



## The Racism of Misrepresentation in *The Last Airbender*

SUMMER LAURICK

Summer Laurick compares the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* to its live-action film adaptation, noting how the movie whitewashes the deliberately Asian-inspired cultures and ethnicities featured in the original, thereby, as Laurick argues, exemplifying Hollywood's common and pernicious marginalization of nonwhite characters and cultures. This essay was written for *Critical Approaches to Literature* with Dr. Shelley Rees.

**I**N HER ARTICLE “Theatre and the Autobiographical Pact,” Sherrill Grace states that acting in theatre has great potential for providing a platform for the stories of minority people who are often excluded or silenced. This is truer still of acting in film, which tends to reach a much wider audience and thus have a larger impact. Some believe that specifying needs such as race or gender in casting a role are unnecessary restrictions, and that the point of theatre and acting is the ability to take on different perspectives—essentially, anyone can become any role. However, desiring accuracy in casting goes further than wanting someone to “look” the part; too often, misrepresentational casting is done to conform to an ignorant public's preconceptions or schema about what a certain group must *be*, therefore sating old stereotypes for hegemonic comfort rather than

breaking the boundaries of diversity and causing a stir. There is still a growing problem in the pop-cultural world of pushing characters of color to the sidelines or whitewashing them when their works are adapted into movies, thereby absorbing their identities and spitting out reinvented versions of minorities' works that are similar to their original versions in name only. *The Last Airbender* is a prime example of taking characters who are clearly non-white and reinventing them through whitewashing in the movie adaptation, contributing to the continuation of racial insensitivity in the film industry.

When it comes to race and casting, there is still division on what is considered acceptable. Why is it such a problem for a white actor to play a character of color when we are (mostly) past the days of blackface? The answer is simple: When certain groups of people are mis- or underrepresented in media and storytelling, their few outlets of expression to share personal and historical experience—or, at the base level, simply to exist as visible figures—should not be given to those groups that, repeatedly, are given the literal and metaphorical spotlight over them. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happens in *The Last Airbender*. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is an animated television show that ran from 2005-2008 and proposed a world in which individuals possess the ability to control (or “bend”) the four elements—water, earth, fire, and air. The world of *Avatar* is heavily based on East Asian design, with each elemental nation styled after a different culture: the Earth Kingdom after China, the Air Nomads after Buddhist monks, the Fire Nation after Japan, and the Water Tribes after Native Inuit peoples. Characters are given obviously Asian-esque names such as Aang, Mai, Ty Lee, and Ozai; furthermore, they are clearly drawn in a manner meant to evoke Asian ethnicities, with epicanthic folds (aside from those characters drawn with quasi-anime features, which also implies Asian influence) and non-white skin tones. The different styles of elemental bending are based on different forms of martial arts, and many aspects of Asian and Native cultures are respectfully woven into the plot and the

world. In essence: the world of *Avatar* is exclusively non-white, obviously and intentionally so. However, when the show received its own live-action movie adaptation directed by M. Night Shyamalan in 2010, there was a major, jarring difference: the protagonists were white.

M. Night Shyamalan's reimagining of the *Avatar* world appears to move it out of Asia and give it a more globally inclusive feel. The ethnic makeup of the Water Tribes and Air Nomads is largely white, somehow supposedly European despite retaining cultural similarities to the original peoples who inspired them. Because the movie is based only on the first season of the show (which focuses on the Water Tribes), the Earth Kingdom is not shown in detail, but it appears that Shyamalan decided to shepherd any Asian ethnicity to this area alone. Finally, it is the Fire Nation—the antagonists—who are mostly cast as Indian and Middle Eastern. The message received through these casting choices, whether intentional or not, is disturbing. The protagonists, the *heroes*, are white; they still possess the cultural characteristics and influences of their original sources but have been given white skin and faces, essentially appropriating the cultures which were formerly respectfully represented in *Avatar*. Although East Asian peoples are not completely removed from the movie, they are shuffled to the background, part of the massive and populous Earth Kingdom (a comparison to China that is far less tasteful than *Avatar's* symmetries) but not allowed to hold a title role. Perhaps most disturbing, though, is the juxtaposition of the white heroes against the brown-skinned villains. Creating a cast of Indian and Middle Eastern antagonists to pit against a group of white heroes in an American movie cannot go unnoticed and cannot be considered a subtle, harmless choice. It is a classic trope that is usually left in the past: stylizing villainous characters after a group of people deemed to be “othered” and frowned upon. Not only did this choice take away opportunities for Asian actors to portray such powerful, vibrant, beloved characters, but it dealt a racist blow to perceptions

of people of color and controverted the very message that the original show perpetuated: that no one group is evil or good, and it must be the individual whose morality is examined.

In addition to the overt “racebending” in the movie, Shyamalan also twists another crucial aspect of the characters’ identities: their names. Although the spellings are presumably kept the same, pronunciations are changed. The sharp, obviously East-Asian-sounding Aang is given a more open pronunciation, now rhyming with “song.” Katara’s name is left alone, but Sokka is reintroduced with a short O, as in “soak.” Even Iroh has his name changed from EYE-roh to EE-roh, sounding more Russian than Asian. These changes were especially jarring to fans, as the pronunciation of character’s names was something clearly understood through the original show. This changing of names is symbolic of the way Shyamalan has rewritten the characters’ identities: they are not and can no longer exist as they were, and have been shaped to fit the whitewashing they endured. This misrepresentational casting is, at its very base, an insult. This blatant dismissal goes beyond one role, beyond one incident; it sends the message that a white person was considered better to play a person of color than any actual person of color would. Never mind that such decisions normalize atrocities like blackface to a receptive public who praises them as “tastefully done,” completely rewriting the steps that have been taken since the days of minstrel shows to break out of these oppressive boxes; it is an affirmation that audiences don’t care if what they see is a caricature whose actor is appropriating a role that could have been used to further underrepresented voices in the so-competitive, so-discriminatory film industry.

In the case of theatre and film as platforms for minority voices to be heard, it must be understood that such representation only works if sensitivity is used during casting. *The Last Airbender* faced immense backlash for its racist-tilted whitewashing of beloved characters, thus removing opportunities for non-white actors. It is irrelevant if the character’s race can supposedly be changed without

damaging the story; it damages the story of the group, if not the individual, rewriting and reducing until the general public only has to face what they want to believe is true, never having to question if there is more to the story. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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