WHITEWASHING: A STUDY ON *THE LAST AIRBENDER* MOVIE

A THESIS

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Sarjana Degree Majoring American Cultural Studies in English Department
Faculty of Humanities Diponegoro University

Submitted by

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PRONOUNCEMENT

The writer honestly confirms that she compiles this thesis entitled "Whitewashing: A Study on *The Last Airbender* Movie" by herself and without taking any results from other researchers in S-1, S-2, S-3 and in diploma degree of any university. The writer ascertains also that she does not quote any material from other publications or someone's paper except from the references mentioned.

Semarang, June 5th 2018

Gneissa A.R. Nirmala

MOTTO AND DEDICATION

"The best way to predict your future is to create it."

- *Abraham Lincoln*

"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow."

- *Albert Einstein*

"Success is walking from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm."

- *Winston Churchill*

I, with all my heart, dedicated this thesis to my

parents, who pour me with their love, and my

friends, who push me back up when I was at my

lowest stage.

APPROVAL

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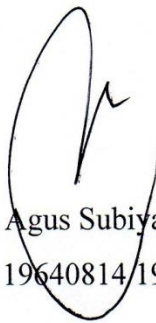on June 5th, 2018

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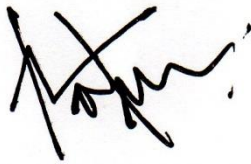NIP. 19521103 198012 1 001

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As this thesis has been completed, I am fully aware that this thesis is still far from perfect. Therefore, by this, I will gladly receive any constructive criticism, recommendations, and suggestions to improve this thesis. I do hope that this thesis will be useful for those studying racism in Hollywood movie industry.

Semarang, June 5th 2018

Gneissa A.R. Nirmala

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ABSTRACT

This study concerns about whitewashing in The Last Airbender movie. The Last Airbender is a fantasy movie telling the journey of a group of friends in order to save the world. This study aims to identify how whitewashing is practiced and how this movie is then considered to whitewash its casts. The writer implements library research with sociological approach to carry out the study. The primary data in this study is the film. The writer obtains the supporting data from previous studies, journal, books, and articles. The writer analyses the issue by applying the theory of racism and whitewashing. From the study, the writer finds, in accordance to the whitewashing theory, that whitewashing is practiced in the movie by Caucasian actors who play the roles of non-white characters and also by atrocious and insignificant characters that are played by non-white actors.

Keyword: Racism, *Whitewashing*, Hollywood, *The Last Airbender*

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

A portion of the society may consider that racism has been long gone, yet it did not. Racism grows from a small daily act. We may not recognize that we possibly have practiced a racism act against a person particularly physically different from us. Lu-In Wang (2006) explains a situational racism as a situation in which people tend to perform discriminative acts in a 'normatively ambiguous' condition, wherein unpleasant treatments towards a person of color are legitimized or considered as rational on several aspects besides race. Therefore, discrimination is 'most likely to occur' in a condition where it is 'least likely to be detected' (Wang, 2006:17).

The fact that the United States of America is an incredibly multicultural country may increase the rate of racism, including in American movie industry, Hollywood. The *2014 Hollywood Diversity Report* conducted by Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA (Hunt et. al., 2014) explains that,

> Historically, there has been a dearth of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity in film and television — both in front of and behind the camera. This reality has meant limited access to employment for women and minorities and to a truncating of the domain of media images available for circulation in contemporary society…When marginalized groups in society are absent from the stories a nation tells about itself, or when media images are rooted primarily in stereotype, inequality is normalized and is more likely to be reinforced over time through our prejudices and practices (Hunt et. al., 2014:5)

The term 'whitewashing' has been rapidly going to social media and news portals as people start to notice a bizarre pattern in several movies in which

colored characters are often played by white actors. Kenneth Lowe (2017), in his article for *Paste Magazine* entitled 'The Scrutable West: Industry Bias, Whitewashing, and the Invisible Asian in Hollywood', describes whitewashing as portraying characters that are described as colored people as white people instead. Even though this issue is brought up massively only in the past two or three years, the practices of whitewashing in Hollywood movies have been taking place since 1960s, as in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961), a famous movie starring the legendary Audrey Hepburn, that presented a form of whitewashing by casting Mickey Rooney to play Mr. Yunioshi, a Japanese.

Whitewashing becomes a huge talk when the adaptation movie of Nickelodeon animation series, *The Last Airbender* (or *The Legend of Aang*) (Shyamalan, 2010) was released. It tells a journey of a teenage monk named Aang who is expected to be the next Avatar, the bender of four elements, after the last one suddenly disappeared one hundred years ago. The movie was highly criticized for its casting white actors to play the lead characters when the story was created based on Asian cultures. This study will identify the practice of whitewashing in the movie by applying the theory of racism.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This study holds several purposes as follows:

1) To analyze the intrinsic elements of the movie *The Last Airbender*

2) To identify the forms of whitewashing in the movie *The Last Airbender*

1.3. Scope of the Study

This study will analyze on an American movie entitled *The Last Airbender* released in 2010 and directed by M. Night Shyamalan (Shyamalan, 2010). This study will only discuss matters within the boundaries of identifying and determining the racism in the movie mentioned before.

1.4. Methods of the Study

1.4.1. Method of Research

The writer will apply library research in regard to the method of research. As explained by Nicholas Walliman (2011), research methods are a set of means employed for various examinations (2011:1). Library research is, thus, 'is a form of structured inquiry with specific tools, rules, and techniques' (George, 2008:1). This type of research includes the classification and detecting sources that present factual information or personal/expert thoughts on a research question, which is an essential aspect of every research method (George, 2008:6). The primary data in this study is *The Last Airbender* movie by M. Night Shyamalan. The secondary data is obtained from journals, books, articles, and previous studies related to the issue discussed.

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1.4.2. Method of Approach

For the method of approach, the writer will concern in sociological approach. Sociology is the scientific study of human society and social interactions. Sociology aims to understand social situations and look for repeating patterns in society. It also tries to understand the forces that operate throughout society—forces that mold individuals, shape their behavior, and, thus, determine social events (Tischler, 2007:4).

Sociology concerns about the 'development, structure, interaction, and collective behavior of social relationship.' It embraces the diversity of the social worlds, including intimate, personal interactions to impersonal gatherings of many people. These interactions include families, communities, neighborhoods, and even nations, or relationships and interactions among nations (Stolley, 2005:1-2).

In *The Sociology of Literature* (1972), Laurenson and Swingewood argue that, similar to sociology, literature is also concerned with "man's social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it" (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972:12). Sociology of literature is developed from sociology and literature. Literature directly reflects different aspects of "social structures, family relationships, class conflicts, and possibly divorce trends and population composition" (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972:13). Thus, it becomes a duty of the sociologist of literature to associate "the experiences of the writer's imaginary characters and situations to the historical climate from which they derive" (Lowenthal in Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972:14).

