings, extending up to sentence-level meanings.

Hurford and Heasley (1983) define semantics as the exploration of meaning within language. Leech (1974), in his discussion on meaning, highlights three aspects: the speaker's intention, interpretation dependent on context, and meaning as an active, dynamic process involving speaker and hearer interaction. Chaer (2002) identifies three types of meaning: lexical, grammatical, and contextual meaning. Lexical meaning pertains to the inherent meaning of a lexeme without context, while grammatical meaning arises through processes like affixation or tense changes. Contextual meaning, on the other hand, hinges on the word's meaning within a specific context. Semantics encompasses conceptual and associative meanings, where conceptual meaning denotes the literal meaning, while associative meaning includes qualities or characteristics beyond the literal meaning, also known as expressive and stylistic meaning.

In the realm of semantics, Leech (1974) introduced the term associative meaning, encompassing connotative, thematic, social, effective, reflective, and collocative meanings.

Associative meanings can evoke powerful communicative and argumentative consequences, exemplified by the associations linked to words like 'pig' or 'nurse.' In summary, Yule (2010) posits that conceptual meaning encompasses the fundamental components conveyed by the literal use of a word, as found in dictionaries. These basic components are part of the conceptual meaning, while associations and connotations, varying among individuals, are not considered inherent to the word's conceptual meaning.

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, inspired by Creswell's methodology, to comprehensively analyze the semiotic theories at play in understanding the relationship between Eywa's significance and the decline in religiosity observed in America. The data are some symbolic interpretation from character, plot and setting in the scene. This methodology is chosen for its suitability in exploring the intricate and multifaceted aspects of the symbolism surrounding Eywa within the context of the Avatar film series. Creswell's framework provides a structured pathway for a detailed examination of the semiotic elements embedded in the Na'vi's cultural practices and their worship of Eywa.

Findings and Discussion

The Tree of Souls as Eywa in the Na'vi Perspective

The Tree of Souls, known as Eywa in the Na'vi perspective, serves as the primary deity in Pandora and holds a spiritual significance as the guiding force for the Na'vi people. Functioning akin to a god for the Na'vi, Eywa is deeply intertwined with the Na'vi's faith, representing the belief that they will reunite with Eywa upon death. The connection to Eywa is facilitated through braids with translucent tendrils, termed neural queues, allowing mental communication among the Na'vi or with Eywa. The Na'vi, viewing all living entities as part of a unified system, emphasize respect and care for nature, forming the thematic core of the Avatar stories (Hwang & Cho, 2021).

Semiotic theories can shed light on the symbolic significance of Eywa in the narrative. The braids and neural queues, serving as conduits for communication, symbolize a semiotic connection, representing the intricate relationship between the Na'vi and their deity. This symbolic communication reflects the semiotic concept of signs and symbols conveying meaning beyond their literal representation. The conflict in Avatar unfolds as Earthlings, driven by the pursuit of new natural resources, arrive on Pandora, prompting resistance from the indigenous Na'vi against environmental degradation. This narrative aligns with semiotic theories by illustrating the symbolic struggle between conflicting signs: the Earthlings representing exploitative technological progress and the Na'vi embodying a symbiotic relationship with nature. The clash becomes a semiotic battle symbolizing the struggle between environmental preservation and exploitation.

Eywa's three laws further exemplify the semiotic interplay in the narrative. Prohibiting the use of stone, turning wheels, and extracting metals from the ground, these laws symbolize the Na'vi's commitment to sustainable practices and protection of Pandora's ecosystem. Each law serves as a semiotic sign conveying the message of balance and harmony with nature. The ban on stone construction signifies reliance on renewable resources like wood, the prohibition of wheels represents opposition to technologies that harm the environment, and the restriction on metal extraction symbolizes the prevention of over-mining and resource depletion. In essence, the environmental message in Avatar, as conveyed through Eywa and the Na'vi's semiotic interactions, promotes a semiotic understanding of the narrative's themes, emphasizing the symbolic struggle between environmental stewardship and exploitation. Eywa, as a semiotic entity, becomes a powerful symbol of the Na'vi's commitment to preserving the balance of nature on Pandora.

