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Feminism in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

When the average American watches roughly 3.1 hours of television per day, it becomes increasingly important to take a more in depth look at the messages and themes displayed (Hubbard). This is especially true when it comes to media that is primarily targeting children, as instilling beneficial themes early on will lead to a society that is generally kinder and more respectful. Feminism, which I would define as the movement that focuses on elevating people regardless of gender, is something that does not appear in most forms of media. One television show that can be analyzed through the lens of feminism though is my personal favorite *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA). While this show certainly has its flaws, ATLA has many great examples of feminist ideas throughout its 61 episodes.

ATLA is an animated children's show focused on a fantasy world in which some people have the ability to control one of the four elements: water, earth, fire, and air. Only one person, called the avatar, is tasked with maintaining harmony between the elemental nations and is born with the ability to bend all four elements. Sokka and Katara are siblings from the Southern Water Tribe, Katara being a waterbender and Sokka not having any bending abilities. They discover Aang, the avatar, in an iceberg and travel the world with him so he can master all styles of bending and defeat the imperial leader of the Fire Nation.

In the very first episode of the show, Katara and Sokka are riding their canoe in the icy ocean looking for fish, and Sokka is immediately characterized by him flashing his muscles and blaming his sister for not catching a fish because she is a girl and will screw things up. Katara

then calls him out on his sexist attitudes, and her frustration leads her to accidentally bend the ice around them to free Avatar Aang from his iceberg. Because of their newfound discovery, his comments are not a focus for the rest of the episode; however, ATLA revisits the discussion three episodes later in "The Warriors of Kyoshi." Aang, Katara, and Sokka get captured by a group of warriors, which to Sokka's disbelief, is composed entirely of women. He spends the episode training with them and he realizes that they are incredible fighters—much better than himself. The reason this situation is important to show in children's television is called modeling theory. Gaye Tuchman, former Professor of Sociology at the University of Connecticut, talks about modeling theory and how children will often learn from what they see characters in media do and will mimic it, especially so when a child sees a character they share a gender with (Tuchman 539). Young girls watch these scenes and feel empowered by the strength of the women, and young boys will follow the ideas of Sokka and stray away from typical sexist rhetoric. That is why it is so important to show how a man could change his mind on the strength of women, as it helps eradicate sexist ideas that are very prevalent in other facets of life. This also gives more positive role models for women and does not play into typical ideas of women being powerless, or the "damsel in distress." It is an inherently feminist idea to empower women and bring them up, considering their historical oppression and image of being helpless.

The Kyoshi Warriors are not the only example of female empowerment in ATLA, but first one must identify what it is that oppresses women. This is a system called the patriarchy, which Allan G. Johnson defines as the "set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture," where "manhood and masculinity [are] most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity [are] relegated to the marginal position of 'other'" (Johnson 84). This system sets ideas for who people are based on their gender, such as women being weak or emotional, and

men being tough and powerful. These ideas perpetuated by the patriarchy hurt men and women alike, but women especially are at such a disadvantage when women are getting paid less at their jobs and less likely to be promoted because of patriarchal ideas. The patriarchy is not called out by name in the ATLA universe, but the show certainly calls attention to it in the episode titled "The Waterbending Master." This episode shows the main characters reaching the Northern Water Tribe so Aang and Katara can learn waterbending. When they reach the tribe, they quickly learn that women are not allowed to learn to fight with waterbending in their society, and are forced to be healers with their ability. Despite being in wartime, the patriarchal society they have built will not utilize the countless female waterbenders ready to fight. The episode ends with the master waterbender, Master Pakku, giving in and teaching Katara after he realizes she is the granddaughter of his former love. Despite Pakku giving in and actually teaching a woman to fight with her powers, this does not change the system they live in. No other women will be taught to fight, so it seems like more of a performative action than any indicator of real change. It heavily connects to bell hooks' discussion of liberal vs radical feminism. hooks defines liberal feminism as the idea of women being raised up to the level of men, while radical feminism is the "eradication of domination and elitism in all human relationships" (hooks 20). This example of Pakku deciding to teach Katara is evident of liberal feminism, because the system itself was not dismantled and rebuilt; the patriarchy is still clearly there. One could argue that a valid criticism of ATLA is being influenced by liberal feminism over radical feminism, which would change the system entirely to raise women up and create a better society for all. Regardless, putting a focus on sexist institutions as a whole is a good example of feminist messaging, and leads kids to question the systems in place that keep all people down.