Sociology contributes an understanding of social issues and patterns of behavior. Hence, it identifies the social standards that regulate the life of human beings. It gives the understanding of the workings of the social systems. In this study, the sociological approach will focus on the issue of racism.

1.5. Previous Studies

In order to prevent emerging similarities and plagiarism, the writer found several studies on this matter that have been conducted by several researchers from a number of universities.

The first study is written by William Lowrey (2016) in his paper entitled People Painted Over: Whitewashing of Minority Actors in recent Film. In his paper, Lowrey observes the whitewashing phenomenon in recent Hollywood movies and examines how whitewashing is practiced in those movies.

Secondly, Kai Nelson (2016) also conducts a study on whitewashing in his work entitled Where's the Representation? The Impact of White Washing on Black Children. Nelson investigates how whitewashing influences the way Black American children see themselves in the society.

Considering these two previous studies, the writer attempts to exercise different analysis by focusing specifically on the whitewashing practiced in *The Last Airbender* movie.

1.6. Organization of the Writing

Chapter I : INTRODUCTION

This chapter encompasses the background, the scope, and the purposes of the study. It also elaborates the previous studies on the similar matter.

Chapter II: SYNOPSIS

This chapter elaborates the summary of the movie.

Chapter III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter comprises of the obtained data supporting the analysis.

Chapter IV: ANALYSIS

This chapter examines the object of the study to fulfill the purpose of the study by comparing theories and findings.

Chapter V: CONCLUSION

This chapter consists of the conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER II

SYPNOSIS OF *THE LAST AIRBENDER*

Two siblings from the Southern Water Tribe, Sokka and Katara, are on their boat when they find a humongous ball of ice. Katara, with no hesitation, approaches the iceberg as she is instantly filled with curiosity. A strong bright light beam suddenly shoots out of the iceberg, showing a silhouette of a boy with arrow symbols on his head and arms. The boy, then, loses his consciousness after the beam shuts down. Katara and Sokka bring him to their village, along with the boy's pet, Appa, a giant flying bison.

The siblings get to know that the name of the boy is Aang, the last air bender existing after the temple of the air benders was attacked and destroyed by the Fire Army hundred years ago. He is also expected to be next Avatar, the only person who may bend all four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Aang learns the fact that the Fire Nation has held the control over other nations too and the last Avatar had long been gone for an unknown reason. The Fire Army, now led by the Prince of Fire Nation, Zuko, has been haunting for the Avatar since then. When they recognize the light beam as the sign of Aang's appearance, the Fire Army hurriedly inspect the Water Tribe village and demand the people to relinquish the Avatar. Aang turns himself in to protect the villagers and is kept as a prisoner by Zuko. He, then, is able to escape with the help of his glider and Appa, brought by Katara and Sokka.

The three teenagers seek refuge at the Earth Kingdom which turns out has been under the hand of Fire Nation. The rebellions of the Earth Kingdom help them get away from being captured by the Fire Army. Aang realizes that he must master each bending techniques of the four elements to release all nations from Fire Nation's control. He asks Katara to teach him water bending but Katara is still lacking. She suggests that they should go to the Northern Water Tribe to get a better training for Aang and liberate more Earth Kingdom villages in the process, weakening the Fire Nation's food and water supplies.

Aang is betrayed by a Southern Earth Kingdom farmer and apprehended by the archers of Fire Army, led by Commander Zhao who is appointed directly by the Fire Lord. Aang once again manages to get away from the army with the help of the 'Blue Spirit', a masked raider. They, then, fight the Fire Army side by side until the Blue Spirit takes Aang as a hostage when he realizes they do not have enough power to defeat the army. He lures the army by negotiating and succeeds in bringing Aang away from the prison. Commander Zhao recognizes that the masked rider is actually Zuko. He tries to kill the Prince, but this time Aang saves Zuko by bending clouds that they surround the prison. The army stops the pursuit in fear. Aang finds his way to reunite with Katara and Sokka, while Zuko goes back to his old self, capturing the Avatar.

Aang, Katara, and Sokka are warmly welcomed by the Northern Water Tribe villagers and the Princess, Yue. Sokka immediately becomes friendly with Yue. Aang receives water bending training from Pakku and Katara is able to strengthen her bending techniques.

As Zhao learns that Aang has gone to the Northern Water Tribe, he prepares his army to attack the village. Zuko, on the other hand, pursues Aang in his own way. Katara and Zuko collide in a battle as she protects Aang who enters the Spirit World looking for the Dragon Spirit to give him the wisdom to defeat the Fire Army. After returning to his body, Aang fights Zuko before Katara freezes him. Zhao kills the Moon Spirit to bring down the power of the water benders. Princess Yue, aware of this tragedy, sacrifices herself by taking the Moon Spirit's place. Zhao then died in a battle with four water benders who throw a giant wave at him and drown him. Aang, fully grasping his ability as an Avatar, creates a gigantic wall of wave and succeeds in driving the Fire Army away from the palace. Aang accepts his fate as the next Avatar and continues his journey with Katara and Sokka, while Zuko does not stop his pursue for Avatar.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Intrinsic Aspects

3.1.1. Narrative Elements

As Abrams explains in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999), a narrative is a story, either in the form of prose or verse that includes every event, character, and the characters' dialogues and actions (1999:173). Intrinsic elements that will be discussed in the paper are as below.

3.1.1.1. Character

According to Abrams (1999), characters are the people depicted in a dramatic or narrative work, who are considered, by the reader, to possess specific moral, intellectual, and emotional values by deciphering the dialogues and actions performed by the people mentioned before (1999:32). James L. Potter (1967) defined characters as basic elements in imaginative literature so that they were entitled to great attention given to them (1967:1).

3.1.1.1.1. Major Character

Major characters are the characters that carry a significant role in a narrative work. Holman elaborates in *A Handbook to Literature* (1980) that major character in a fictional work requires three-dimensional approach; that is a collection of characters whose personalities are complicated (1980:76).

3.1.1.1.2. Minor Character

Minor characters are the characters whose role does not particularly affect the plot of a narrative work. Minor characters also work as companions to the major characters.

3.1.1.2. Setting

The setting of a narrative work includes the general location, historical time, and social condition wherein the action takes place. Therefore, the setting of one episode or scene in a narrative work is the 'particular physical location' where it occurs (Abrams, 1999:284). Setting also majorly affects the feeling or tone of a narrative work. It may construct a combination of mood, feeling of the character, and general atmosphere that becomes a part of the allure and 'sense of rightness' such as plot, characterization, or other factors (Bickham, 1999:1).

3.1.1.2.1. Setting of Place

Setting of place may be defined as the location where scenes in a narrative work occur. Holman describes setting of place in *A Handbook to Literature* (1980) as 'the actual geographic location including topography, scenery, and such a physical arrangements as the location of the windows and doors in a room' (1980:413).

