

MYTHS AND GENDER IN AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER

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ABSTRACT: This exploration of the show Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005-2008) analyzes several characters to discover how they accept and reject the norms associated with their gender. By using signs to explain how viewers determine each character's gender, attention is called to the norms associated with certain gender identities. Among other social issues, the lens of fourth wave feminism values the pluralism of gender identity which expands beyond a traditional womxn-man binary. In looking at how each character interacts with the world around them despite their gender, we can determine how those actions align with (and stray from) the norms associated with their gender.

Kids' shows are often one of the first socializers available for children. The purpose of the show drastically affects the teachings that children will take away from it; shows such as Dora The Explorer emphasize multilingualism while a show such as Wonder Pets displays the advantages of teamwork. Granted, these two examples are geared towards younger children who are still entering society. So how do shows create learning moments for children who aren't kids anymore? When children turn into adolescents who may already be multilingual or an effective group member, what can TV shows offer other than entertainment? While there are many ways to teach children, adolescents, and adults, one major proponent for learning is through the characterization captured by the cast, whether animated or live-action. As an agent of socialization, cast representation can be viewed as a means for self-identification when viewers see characters they relate to (Karniol, Reichmann, Fund 2000). For example, viewers of a show may feel a particular connection with a character because they see themselves reflected in that character. For the purpose of this argumentative essay, I used a lens of fourth wave feminism to analyze how different womxn characters from the

show Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005-2008) present feminine gender norms, as represented through signs and metaphors in relationship to social myths, and how their actions in the show create multifaceted characters from whom viewers can learn. Through these methods, I've found that pluralism of gender representation exists in a variety of characters, from the most androgynous to the most feminine of characters, in and outside of the dual realm of gender binary. In this way, it provides characters in the show that can stand as role models of gender expression for viewers of the show.

For some background information, Avatar: The Last Airbender (shortened to AtLA) first aired in 2005 and provided three seasons of content until the show ended in 2008¹. During that time, we follow the quests and adventures of characters who can manipulate, or bend, four basic elements of the world: fire, water, air, and earth. Only one character, called the Avatar, can bend all four elements. The premise of the show begins 100 years after the start of a world war initiated by the Fire Nation (a militaristic nation of firebenders) who, a century ago, launched a genocide against the Air Nomads (a peaceful community of airbenders), eradicating them all. Fast forward to where the show begins, and

¹Seasons and episodes will be noted in shorthand, such as S2E12 for season 2 episode 12.

two of the main characters discover the only remaining airbender in the world: the Avatar named Aang. The show follows Aang and his growing list of friends (the “Gaang”) as they set forth to bring peace to the world by stopping the Fire Nation before they can wipe out any other race of bender.

Before we analyze the show, please make a note about the concepts and values of fourth wave feminism. Although the metaphor of the wave is flawed (Nicholson 2010), I’ll be using it because of its wide-spread acceptance and understanding of how to distinguish various generations of feminism. Different feminist values take the forefront in each wave because feminism and gender equality is an ongoing process. In this case, the fourth wave’s desire for inclusion in gender and LGBTQ+² rights takes the forefront (Rampton 2008). Values of gender equality expand beyond the traditional binary of man and womxn, including transgender and nonbinary individuals. Because of this, I intentionally use womxn instead of woman or women because of its exclusion of man and men from the word to emphasize inclusivity of transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer individuals³ (Paradis 2018). An important aspect of identity to keep in mind while reading this essay is that sex and gender are two different aspects, where sex refers to reproductive organs while gender refers to the embodiment and representation of masculinity, femininity, or neither that society has placed on one’s sex (Wade and Ferree 2015). Similarly, society relies on tying gender roles and identities closely to masculinity and femininity, womxn and men. Without the distinctions of traditional gender assignments, there is nothing othering about the bodies or identities of transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer bodies to deem different. These key notes about gender and

transcending traditional gender binaries, identities, and norms are the primary concepts of fourth wave feminism that I’ll be using to look at the characters from AtLA.