One of the biggest misconceptions surrounding feminism is the idea that it is focused on women and only aims to benefit women, but the patriarchy hurts everyone, and true radical feminism aims to dismantle the patriarchy and improve the lives of everyone. Maxine Baca Zinn, Professor of Sociology and Senior Research Associate at the Julian Samora Research Institute, and Bonnie Thornton Dill, Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland, argue typical ideas of masculinity are valued over ideas of femininity in society, and men strive to be above feminine traits (Baca Zinn et al. 4). This means that any action that does not fall under society's definition of masculine is seen as weak and not manly. It means that men may not be who they truly are because of the fear of being compared to women, who are considered lower in the social hierarchy. ATLA's main character, Aang, is a perfect example of embracing who you are. His entire life, he was raised to be a pacifist and to treat everyone with kindness, patience, and respect. Aang demonstrates this throughout the show by being much more "emotional" than his male and even female friends, despite women being considered emotional and passive by society's standards. This brings forth the idea of traditional masculinity, which former Professor of U.S. History Andrew L. Yarrow describes as being "toughness, strength, power, dominance," but also harmful ideas like men not crying, homophobia, and always taking a fight (Yarrow 62). There are good traits that come with today's masculinity, but the idea of never being allowed to show emotion is unhealthy and damaging to men. In fact, Yarrow goes on to argue that traditional masculinity leads to more acts of violence committed by men due to the emotional stress. Where ATLA shines is the show's depiction of men and masculinity. Another example of Aang and masculinity is his reaction to his pet Appa being stolen. In the episode "The Desert," Aang is upset and takes his anger out by closing himself off, blowing up at Katara who is trying to bring everyone to safety, and destroying the

ships of some sandbenders because one of them stole Appa. This is clearly an unhealthy reaction to losing his pet, and the show focuses on that, with Katara being the calm one who keeps them all alive. In the next episode titled "The Serpent's Pass," Aang goes completely the other way and shuts himself off from emotion entirely, again falling into the trap of traditional masculinity. This episode is where he realizes that he must maintain hope to make it through his situation though, and he cries at the end of the episode after the wave of emotion hits him. He again cries when he and Appa are reunited in "Lake Laogai." ATLA focuses on the moments of Aang releasing his emotion in incredibly unhealthy ways and shows him realizing what he is doing is wrong, and it is healthy to show your emotions. He is a role model for men watching the show to understand it is okay to cry and to feel sad.

The way that ATLA showcases feminism to a young audience is incredibly well done. ATLA teaches kids ideas of feminism without ever needing to say the buzzword of feminism, and provides countless role models to follow along with. In addition to very apparent criticisms of sexism, the patriarchy, and toxic masculinity, there are many more topics to analyze in regards to equality and elevating people of all genders, race, or background. One of the characters, Toph, is blind, yet her disability is actually her greatest asset, allowing her to be the best earthbender in the entire show. Even in the sequel to ATLA, *The Legend of Korra*, there is a female main character who is incredibly tough and resilient, which breaks the norms of femininity. Korra is even bisexual, although it had to be hinted at due to Nickelodeon's homophobia. The universe of ATLA teaches kids many feminist lessons, and should be a benchmark for children's shows of the future. While it is somewhat disappointing the show took a more liberal approach to feminism than a radical one, there is no doubt that it accomplishes the goals it set out to do in

regards to portraying themes of feminism. And feminism is only one of the many ideologies ATLA has to offer.

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