Giving more respect to Eywa, the Navi believe that this Tree of Soul is sacred, which functions as a defender and guide of life, who helps, protects, and guides the Na'vi against such life-threatening assaults of nature. In return, Eywa instructed the Na'vi to protect the environment. Therefore, The Na'vi seek to live in perpetual harmony with their world, especially the around them. Their bound with Eywa helps them to create a balanced life with the nature lead them through many hard times throughout their history. In times of great need, Na'vi clan members gather at the Tree of Souls and all unanimously connect their queues to the tree; through this, they all experience a simultaneous connection to each other, a condition of profound emotional power. Tsahik, a spiritual leader who is tasked with communing with and interpreting the will of Eywa, believes that

The connection between Eywa and the Na've enables them to be connected to each other nature and amplify any message they have to Eywa. This is the strongest statement of purpose the Na'vi can make, and is vital to important processes such as the consciousness transfer. The Na'vi also pray to Eywa and the connections between the Na'vi and Eywa allows the Na'vi to access the Pandora Network and the wealth of memories, information, and consciousnesses along with it, and even commune with deceased friends and family, like Jake Sully and his wife, Neytiri, are able to keep in touch with their late son, and is able to have a vision that their son is happy in his afterlife through the connection Eywa makes for them. Eywa is the great mother of all living things on Pandora that they respect and worship.

American's Declining of Christianity as Reflected on the Worshipping of Eywa

In the film Avatar, Eywa emerges as a symbol of profound significance, intricately woven into the fabric of Na'vi culture. The Na'vi's intricate rituals, celebrations, and expressions of gratitude directed towards Eywa reflect a complex semiotic system where symbols carry deep cultural meanings. Eywa serves not just as a spiritual entity but as a semiotic anchor for the Na'vi's collective aspirations and values. The Na'vi, in their unconventional form of worship, manifest a semiotic interpretation of Eywa resembling a deity. This belief system shares striking parallels with animism, a semiotic perspective that attributes spiritual essence to various objects in the world. Within the animistic semiotic framework, objects transcend mere physicality; they become carriers of unique spiritual meanings and connections. In this context, a tree or rock isn't merely an inanimate entity but is laden with a distinct semiotic character that individuals can engage with symbolically.

Eywa, as a semiotic representation, becomes a focal point for the Na'vi, mirroring the animistic tradition's emphasis on imbuing symbols with spiritual significance (Lioi, 2011). The semiotic interpretation of Eywa allows the Na'vi to establish a meaningful connection with their environment, transcending the physical realm into a realm of symbolic understanding. Moreover, the film's exploration of Eywa and the animistic tradition aligns with semiotic theories that emphasize the cultural construction of symbols. The Na'vi's belief in the essence of Eywa resonates with the semiotic idea that symbols are not universal but are culturally constructed and imbued with specific meanings. The cyclical nature of tree life, symbolizing growth, death, and rebirth, is a semiotic construct that transcends cultural boundaries, resonating with broader human perceptions of symbolism. In summary, the portrayal of Eywa in Avatar not only reflects the Na'vi's intricate belief system but also aligns with semiotic theories, emphasizing the cultural construction and symbolic richness embedded in their worship practices and the animistic worldview. The concept of a sacred tree or Tree of Life is recurrent in various mythologies, such as the banyan and sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Judaism and Christianity. In "Avatar," the Na'vi's reverence is directed towards Eywa, portraying a cinematic manifestation of this ancient and widespread symbolic connection between spirituality and the natural world.

Even though Eywa is referred to as the Tree of Souls and not explicitly identified as a deity, the Na'vi perceive Eywa as a god—a spiritual entity of higher power. Referred to as The Great Mother, this title implies a role akin to that of a Creator. As a god, Eywa's soul encompasses the collective memories of an entire world, with every living creature sharing their experiences with it. If the Na'vi, portrayed as less advanced compared to the more modern humans in the movie, symbolize a less civilized society, the film aims to redirect attention to an era when people revered sacred objects as deities. Examining the specifics, the pantheistic spirituality depicted in the film deviates from a biblical worldview. This evokes thoughts of Romans 1:25, which states, "*They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised.*" While the film may not explicitly promote spirituality outside the fictional realm of Pandora, it prompts Christians to recognize the inconsistencies with biblical truth in how the Na'vi celebrate, pray to, and express gratitude to Eywa in their cultural practices. Given the movie's American setting, it appears to align with the theme of declining faith in America.

The worship of Eywa among the Na'vi presents a nuanced commentary on the evolving religious landscape in America, particularly the declining influence of Christianity. The film highlights the Na'vi's animistic and pantheistic belief system, where Eywa is not just a symbol but a living, spiritual entity intricately connected to the natural world. This portrayal challenges the conventional binary between monotheistic religions and nature-centric spirituality, encouraging viewers to reconsider established religious frameworks. The concept of Eywa as a deity with a collective soul storing the memories of an entire world deviates from traditional Judeo-Christian perspectives. The title "The Great Mother" implies a nurturing and creative force, reminiscent of divine attributes, but within a context that diverges from mainstream religious doctrines. This cinematic exploration invites reflection on how modern societies, particularly in America, might be navigating away from traditional religious structures in favor of alternative spiritual connections with nature.