As viewers, we rely on dominant ideology and societal norms to make meaning; otherwise it is impossible for us to make sense of the show without dominant ideological signs to reinforce gender norms (such as relying on traditional gender assignments to determine transgender bodies as other). As with any show, meaning is created when communication is achieved. The produced meaning in the show must be received by an audience that understands the ideologies being represented. Signs are a form of visual communication which rely on a fixed, denotative meaning, but through connotation and interpretation can mean different things to different people (Hall 512). In other words by Turton-Turner, “although not obvious at the literal level of meaning, the subtleties of gendered language remain active as the message is inferred. Our subjective interpretation of that message is meant to complete the communicative process” (Turton-Turner 2013). An example of this might be identifying someone as a womxn because they have large breasts, or assigning masculinity to physical strength and combat. Making meaning of a sign isn’t fixed, which is why it’s important to analyze such things as kids’ show characters to understand how meaning changes over time and viewership to have a deeper meaning of shows’ content. How do the characters adhere to or flout popular ideology? What is the responsibility of writers, artists, and creators to add that layer of depth to their show? If meaning is unstable, then how do interpretations of a show change over time and audience? Those are some of the questions I’ll be looking at as I analyze the signs assigned to the characters of AtLA.

²Shorthand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, with + indicating a nonexhaustive list of sexualities and gender orientations, and identities.

³Transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer individuals are those whose gender identity does not correspond with their sex assigned at birth.

Avatar: The Last Airbender presents to us a mythic world filled with magical powers and mystical creatures. But what about the myths of this show? Where do the creators draw the line between creating ideologies within the show and imposing ideologies from outside the show— ideologies from the real world? Because myths reinforce the social norms by creating the normalcy of an event, people often accept them without so much as blinking an eye. By identifying myths within the show and determining whether they align with popular Western (American) ideologies regarding gender, or transcend the screen and become the myths necessary for the narrative, we can properly evaluate each character's words or actions and how they relate to accepted gender norms. For example, AtLA adopts a cisgender patriarchal view of society, a myth which comes from the real world. But a myth produced by the show would be society's acceptance that humans have the ability to manipulate a piece of rock or produce fire out of nothing. As Griffin says, myths "go without saying. They don't explain, they don't defend, and they certainly don't raise questions" (Griffin 337). It will be up to my analysis to explain, defend, and raise questions about the selected characters' actions and words to help readers understand why those actions and words are defying or reinforcing feminine gender norms— within the context of the show.

Given the above, the first character to analyze is named Smellerbee. Her first appearance is in S1E10, titled "Jet". To be clear: Smellerbee is not a main character. Her presence in the show is sparse, but incredibly important because she is the most androgynous character, both in appearance and in reference as no other characters use any pronouns to refer to Smellerbee until she reappears later in S2E12, "The Serpent's Pass". But a bold statement is made in S2E12 when someone misgenders her,

claiming her name is strange for a young man. This mistake is made because she lacks the typical signs of femininity, such as a large bust and wide hips: there are no physical signs to denote Smellerbee as a womxn, so therefore she must be a man. Smellerbee tells them, angrily, "maybe it's because I'm not a man. I'm a girl!" (DiMartino and Konietzko 2006). Outburst aside, this instance displays an alliance with Western ideals of femininity and what a womxn "should" look like, leading to the misgendering of a character who appears more masculine in physique. Smellerbee, with her short, shaggy hair and flat chest as designated signs, doesn't align with the myth of feminine beauty standards. She goes on to be comforted by her friend, who reminds her that "as long as I'm confident with who I am, it doesn't matter what other people think" (DiMartino and Konietzko 2006). The writers make a statement with this scene because its existence in the episode doesn't progress the plot; the reminder that adhering to gendered beauty norms regarding appearance is apparently important enough to state explicitly even though it takes up airtime in an episode only 24 minutes long.