3.1.1.2.2. Setting of Time

Setting of time concerns about a particular period of time when a scene occurs in a narrative work (Holman, 1980:413). It involves every time unit such as hours, minutes, seconds, days, months, and years, and also parts of the day that consist of morning, afternoon, and evening.

3.1.1.2.3. Setting of Social Environment

Setting of social environment deals with the condition that surrounds the characters including religious, mental, moral, and social values (Holman, 1980:453).

3.1.1.3. Conflict

Conflict involves 'the tension, opposition, or struggle' built to guide the story. Conflict is classified into two; external and internal conflict. External conflict is the tension emerging when two characters or forces interact, while internal conflict occurs only in one character's self (Jago et.al., 2011:1485).

3.1.2. Cinematic Elements

According to Mascelli (1965), there are five aspects of cinematic elements, namely camera angles, continuity, cutting, close-ups, and composition (5Cs). Camera angles are responsible for the audience's viewpoint and area covered in the shot. A correct camera angle may strengthen the *dramatic visualization* of the motion (Mascelli, 1965:11). Thus, where the cameras are installed becomes a critical consideration. There are three aspects that influence the camera angles. They are subject size, subject angle, and camera height.

3.1.2.1. Subject Size

The subject size or the image size is resolved by the camera distance; the smaller the distance, the larger the image size (Mascelli, 1965:24). Camera distance or shot, thus, is classified as below.

3.1.2.1.1. Extreme Long Shot

This shot generates an image of a far-reaching area from certain viewpoints. This type of shot is mostly taken from a high position and a large distance, such as a rooftop or a mountain peak. Directors occasionally put this shot into several frames to have the audience impressed by particular events. This shot may also help some scenes introduce the setting to the audience (Mascelli, 1965:25)

Picture 3.1 Extreme Long Shot
(From http://www.mediaknowall.com/camangles.html)

3.1.2.1.2. Long Shot

Long shot is set up to give the audience full coverage of the scene; the actors, the place, and other objects. It must be able to relay who is engaged in the situation and where the situation takes place. This shot provides the whole depiction of the actors (from head to toe) and the objects surrounding them (Mascelli, 1965:26).

Picture 3.2 Long Shot
(From http://www.mediaknowall.com/camangles.html)

3.1.2.1.3. Medium Shot

Medium shot is also known as intermediate shot as it stands between long shot and close-up. This type of shot recorded the actors from above the knees or below the waist. Even though this shot is taken from a relatively short distance, it still can depict the expressions and gestures of the characters. This shot is popular in television show industry. The 'two-shots' is perhaps the medium shot that may bring out the dramatic tension in a scene (Mascelli, 1965:27)

Picture 3.3 Medium Shot
(From http://www.mediaknowall.com/camangles.html)

3.1.2.1.4. Close-Up

Close-up shots of particular actors are set up in the script based on the image size. A medium close-up covers the actors from between the waist and shoulder to above the head. A head-and-shoulder close-up limits the frame from below the shoulder to above the head. A head close-up only films the head area. Lastly, a choker close-up focuses on the facial area from just below the lips to above the eyes. (Mascelli, 1965:32)

Picture 3.4 Close-up
(From https://www.videoeditingsage.com/camera-shot-close-up.html)

3.1.2.2. Subject Angle

Since all objects supposedly are constructed in three-dimensional form, the images depicted in the frame should also create the same solid composition. This can be achieved in several ways, but the most effective one is by choosing the right camera angle. Mascelli (1965) states that angle takes a critical role in capturing "illusion of scenic depth" (1965:34).

The cameramen are expected to place the camera preferably at a forty-five-degree angle, also known as the three-quarter angle, to the subject. This angle will "record people with roundness, and solid objects with two or more surfaces, and converging lines which produce perspective—suggesting three dimensions" (Mascelli, 1965:35)

3.1.2.3. Camera Height

Camera height may not be as regarded as camera distance and subject angle, but it still is as important as the other two aspects. Placing the camera at a certain height may influence the "artistic, dramatic, and psychological"

implications in the film. How the audiences engage in and react to the scenes is also majorly influenced by the height of the camera (Mascelli, 1965:35).

3.1.2.3.1. Level Angle

A scene is considered to be recorded from a level camera angle when the camera is positioned at the eye-level of an observer or a subject with average heights. Even though this angle often creates monotonous images, it remains necessary in portraying eye-level perspectives, for instances, objectives shots, that display the perspectives of an observer, are preferably taken from "the eye-level of an average person". Meanwhile, close-ups are filmed from the subject's eye-level to develop an "eye-to-eye basis" between the character and the audiences (Mascelli, 1965:35-36).

3.1.2.3.2. High Angle

A scene is shot from a high angle when the camera is bended from above towards a lower position. This angle is often used to create an aesthetic image that allows any action to take place deeply and also determines how the audiences react (Mascelli, 1965:37-38).

> The subjective camera may also place the audience higher, so that it may look down on a player to feel superior to him; and to achieve a certain heavenly transcendence over both the player and his situation. Such high-angling is excellent whenever a player should be belittled, either by his surroundings or by his actions. An important player who loses prestige or honor may thus be depicted. As beaten down by circumstances, or natural elements, or terrain, simply by positioning the camera high, employing a Wide-angle lens to look down upon him, and reducing his image to lowly insignificance in relation to the setting. (Mascelli, 1965:39)

3.1.2.3.3. Low Angle

As low angle is the opposite of high angle, thus a low angle shot is filmed from below towards a higher position. It has to be noted that a low angle is not

particularly similar to the 'worm's eye' view or that it has to be shot lower than the camera's position. A low angle that is employed to film religious buildings may construct amazement among the audiences since such depiction will create a situation as if the audiences interact with God. This type of angle is also used to portray admiration of characters towards other characters or to represent a symbol of domination and power. (Mascelli, 1965:41).

3.1.2.3.4. Tilt 'Dutch' Angle

Dutch angle is defined as an extremely tilted angle, where "the vertical axis of the camera is at an angle to the vertical axis of the subject." The implementation of this angle has to be accompanied with great caution as it may draw the story away. This angle is mostly used to depict a "highly-emotional state" (Mascelli, 1965:47).

Picture 3.5 Tilt 'Dutch' Angle
From (https://nofilmschool.com/2015/09/should-you-use-dutch-angles-films-yes-but)

3.1.2.4. Sound

According to Bordwell and Thompson in *Film Art: An Introduction* (2013), sound is one of the most significant components in movie for several logics. First, it may create distinctive impressions. Background music, such as orchestra and piano, furnishes the quietness and allows the audience to acquire an absolute

experience. In addition, as how Sergei Eisenstein describes it, sound may build the 'synchronization of senses' in which each rhythm confines image and sound (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013: 267).