In American setting, the symbolic worship of Eywa among the Na'vi serves as a metaphor for the broader trend of declining faith (Lioi, 2011). The Na'vi's spiritual practices, while fictional, parallel real-world movements that seek spirituality outside institutionalized religions. This theme resonates with the idea that contemporary society might be turning towards alternative belief systems, whether ecological, pantheistic, or nature-centric, as a response to the perceived shortcomings or diminishing influence of organized religion. In summary, the portrayal of Eywa in *Avatar* provides a cinematic lens through which to examine the complex interplay between spirituality, cultural shifts, and the decline of traditional religious beliefs, offering a thought-provoking commentary on the evolving religious landscape in America and beyond.

The Decreasing of Christianity in America Reflected from Avatar Movie

In the captivating world of *Avatar*, Eywa emerges as the epicenter of life for the Na'vi, transcending mere spiritual significance to become a guiding force intricately woven into the fabric of their existence. Beyond serving as a symbolic beacon, Eywa holds the profound role of being the destination to which the Na'vi spirits return upon their earthly departure. This spiritual connection with Eywa takes on a dynamic dimension, as Eywa intervenes directly in the lives of the Na'vi during perilous moments, influencing their cultural and interpersonal dynamics in profound ways. Such a deity-like presence aligns with the tenets of Animism, a belief system that imparts spiritual essence to various entities, including objects, places, and creatures. Strikingly, the Na'vi's veneration of Eywa, despite the apparent contradiction with the first commandment cautioning against having other gods, mirrors the intricate interplay of belief systems in a fantastical realm.

In parallel, the contemporary United States witnesses a nuanced narrative of religious disaffiliation, with discernible shifts in patterns beginning in the 1990s. Notably, older Americans tend to exhibit a more enduring loyalty to Christian affiliations compared to the younger generations. This generational transformation gains momentum as individuals step into newfound independence, embark on their professional journeys, and forge enduring romantic bonds. The observed "snowballing" dynamic, wherein the decline of Christian identity becomes increasingly evident, particularly among Protestants constituting 40% of U.S. adults, showcases a complex interplay of socio-cultural factors. Over the past five years, the Protestant share has experienced a decline of 4 percentage points, and a more substantial dip of 10 points unfolds over the decade. In contrast, the Catholic share presents a contrasting stability, with 21% of U.S. adults identifying as Catholic in 2021, mirroring the figures from 2014, according to comprehensive research conducted by Pew.

Drawing intriguing parallels between the mythical universe of Avatar and the evolving religious landscape in contemporary America, one cannot help but reflect on the intricate dynamics of belief systems, societal transformations, and the enduring quest for spiritual meaning. In both realms, the central figures—be it Eywa for the Na'vi or traditional religious affiliations for Americans—mirror the intricate interplay of evolving ideologies amid the ever-shifting tapestry of human beliefs and aspirations.

The Na'vi worship Eywa as the source of life and protection. In the context of contemporary America, the question arises: who or what holds a higher place of worship than Jesus for the American people? Many Americans prioritize material comfort over traditional religious practices, with the pursuit of financial success replacing the once-central role of faith. This shift is evident in the abandonment of serving God, as warned by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where he cautioned against serving both God and money. In the aftermath of the 1930s Great Depression and the recent economic downturn, the pursuit of wealth has become a dominant societal focus. The trauma of economic challenges has reshaped perspectives, and the admiration for billionaires has grown. Figures like Gates, Musk, and Zuckerberg are now revered akin to celebrities, frequently making national headlines. These individuals are perceived as guarantors of a good life, akin to the role Eywa plays for the Na'vi. The society's relentless pursuit of wealth has created a culture marked by insatiable greed and a shift in values, mirroring the transformation of the divine from traditional faith to modern idols..

Conclusion

Although religion has shaped the history of America, it cannot be denied that the number of believers of Christianity, which has been issued as the first religion brought by the Puritan, has been decreasing day by day. The tendency to worship other gods before Jesus has been shown in the movies of Avatar through the worshipping of Eywa. The Na'vi believe that Eywa is their god, who is able to give them protection and fulfilments. This reflects the American today, who believe that wealth is what they pursue and worship, not Jesus as what their faith believe as Christians. Therefore, the movies of Avatars give the reflections on how Christianity is decreasing in America

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