As Jackson states about AtLA, "the series debunks the gender dichotomy and upholds Third-Wave Feminism's concept of gender fluidity by depicting genderbending characters of both sexes who do not present polarized perceptions of gender in accordance with traditional gender stereotypes" (Jackson 14)⁴. Here, Jackson utilizes the fan-centered practice of changing a character's gender (genderbending) and creates a pun about the show's elemental bending. However, Jackson points out that AtLA produces characters who somewhat genderbend on their own without a fan's reinterpretation of the character. This quote accurately represents Smellerbee's presence in the AtLA universe; an important character to have, as it shows that characters,

⁴Although Jackson utilizes a lens of third wave feminism as opposed to fourth wave, it is in consensus with the feminist values I'm using to analyze characters.

especially womxn, do not have to fall in line with their gender's prescribed ideals of beauty to identify with that gender. In some cases, when meaning changes over time, viewers will read Smellerbee's character differently. To me, when I watched the show as a kid, Smellerbee was simply a "tom-boy" character who didn't display feminine beauty traits. However, in comments along the web, some fans of the show read her character as transgender, as seen in the AtLA subreddit strand titled "Smellerbee transgender?" which was published April 2019, 11 years after the show ended. While not confirmed, this provides an excellent example of how time, awareness of LGBTQ+ folks, and inclusion of feminist values can create new meaning for older content.

To further support the notion that the creators and writers of the show intentionally create characters who choose not to adhere to Western ideals of beauty, we'll analyze Toph. As a main character in the show, Toph's presence is important for a variety of reasons. An entire essay could be written on Toph's character, but I will only be focusing on two of her specific attributes. As with Smellerbee, Toph is short, flat-chested, and actively takes on more of a "tom-boy" presence and persona. She also happens to be blind, one of the few characters who is differently-abled. The episode "The Tales of Ba Sing Se" from season two produced multiple short vignettes that follow various main characters, but the episode as a whole isn't meant to propel the plot. The vignette follows Toph and Katara (who, for the record, does follow and adhere to many Western ideals of beauty and femininity) as the two girls have a spa day. At the end, when they're leaving the spa wearing heavy make-up, Toph finds herself being bullied by a group of strangers, girls who, like Katara, are tall, curvy, and clearly care about their physical appearance, signified by their makeup and hairstyles. Toph handles the situation with the support of Katara, and afterwards confides in her friend, saying "one of the good things about being blind is I don't have

to waste my time worrying about appearance. I don't care what I look like. I'm not looking for anyone's approval. I know who I am" (Estoesta and Wahlander 2006). With body image functioning as a dominant ideology, the signs which reinforce this myth of the feminine body are large chests, tiny waists, and wide hips. With fourth wave feminism in mind, traditionally gendered body types become irrelevant and instead place someone's personal identity at the forefront. A person could identify as nonbinary while still displaying a traditionally "feminine" body type. Bray explains this separation of gender identity and bodily integrity, saying "we are better served by the subject's prerogative to designate the body she requires without necessarily having recourse to her identity" (Bray 2015). This idea applies to Toph as well, by displaying her acceptance of her physique and her identity as a womxn. The immediate content to unpack is the indication that Toph is aware that there's more to her than meets the eye, and that more is what she prioritizes in her life. She's aware of the other aspects of her personality that precede her non-feminine womxnness, such as willpower, fighting and bending ability, and the advantages of her blindness.

This idea is further reinforced in season three during the episode "The Ember Island Players". In this episode, the Gaang goes to watch a play that is made about them. Each character finds themselves being dramatized for the sake of the show: Aang finds himself being played by a girl (another statement about gender that I won't be unpacking in this essay), Katara is portrayed as overly emotional, and Sokka's caricature tells bad jokes and is always hungry. Toph tells them "I know it must hurt, but what you're seeing up there on that stage is the truth" (Hedrick, Hamilton, O' Bryan 2008). Later, Toph waits in anticipation for her appearance in the play. Her caricature's introduction is "my name's Toph, because it sounds like tough, and that's just what I am!" (Hedrick, Hamilton, O' Bryan 2008). Despite her initial confusion at being portrayed on stage as a giant, enormously buff man, Toph is

overjoyed at her portrayal, reassuring the Gaang “are you kidding me? I wouldn’t have cast it any other way!” (Hedrick, Hamilton, O’ Bryan 2008). By re-appropriating Toph’s character and portraying it (even if humorously) as the exact opposite in physique, the writers reassure us of Toph’s feelings for herself: although she doesn’t fit in with a Western beauty ideal, even if it means being caricatured as a large, buff man, she’s happy with who she is. Fourth wave feminism (and Bray’s) interpretation would validate this masculine physique, however, by accepting that someone with such a body type could still identify closely with other feminine traits, such as gendered clothing or makeup and hairstyles. A person with a massively buff physique can also be a womxn, by fourth wave feminism’s understanding, and counters Western beauty standards that womxn must be sleek and curvy. Toph positively reacting to such a portrayal of herself displays this acceptance, as she is a womxn but happy to have a buff, traditionally-masculine body type.