3.1.2.4.1. Dialogue

One part of sound that is certainly important in a film is dialogue. Dialogue is a conversation between two characters or more. It builds up the action and is usually constant in regards of the player's characteristics, social status, and passions. It may differ in tone and style based on the player's dialect, nationality, job, and social class. It also depicts the perceptions of the people engaging in the conversation (Holman, 1980:127-128).

3.1.2.5. Mise-en-Scene

Derived from French, mise-en-scene is literally translated to 'putting into scene' and was first implemented to direct theatrical plays (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:113).

> Film scholars, extending the term to film direction, use the term to signify the director's control over what happens in the film frame. As you would expect, mise-en-scene includes those aspects of film that overlap with the art of theater: setting, lighting, costume and makeup, and staging and performance. (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:113)

Thus, the study will also provide the elaboration of the aspects of mise-en-scene.

3.1.2.5.1. Setting

Setting becomes a major role in producing movies. It does not only act as a space filled with human activities but also may effectively engage in actions. A director of a film may transform his natural surroundings into a setting or build his own setting that is more known as studio (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:115).

3.1.2.5.2. Costume and Makeup

Costume selection is a significant role in a movie production. Costumes may intensify personalities and depict behavior development of the characters. Costumes are also important to essentially heighten the graphic quality. Mostly, costumes are designed according to the respectable settings in which these costumes will be worn (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:119).

Following costumes, another aspect that is as crucial is makeup. In the early movie era, makeup is especially necessary as a mean to strengthen the facial expression of the characters. Nowadays the players' makeup is expected to be more subtle yet still displays their expression at the same time. Makeup is also applied to cover facial imperfections, such as wrinkles, pimples, or unhealthy skin. It, too, may emphasize certain parts of one's face, for example, applying eyeliner and mascara will attract more attention to the players' eyes (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:122).

3.1.2.5.3. Lighting

In order to create an excellent film, lighting is one of the aspects that have to be deeply considered. The sole purpose of lighting is to let the object and subject be detectable. However, many directors believe that lighting should also build up impression (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:125)

> Lighting is more than just illumination that permits us to see the action. Lighter and darker areas within the frame help create the overall composition of each shot and guide our attention to certain objects and actions. A brightly illuminated patch may draw our eye to a key gesture, while a shadow may conceal a detail or build up suspense about what may be present. Lighting can also articulate textures: the curve of a face, the grain of a piece of wood, the tracery of a spider's web, the sparkle of a gem. (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:125)

3.2. Extrinsic Aspects

3.2.1. Racism

As literature is an expression of society, literature depicts some aspects of social reality (Wellek and Warren, 1942:90). In *Theory of Literature* by Wellek and Warren (1942), a literary work may contain the problem of the social content, the implications and social purpose of the works of literature themselves (1942:90). Based on that theory, this paper will discuss the sociology aspect of the movie. The issues will be analyzed with racism theory.

In the eighteenth century, an abundance of European languages engaged several refinements towards the term 'race' and other similar expressions implying generality of lineage or sense into more common ideas and interpretation, leading to the constitution of a phrase where people grew a relationship with others and created a perception of their features (Banton, 1998:4).

Race is defined as a group of people who are considered to be similar as they share identical physical features. This categorizing based on biological traits is found to not regard differences in hair or nose type (Tischler, 2007:218).

Back and Solomos (2000) concludes from Banton's elaboration on race in *The Idiom of Race: A Critique of Presentism* (1980) saying that differences in physical traits between human beings have been examined throughout the history of mankind. This examination leads to the development of words defining those differences. 'Race' is a perception that is established in a certain culture and period of time that bears the ideas of how these differences should be described.

'Race' is also defined as lineage at the time people were illiterate of the biological learning of descent (Banton in Back and Solomos, 2000:62).

Tzvetan Todorov states that races are defined as a group of human beings comprising of those who share similar physical features or asserting the importance and the gravity of that belief (in Back and Solomos, 2000:66). The concept of race is associated with biological and cultural elements, such as skin color, religion, and behavior. Meanwhile, a racial status is influenced by political agreement and alteration (Rattansi, 2007:7-8). Racial group, then, embodies those experiencing the same history, practicing their own cultural traditions, originating from a comparable region, speaking a similar language, authoring similar literature, believing in similar religion, and standing as the minority or majority in a greater society (Rattansi, 2007:87).

These physical differences are believed to have brought up racism within the social system. It is notable that racism and racial discrimination are not common issues. Racial discrimination evolves in the matter of unequal manner towards certain races and racial inequality covers the unequal outcomes, such as wage, education, and health. Meanwhile, racism is formed by both actions (Pager and Sheperd in Clair and Denis, 215:857).

Jones in Augoustinos and Reynolds (2001), define racism as an understanding that one race may have dominance over another and attitudes cultivating that superiority and inferiority (2001:3). The term 'racism' is described in two different ideas: behavior, in which hatred is exhibited towards those who have particular physical traits and look different, and ideology as a principle

dealing with races. Racism is also an archaic action that has been spreading globally (Todorov in Back and Solomos, 2000:64). Racism tends to relate to "a philosophy of racial antipathy" (Cox in Back and Solomos, 2000:71).

'Racism' was first mentioned in the 1930s, mainly to give an answer to the Nazi venture of cleaning all the Jews from Germany (Rattansi, 2007:4). Racial exploitation and prejudice against race flourished in European society along with the growth of capitalism and nationalism. Thus, as the gravity of this ascending capitalism, racial antagonism might be found in the policies and behavior of the leading capitalists, white Europeans and North Americans (Cox in Back and Solomos, 2000:72).

Cox quoted from Josef W. Hall (1972:4), "the white man's conception of himself as the aristocrat of the earth came gradually through the discovery, as surprising to himself as to anyone else, that he had weapons and organization which made opposition to his ambition futile" (in Back and Solomos, 2000:74).

In 1815, American scholars believed in the ideas that racial differences were influenced by environment, which was descended from the European Enlightenment. Yet, they showed the tendency to have a more scientifically rationale opinion. Before the 1840s, American experts on race developed theories supporting "innate differences between races". These notions were spread all over America and were used by Europeans who objected the old belief of "the unity of the human race" (Horsman in Bulmer and Solomos, 1999:45).

3.2.1.1. Whitewashing

A new concept of racism arising within Hollywood movie industry is whitewashing. This concept lies on "both the process and works within a loose problematic racialization" which focuses "on the construction of white racialized identities" (Gabriel, 1998:4). Whitewashing can be defined as a practice of eliminating apparent minorities in media by lightening their skin tone or "replacing them altogether with white actors" (Nelson, 2016:3). Whitewashing is also translated into the act of casting white actors to play non-white characters within the boundary of film making (Zhang, 2017:321).

