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By Anita Singh, Showbusiness Editor

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Critics claims the story of a white US Marine who saves an alien race perpetuates the "white Messiah fable" and suggests that non-whites are primitives incapable of helping themselves.

Hundreds of blogs, YouTube videos and Twitter postings have sprung up on the subject since the film's release three weeks ago, with one writer dubbing the 3-D extravaganza "a racial fantasy par excellence".

Avatar is set on a distant planet populated by the Na'vi, an eco-conscious, blue-skinned alien tribe with no understanding of modern technology. A disabled Marine, played by the Australian actor Sam Worthington, is sent to infiltrate the tribe but soon "goes native" and leads them in a defence of their homeland against the white invaders.

He also falls in love with an alien woman, who rejects a Na'vi suitor and becomes his wife. The main Na'vi characters are played by black actors, including Zoe Saldana and Laz Alonso.

David Brooks, a columnist writing in the New York Times, said: "Avatar is a racial fantasy par excellence ... It rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that non-whites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. It rests on the assumption that illiteracy is the path to grace.

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"It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration."

The ruthless treatment of the Na'vi has been interpreted as a metaphor for the plight of American Indians. Brooks said Avatar followed a long tradition of "white Messiah" movies which began in the 1970s with A Man Called Horse, starring Richard Harris as an English aristocrat who is captured by a Sioux Indian tribe and becomes their leader, and which includes Kevin Costner's Dances With Wolves and the Tom Cruise film, The Last Samurai.

Robinne Lee, a black actress who appeared opposite Will Smith in the film Seven Pounds, is also among Avatar's detractors.

Likening the film to Pocahontas – "the Indian woman leads the white man into the wilderness, and he learns the way of the people and becomes the saviour" – she said: "It's really upsetting in many ways. It would be nice if we could save ourselves."

Annalee Newitz, editor-in-chief of io9.com, a sci-fi website, said: "The main white characters realise that they are complicit in a system which is destroying aliens, aka people of colour ... then go beyond assimilation and become leaders of the people they once oppressed. When will whites stop making these movies and start thinking about race in a new way?" Cameron strongly denied any racist intent. He said that his film "asks us to open our eyes and truly see others, respecting them even though they are different, in the hope that we may find a way to prevent conflict and live more harmoniously on this world. I hardly think that is a racist message."

The controversy has done little to dent Avatar's remarkable run at the box office. It took just 17 days to pass \$1 billion in ticket sales – a new record – and to become the second highest grossing film of all time behind Titanic, also directed by Cameron.

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