Though I skipped ahead to mid-season two, the embodied masculinity in Toph is presented right off the bat when we meet her in S2E6, “The Blind Bandit”. After facing some relational hardships with her parents, Toph chooses to come clean about her fighting experience, telling her father “the obedient little helpless blind girl that you think I am just isn’t me. I love fighting, I love being an earthbender, and I’m really, really good at it” (DiMartino 2006). Here, fighting and being an earthbender are associated with both masculinity and ableism, demonstrated by pitting “helpless blind girl” against “fighting” and “earthbending”. Girl, here, is shown in direct contrast against fighting and creates a clear meaning for viewers to understand that fighting and elemental bending are assigned to men and masculinity. An external example of combat associated with masculinity to support this

notion would be Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), in that “this masculine archetype typically involves strength, toughness, competitiveness, risk taking, muscularity, and, above all else, the ability to dominate others—characteristics typically considered central to constructions of hegemonic forms of masculinity” (Channon & Matthews 2015). However, viewers don’t feel as if that’s a bad thing due to Toph’s acceptance of herself, masculine traits and all. This isn’t the first time elemental bending is associated with masculinity, which I’ll follow up with next. As an influential character in the show, Toph represents proud acceptance of masculinity while retaining her womxnness, creating a multifaceted character for viewers to draw from and learn that you don’t need to be either feminine or masculine, but that you can pull from both femininity and masculinity to form your own sense of identity, no matter what gender you identify with or express⁵. This understanding for viewers is an important alignment with fourth wave feminism’s goals of debunking traditional gender identity and expression because it allows viewers to see that they don’t have to strictly follow a single iteration of their personality and identity, but that they can fluidly exist in the world. Viewers who may be questioning their identity could find the presence of a character like Toph (or Smellerbee) validating or reassuring.

Earlier, it was established that Katara embodies feminine physical traits, signified by her long hair, large chest, and wide hips. She is caricatured in “The Ember Island Players” as being hopeful in the face of adversity as well as tearfully overcome by emotions all the time. This portrayal of womxn as being overly emotional is reoccurring rhetoric often used to delegitimize womxn as being unfit to hold positions of power, rhetoric so commonly used, as seen in Gleason, Jones, and Mcbean’s study of

⁵This optimism should be taken with a grain of salt, however, as womxn who embody or embrace masculine mannerisms also face backlash for behaving outside their realm of gender norms, as seen in both Manne and in Gleason, Jones, and Mcbean.

gender in the Supreme Court. This is yet another example of an external myth being placed within the show. So why is it important to analyze Katara's character as defying gender norms? As mentioned earlier, the show's universe functions in a patriarchal society, which is precisely where Katara comes in. The first season of the show follows the Gaang as they travel from the tiny village in the Southern Water Tribe, where Katara is the only waterbender, until they reach the booming dominion of the Northern Water Tribe. When they arrive, both Katara and Aang are excited to learn more complex waterbending skills from the master waterbender, Pakku. However, both are enraged to discover that in the Northern Water Tribe, womxn who possess waterbending abilities are relegated to become healers, and are barred from learning combative waterbending skills (DiMartino 2005). Her caricature as hopeful in the face of adversity proves true when Katara literally fights the patriarchy to earn the right to learn combative waterbending.

Phrases such as "you have disrespected... my entire culture", "I'm waiting, little girl", and "go back to the healing huts with the other women where you belong" (DiMartino 2005), all used by Pakku in the episode "The Waterbending Master", indicate the level of normalcy associated with the sexism in the Northern Water Tribe. These phrases display the myths of misogyny often associated with a patriarchal society and depend on the viewer's knowledge of such misogyny to make sense, even if the misogyny is coded in the universe of AtLA. Even the phrase "go back to the healing hut" exists in parallel with other, real world examples of gender being assigned to certain areas, such as womxn belonging in domestic spaces like homes and kitchens. Rhetoric and attacks such as this are used when womxn try to leave such domestic spaces, and are mirrored by Katara attempting to use waterbending for fighting (a masculine use of the ability) instead of healing (a feminine use of the ability). Katara, as put by Rampton, "challenges the 'cult of domesticity'"