The practice of whitewashing in Hollywood has started as far as the early 1900s when white actors portrayed black characters by coloring their face black to resemble the characters. This practice was known as "blackface". Besides blackface, Hollywood film makers also practiced "yellowface" to portray Asian characters, "brownface" to portray Latinos, and "redface" to portray indigenous people (Zhang, 2017:321).

Whitewashing consists of two fundamental elements, namely "the inequality of culture representation and racial stereotypes" (Zhang, 2017:321). A research by USC Annenberg shows that out of all speaking or named characters in top movies released between 2007 and 2014, only 24.8% were portrayed by minorities (Smith et.al, 2015:15). However, the characters played by minorities are frequently depicted "based on undesirable stereotypes, and are marginalized with flat and uninteresting storylines" (Nelson in Zhang, 2017:321).

Whitewashing emerges as the result of several factors. Most of Hollywood filmmakers are originated from English-speaking settler states and other countries in Europe. "The stereotypes of minorities have remained unchallenged in their minds as well as their filmmaking practices" (Ginneken in Zhang, 2017:322). Moreover, the racism against cultural representation in movies has been dominant for so long that it is challenging to change the practice that has transformed into a norm (Denzin in Zhang, 2017:322).

Whitewashing is also derived from Eurocentrism (Zhang, 2017:322). Shohat and Stam (1994) describe Eurocentrism as "the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world's center of gravity, as ontological 'reality' to the rest of the world's shadow" (1994:1-2). Zhang (2017) explains that as these values have been encouraged in the society, many Americans observe things through a Eurocentric perspective, in which "anything other than Caucasian is deemed 'The Other', which always has a negative or inferior connotation" (Zhang, 2017:322). This kind of perspective does not only influence the filmmaking process but also the film consumption. Americans tend to watch movies that support their Eurocentric belief. A movie will not be doing well in the industry if it disprove with Americans' susceptibility (Zhang, 2017:322).

CHAPTER IV

WHITEWASHING: A STUDY ON THE LAST AIRBENDER MOVIE

This chapter will discuss the movie *The Last Airbender* (Shyamalan, 2010) in regards to the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. The intrinsic aspects will contribute in analyzing the narrative elements of the movie, including characters, conflicts, and settings. Meanwhile, the extrinsic aspects will mainly focus in analyzing the external issue related to movie, which in this case is the practice of whitewashing.

4.1. Intrinsic Aspects

Intrinsic aspects in this discussion will analyze the narrative elements of the movie *The Last Airbender* (Shyamalan, 2010). Below is the analysis of the regarded aspects.

4.1.1. Characters

4.1.1.1. Major Characters

Major characters in this movie are portrayed by Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Zuko as they majorly influence the storyline and possess important roles.

1. Aang

Aang depicts a young monk who possesses the ability of air bending. He is trained by the monks in the Southern Air Temple. He is later informed that he is chosen as the next Avatar, the four-element bender. He is destined to bring peace to the four nations and save the world. Overwhelmed by the revelation, Aang runs away from his fate and responsibility. He is afraid that he may not be able to fulfill his duty as he is only a child. During his escape, Aang encounters a storm

that traps him in a giant ice sphere for a hundred years. He is rescued by the siblings, Sokka and Katara from the Water Kingdom.

The development of Aang's characteristics can be seen during the movie. In the beginning, he still holds a child-like side inside of him. This is expected as Aang is predicted to be no older than twelve years old. In several scenes, he is shown to be unstable and sensitive. His characteristics are going back and forth between mature and childish.

Picture 4.1 His running away from home shows his childish attitude (00:07:09

Picture 4.2 He then realizes that his doings are wrong (00:07:18)

The scene above is filmed in medium shot and eye-level angle to disclose Aang's expression and gestures. His face expression depicts the innocence of a kid that also explains his characteristic. Although Aang is somehow introduced by his childish attitude, his mature personality emerges in later scenes. His heroic and courageous instincts emerge when Prince Zuko and his army march into the Water Tribe Village with their machines and weapons. As Prince Zuko threatens the villagers by ordering his army to capture all elderly, Aang steps in to protect the people as presented in scene 00:09:43—00:10:17.

> AANG : You're scaring these people.
> PRINCE ZUKO : Who are you? What's your name?
> AANG : I don't need to tell you anything.

PRINCE ZUKO : Firebenders! [*Zuko's soldiers move into position*] I'm taking you to my ship. If you don't come, I'll burn this village.

AANG : I'll go with you don't hurt anyone.

(Aang and Prince Zuko, *The Last Airbender*, 00:09:43—00:10:17)

From the dialogue above, it can be inferred that Aang's bravery and responsible manner slowly start to arise. Even though at this moment he becomes clueless about his destiny as the Avatar due to his long sleep, he believes that he must defend the villagers from Fire Army's brutality.

Besides his courageous attitude, his mature characteristic is also displayed by his leadership and wisdom. During his journey to the Northern Water Tribe, Aang, Katara, and Sokka are captured by a group of Fire Soldiers when they try to save a young earth bender. They are brought to the prison confining a number of earth benders. Witnessing how the earth benders are subject to the Fire Army, Aang attempts to persuade the earth benders to fight in scene 00:27:47—00:28:37.

AANG : Eartbenders! Why are you acting this way? You are powerful and amazing people! You don't need to live like this. There is earth right beneath your feet. The ground is an extension of who you are. If the Avatar had returned, would that mean anything to you?

EARTHBENDERS : The Avatar is dead. If he was here, he would protect us.

AANG : My name is Aang and I am the Avatar. I ran away, but I'm back now. It's time for you to stop doing this!

(Aang and Earthbenders, *The Last Airbender*, 00:27:47—00:28:37)

Aang's short speech succeeds to have the earth benders fight the Fire Army and defeat them. This scene also exhibits how Aang has accepted his fate and duty as the Avatar that indicates the growth of his character.

Picture 4.3 Aang proclaims himself as the Avatar (00:28:21)

Picture 4.4 Aang proclaims himself as the avatar

This scene is shot in a medium close-up to draw sympathy from the audience towards Aang's responsibility as the Avatar. The shot also emphasizes Aang's facial expression and feelings as he is finally ready to fulfill his duty. At the end of the movie, Aang's heroic act is pronounced by his combat against the Fire Army to protect the Northern Water Tribe. This is shown between 00:27:10—00:32:14.

Picture 4.5 Aang fights the Fire Army (00:27:10)

Picture 4.6 Aang has conflict with himself on how to protect the Northern Water Tribe (00:28:04)

Picture 4.7 Aang faces the Fire Army (00:27:55)

Picture 4.8 Aang builds a giant wave to drive the Fire Army away (01:30:07)

Picture 4.9 Everyone gives a deep bow of respect to Aang as he defeats the Fire Army (01:33:39)

During the scene, it is shown how Aang bears a formidable burden on his shoulders when he realizes that he is the only person that has the ability to save the tribe and everyone in it. Aang, eventually, accomplishes to defeat the Fire Army by forging an enormous wave. This wave scene is recorded in an extreme long shot to give a full depiction of Aang's power and exhibits his greatness. The scene also presents a picture where everyone pays Aang a deep bow of respect to affirm that Aang is their new leader.

2. **Katara and Sokka**

Katara, the sister of Sokka, opens *The Last Airbender* (Shyamalan, 2010) by narrating the legend of Avatar. These two siblings are the first characters to be

introduced at the beginning of the movie. Katara and Sokka are considered as major characters as they are the ones who save Aang, the hero of the movie.

Katara is depicted as a strong-will young lady who is still struggling with learning water bending. As the only water bender in her family after her mother left, she holds a great responsibility to preserve the ability so that it will not vanish. She also has to take care of his brother from time to time. This develops a motherly characteristic inside her. Her mature side is shown in scene 00:06:18—00:06:30 when she encounters Aang for the first time.

> KATARA : (*to Aang*) What's your name? How did you get here? How did you get in the ice? He's exhausted. We need to get him back to the village.
> (Katara, *The Last Airbender*, 00:06:18—00:06:30)

This scene indicates that Katara's motherly attitude emerges when she finds the helpless Aang. She instantly worries about Aang's well-being. Katara's mature characteristic leads to her rejecting any disagreeing opinion. She also acquires a stubborn attitude.

Picture 4.10 Sokka warns Katara to stay away from the ice sphere (00:05:03)

Picture 4.11 Sokka, again, warns his sister (00:05:11)

Picture 4.12 Katara disobeys her brother
and breaks the ice (00:05:14)

From this scene, it can be seen how Katara makes her own decision and does not regard her brother's warning. This scene is filmed in a two-shot medium shot in which two characters are filmed together in one frame. It is recorded with a normal angle to create a clear picture of Katara and Sokka's expression. Katara's stubbornness often influences the storyline, such as in scene 00:10:35—00:11:04.

> SOKKA : They were looking for someone old. And they were looking for someone with the same markings the boy had.
> KATARA : They dragged Mom the same way when we were babies. She wouldn't have watched us being taken away. She would have fought. We found that boy. He's our responsibility. We should fight. What would you do if they tried to take me away?
> SOKKA : I'd kill them all.
> KATARA : Why?
> SOKKA : Because you're my sister. Because Dad told me to protect you with my life.
> KATARA : Because I'm your responsibility. And this boy is our responsibility.
> (Katara and Sokka, *The Last Airbender*, 00:10:35—00:11:04)

Katara's words succeed in luring Sokka to agree to save Aang from the Fire Army. This can be considered as the start of the journey that Katara, Sokka, and Aang are going to have. Katara may also be described as brave and dauntless. In several scenes, she often carries out actions that may bring danger to herself.

Picture 4.13 Katara hits the iceberg
(00:05:14)

Picture 4.14 Katara protects a
young earth bender from the Fire
Army (00:26:15)

Picture 4.15 Katara pushes a fire soldier
(00:28:46)

Meanwhile, Sokka has opposite characteristics to her sister's. Sokka is often doubtful towards things around him and always worries about everything, particularly if it involves Katara. As the only son in his family, Sokka grows up believing that he is going to be a warrior. After his mother killed during a Fire Nation attack and his father left the tribe to serve in the War, Sokka considers himself responsible for the safety of his family and the people.

> SOKKA   : Katara, don't go near it. This is probably some Fire Nation
>   trick. Just back away really slow.
> (Sokka, *The Last Airbender*, 00:04:56—00:05:04).
>
> SOKKA   : The Fire Nation is here.
> KATARA : What?
> SOKKA   : …and they brought their machines. Don't come out 'til I tell
>   you it's safe.
> (Sokka and Katara, *The Last Airbender*, 00:07:48—00:07:53).

KATARA : We should fight. What would you do if they tried to take me
away?

SOKKA   : I'd kill them all.

KATARA : Why?

SOKKA   : Because you're my sister. Because Dad told me to protect
you with my life.

(Sokka and Katara, *The Last Airbender*, 00:10:48—00:11:04)

From the dialogues above, it can be inferred that Sokka incredibly preconceives everything to have relation to the Fire Nation. During his journey to the Northern Water Tribe with Aang and Katara, Sokka is always anxious about being followed and captured by the Fire Army. He always ensures that they are not entailed and prevents any actions that will leave traces of them. However, despite his skeptical attitudes, Sokka exhibits his warrior spirit by protecting Aang and Katara every time they encounter danger. He also shows his leadership throughout the journey as he plays an incredible role in planning and arranging strategy.

AANG   : I need to tell you something.

KATARA : What is it, Aang?

AANG   : I ran away before they trained me to be the Avatar. I don't
know how to bend the other elements.

KATARA : Why did you run away?

AANG   : The day they told me I was the Avatar, they say I could
never have a normal life, that I could never have a family.
They said it cannot work with the responsibilities of the
Avatar.

KATARA : Why can't the Avatar have a family?

AANG   : I asked that! They said that's the sacrifice the Avatar always
has to make.

SOKKA   : Okay. So, what if we find you teachers, teachers to teach
you bending? Which element would you have to learn first?

AANG   : Water. Water comes after the Air in the cycle. Air, Water, Earth, Fire.

SOKKA   : But, there are really powerful benders in the Northern Water Tribe. My dad told me about it before he left. It's led by a Princess because her father died. There are teachers there, but all the way on the other side of the world.

AANG   : We can get there on Appa.

SOKKA   : That's what I was thinking. And maybe we can stop in the villages on the way, start a change in the War in these small villages. Should we try it?

AANG   : Yes, we should!

(Aang, Katara, and Sokka, *The Last Airbender*, 00:31:45—00:32:47)

When Aang informs his two friends that he is not skillful enough to be the Avatar, Sokka remains composed and calm while thinking of the best solution to this problem. He then shares his idea of taking Aang to the Northern Water Tribe to learn water bending. It can be seen that Sokka is a wise strategy maker.

3. Prince Zuko

The character of Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation is depicted quite uniquely by the movie. He can be identified as the antagonistic character yet at the same time he is not entirely evil. Indeed, Zuko often advertises his status and dominance towards others. However, he develops this attitude based on a reason.

Zuko was sent to the Duel of Fire after defending his colleagues who were to be sacrificed during a battle. He bravely fulfilled his sentence yet it was his father who he had to fight against. He chose to step out of the competition rather than attacking his own father. Out of embarrassment, his father burned Zuko's face and left a scar. In order to gain back his honor, Zuko left his country to find the Avatar and bring him to his father.

With his dignity being disregarded, Zuko develops a hunger for control and dominance.