(Rampton 2008) and challenges the entire Northern Water Tribe's understanding of gendered waterbending practices. Subsequently, "women who resist or flout gender norms and expectations may consequently garner suspicion and consternation, which has less to do with their challenging gendered norms per se, and more to do with their challenging entrenched norms simpliciter" (Manne 61). Although there isn't official closure on this specific fight, the episode closes with Katara arriving to a combative waterbending practice unchallenged. Despite Katara fighting and losing the battle with the patriarchy, she eventually goes on to win the war against sexism. Not only ready to fight for what she believes, Katara also possesses ambition to learn and to fight, just as Toph does. Although the two characters are different in their expressions of gender and femininity, both rely on the same hunger for combat and skills associated with masculinity. Just as with Toph, Katara demonstrates a duality of femininity and masculinity that viewers can learn from and embody.

By analyzing these three characters, Smellerbee, Toph, and Katara, we understand how they challenge gender norms and societal myths about gender. But why is that important? Why should we bother ourselves with better understanding of characters from an animated kid's show? It is in understanding the characters that we can understand how they influence the viewers. The details of Smellerbee's gender identity don't have to matter, but to someone who's questioning their own identity, just the existence of an androgynous person like Smellerbee could be enough to validate that viewer's own existence. A viewer who expresses femininity in adherence to Western beauty ideals (large chest, long hair, tiny waist, etc) may find themselves in college receiving an engineering degree (a male-dominated degree path), and find comfort in seeing Katara fight the patriarchy. A viewer who finds themselves torn on how to express their gender identity can look to Toph and see duality and pluralism and

know that the same multitude of expressions can exist in them. We look for characters that could mirror a viewer's existence because we don't know who's watching this show.

As I said at the beginning, one of the goals of this essay was to explain, defend, and raise questions about the selected characters' actions and words to help readers understand why those actions and words are defying or reinforcing feminine gender norms. Explaining how characters challenge Western concepts of gender expression and body type helps us to understand that feminine gender norms are becoming more and more fluid all the time, especially with fourth wave feminism influencing society's perception of gender expression for the past twenty to thirty years. Defending the characters' choices and validating their existence and identity helps us to understand that pluralism of gender can exist in everyone, and questioning a character's identity can lead to different conclusions (such as Smellerbee: tom-boy or transgender?), but those conclusions don't have to matter. Gender identity, expression, and actions both do not have to matter and need to be validated. By exposing the myths of the show, whether superimposed or not, we can understand how these identities, expressions, and actions exist and challenge. Would any of the chosen characters be read the same had they not existed in a cisgendered patriarchal society? Probably not, because, as established earlier, a cisgendered patriarchal society relies on the enforcement gendered embodiments assigned to birth-sex. Nothing about the selected characters would raise a red flag if they existed in a universe without patriarchy, misogyny, or a gender binary—without the basis of a womxn/man binary, there is not otherness to set genderqueer characters apart. However, because the creators made a world that does display the myths of patriarchy, misogyny, and gender binary, the actions of Smellerbee, Toph, and Katara stand out as different, contrasting society's understanding of gender norms and roles.

As we established with fourth wave feminism, gender fluidity, pluralism, and acceptance are key traits that feminists believe are worth fighting for. As Rampton says, "feminism is part of a larger consciousness of oppression along with racism, ageism, classism, ableism, and sexual orientation" (Rampton 2008). It is important for people of all ages to have access to entertaining content that displays an awareness of these issues, as we see in AtLA. The signs that designate acceptance or denial of gender norms are but one of the ways this show addresses topics of gender. As an agent of socialization, characters who are multifaceted, pluralistic, or just plain comfortable being themselves could be the next best thing to meeting an actual person who embodies those traits. Although I've analyzed characters who specifically challenge or uphold gender norms, there are many other characters out there from whom viewers can learn from and identify with, not just in the universe of Avatar: The Last Airbender. A well-written character is a well-written lesson that can be taught, episode after episode.

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