> PRINCE ZUKO : I am Prince Zuko, son of Fire Lord Ozai and heir to the throne! Bring me all your elderly!
> (Prince Zuko, *The Last Airbender*, 00:08:43—00:08:53)

It can be inferred from this monologue that Zuko tends to emphasize his nobility to gain recognition and respect from the people. During the movie, Zuko is often filmed with a low camera angle and close-up shots so that the audience is also able to empathize with him.
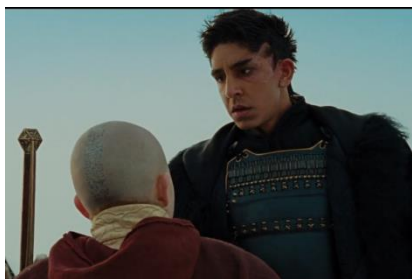
Picture 4.16 Zuko threatens Aang so that Aang will come with him (00:09:53)
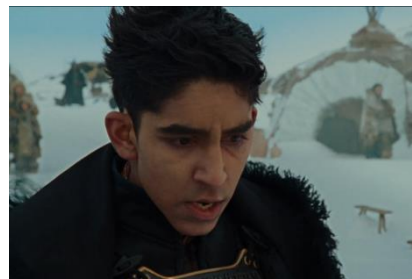
Picture 4.17 Zuko proclaims his nobility before the Water Tribe (00:08:43)

From the scenes above, it can be seen how Zuko is pictured as stronger than everyone else by applying the low camera angle. This angle creates a higher position for his figure, implying that Aang is below him and probably weaker. He is also filmed from close-up shots to emphasize his expressions of anger and gloom.

Zuko is a quite complicated character as at a certain point he depicts so much bitterness and ambition that creates a villainy image. As explained before, his hunt

for the Avatar started after his father banished him from the Fire Nation. Embracing this embarrassment, Zuko is misguided by his revenge to his father.

Picture 4.18 The Blue Spirit rescued Aang (00:46:53)

Picture 4.19 The Blue Spirit is Zuko (00:51:32)

Picture 4.20 When Aang was captured by Zuko (00:11:59)

Picture 4.21 When Aang was captured by Zhao (00:43:13)

From the first two scenes above, it can be seen that Zuko disguises himself as the Blue Spirit in order to rescue Aang from Commander Zhao. This act of his may be inferred as an attempt to undertake Aang from Zhao, yet it also shows his other sides. As mentioned before, Zuko was dispelled from his country after walking out from a battle against his father, intrigued by his belief that no one should be sacrificed. By rescuing Aang, Zuko shows his humane characteristic.

The difference between how Zuko and Zhao treat Aang when they capture him also presents that Zuko is not as evil as Zhao. Zuko may be incredibly

ambitious in term of capturing the Avatar, but he never means any harm to Aang. Meanwhile, Zhao ties Aang to a chain to keep him from escaping. In short, though Zuko is indeed domineering and controlling due to his nature as the Prince of the Fire Nation, but he is also an ordinary child who wishes to gain his father's trust and his pride back.

4.1.1.2. Minor Character

Minor characters are the characters whose role does not particularly affect the plot of a narrative work. Minor characters also work as companions to the major characters. Minor characters in this movie are represented by Uncle Iroh and Commander Zhao.

1. Uncle Iroh

Iroh is the uncle of Prince Zuko and also the elder brother of Fire Lord Ozai. He used to be a General of the Fire Army before retiring. Iroh chooses to accompany his nephew during his journey in finding the Avatar. Iroh becomes a father-like figure for Zuko after he was banished by his own father. Iroh's characters can be described as considerate, wise, and loyal. He often provides advices for Zuko and leads him to the right path.

Picture 4.22 Iroh persuades Aang to take the test (00:12:07)
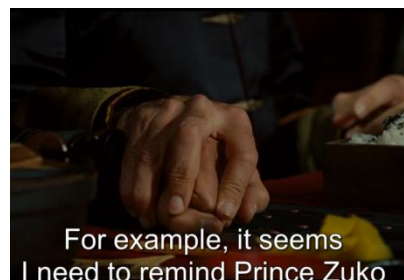
Picture 4.23 Iroh soothes Zuko when he's angry (00:43:13)

During his first appearance in the movie, Iroh exhibits a calming and trustworthy image that Aang ends up convinced to undergo the Avatar test. Iroh is also shown to have persuasive personality. As a father replacement for Zuko, Iroh often manages to control Zuko's temper and defends his nephew when he is a confrontation against Zhao.

> AANG : What do you want with me?
> IROH   : My nephew wants me to perform a little test on you.
> AANG : What kind of test?
> IROH   : I assure you, it won't hurt. I've performed it hundreds of times. It only takes a few moments and then you're free to go. Would you mind if I put a few things in front of you at the table? It will only take a moment.
>
> (Aang and Iroh, *The Last Airbender*, 00:12:00—00:12:23)

Iroh uses words that are assuring and sets his voice tone in a way that is comforting and not threatening for Aang, even though at the end Iroh cannot keep his words as Zuko still intends to capture him. The tone Iroh uses in the entire movie is always laid back, building an image that he is gentle. Iroh is mostly filmed with medium shot and normal level angle so that his facial appearance may be clearly depicted.

Picture 4.24 Iroh exhibits his true power (00:20:46)

Picture 4.25 Iroh rages when Zhao attacks Zuko (00:25:46)

However, despite his serene and amiable nature, Iroh shows no mercy when Zhao cold-bloodily kills the Moon Spirit at the Northern Water Tribe and tries to

attack his nephew. He releases his true power as a highly skilled fire bender. Although he has never demonstrated any of his power in a combat before and tends to avoid conflicts, he cannot hold his anger when Zhao acts harshly. This indicates that Iroh is strongly against heinous doings, even when they are done by his own tribe.

2. Commander Zhao

Commander Zhao is the right hand of Fire Lord Ozai who must bear the duty to capture the Avatar before Prince Zuko does. Zhao is depicted as a strongly ambitious soldier whose life is dedicated entirely for Ozai. He grows incredibly competitive when he finds out that Zuko is also on his way to capture the Avatar. He often belittles Zuko, thinking that Zuko is no match for him. In addition to that, the fact that Zuko is banished from his country by his own father drives Zhao to discredit the Prince more.

> ZHAO : I wanted to thank the great General Iroh and young Prince Zuko for dining with us. As you know, the Fire Lord has banished his son, the prince, and renounced his love of him, and will not let him return to the throne unless he finds the Avatar. The Fire Lord believes his son is too soft, and by doing this, he will become strong and become a worthy heir to the throne.
>
> ZHAO : I commend the Fire Lord's discipline. For example, it seems I need to remind Prince Zuko that, during his banishment, he is an enemy of the Fire Nation and is not allowed to wear the Fire Nation uniform. But we will let him wear it today, like a child wearing a costume.
>
> (Zhao, *The Last Airbender*, 00:23:04—00:23:42)

His wicked personality appears when his ambitions cloud his mind. Besides capturing the Avatar before Prince Zuko does, he is also ordered by Ozai to kill the Moon Spirit so that the Fire Nation may conquer the Northern Water Tribe. Ozai convinces him that it is their destiny to find the spirit and eliminate it. Zhao's viciousness may also be seen when he tries to assassinate Zuko by exploding his ship in order to minimize the rivalry.

Picture 4.26 Zuko's ship explodes
(00:53:56)

Picture 4.27 Zhao cold-heartedly
kills the Moon Spirit (01:20:09)

Picture 4.28 Zhao attacks Zuko
from behind (01:25:43)

During the scene where Zhao eventually discovers the spirit pond, he immediately grabs the Moon Spirit and put it inside a sack. He seems to be hesitant at the beginning, showing how he is conflicting inside. However, he still stabs the spirit with his knife as he holds on to his belief that it is his destiny to do so. His ambition turns him into a more villainous character when he attempts to attack Zuko from behind after the Prince spares his life.

4.1.2. Setting

4.1.2.1. Setting of Place

1. Water Kingdom

By observing the clothing and housing style, the Southern Water Tribe is most likely to be located in the South Pole or in village occupied by an Inuit tribe. As this movie is adapted from a fantasy animated series, each indicated location in this movie may not be entirely accurate. Nonetheless, the people of the Southern Water Tribe exhibit a strong similarity to the Inuit Tribes. They are shown to be living in houses made of ice and also tents made of animal's skin.

Picture 4.29 Southern Water Tribe Surroundings
(00:02:55)

Picture 4.30 Southern Water
Tribe Housing Style (00:06:50)

Picture 4.31 Southern Water
Tribe Clothing Style (00:03:42)

Picture 4.32 Inuit Tribe Clothing Style (From https://www.warpaths2peacepip es.com/images/inuit-igloo-village.jpg)
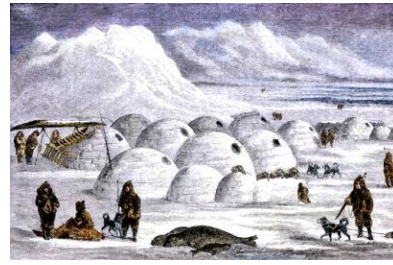
Picture 4.33 Inuit Tribe Housing Style (From https://c1.staticflickr.com/3/2875 /34252941741_4eee8cf4ee_b.jpg

From the pictures above, it can be clearly seen how the Southern Water Tribe builds its village very similarly to the Inuit Tribe. The clothes worn by these two tribes are also almost identical with the thick warm layered fabrics that are probably made from animal skin. Apparently, these clothing and housing topic is mentioned in *Avatar: The Last Airbender—The Art of the Animated Series* written by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino (2010) who are also the creators of Nickelodeon's animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Konietzko and DiMartino, 2005). It is explained that the two creators are inspired by the movie *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Kunuk, 2002) that portrays the life of an Inuit tribe (Konietzko and DiMartino, 2010:42).

Picture 4.34 The entrance to the Northern Water Tribe (00:54:56)

Picture 4.35 The Northern Water Tribe (00:56:26)

On the other side, the Northern Water Tribe is depicted to be much more majestic and luxurious. Compared to the Southern Water Tribe that can be described as a village, Northern Water Tribe is more like a city. It is certainly wider and the architectures inside it are more solid. The buildings are not simply tents or igloos. In addition, the clothes that the people wear are more extravagant and elegant. The Northern Water Tribe is likely to be located in the North Pole since the city is surrounded by ice cliffs and, according to the story, Aang goes on a long journey to reach the city.

2. **Fire Kingdom**

Unlike the Water Kingdom, the Fire Kingdom is assumed to be located in East Asia, particularly China. The settings shown in the Fire Kingdom scenes depict a thick adaptation of Chinese cultures. The uniform worn by the Fire Army, including Zuko, Zhao, Iroh, and Fire Lord Ozai is probably inspired by Chinese ancient warrior armors.

Picture 4.36 Fire Lord Ozai's Attire (00:57:41)

Picture 4.37 Fire Army Uniform (00:08:20)

Picture 4.38 Fire Kingdom Men Clothing (00:52:55)

Picture 4.39 Fire Kingdom Men Clothing (00:53:20)

Picture 4.40 Ancient Chinese Warrior Armor (From https://i.pinimg.com/736x/af/64/0a/af640a54bbdc58b0155b8730 61d4f977--female-armor-chain-mail.jpg)

Picture 4.41 Ancient Chinese Changshan Attire (From http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-wdlUrNVQrrc/U3y88DRF-5I/AAAAAAAAACc/uxATpN53s RA/s1600/C9.jpg)

These clothing indicates that the Fire Kingdom perhaps takes place in China or in a country that is excessively influenced by Chinese cultures. However, the people of Fire Kingdom particularly have South Asian appearance, such as brown skin. Thus, the Fire Kingdom may have two possible locations: East Asia and South Asia.

3. **Earth Kingdom**

According to Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino (2010), the creator of Nickelodeon's animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Konietzko and DiMartino, 2005), on which this movie is based, the Earth Kingdom is culturally inspired by the city of Beijing in China (2010:86). However, the only part of the Earth Kingdom shown in the movie is the prison built by the Fire Army. Hence, the writer will examine the Earth Kingdom's clothing to identify whether it is supposedly located in China or not.

*Picture 4.42 Earth Kingdom
Clothing (00:26:33)*

*Picture 4.43 Earth Kingdom
Clothing (00:27:33)*

*Picture 4.44 Chinese Ancient
Clothing (From
https://traprock.info/trap/a/anci
ent-chinese-clothing-for-the-
poor.html)*

*Picture 4.45 Chinese Ancient
Clothing (From
http://factsanddetails.com/chi
na/cat11/sub70/item155.html)*

The pictures above imply that the Earth Kingdom's clothing has similarities with ancient Chinese clothing. The people of the Earth Kingdom wear Chinese attire for commoners, while in Fire Kingdom the attires are more likely to resemble Chinese royal clothing and armors. Therefore, it may be assumed that the Earth Kingdom is placed in China or, if not, in East Asia.

4. **Air Temples**

Picture 4.46 Southern Air Temple (00:18:24)

Picture 4.47 Northern Air Temple (00:40:22)

The Air Nomads, people of the Air Temples, are depicted to live as monks. The Avatar, Aang, is a young monk with special air bending ability. The temples are placed on top of mountains, filled with trees and wild animals. The precise location is again unknown but it is very much likely to be in East Asia. As we all know, monk and shaolin temples originally come from China even though today they exist in every part of the world.

4.1.2.2. Setting of Time

The Last Airbender (Shyamalan, 2010) has no definite explanation regarding in which period it happens. It may be presumed that the story happens long before today's modern day and several decades after the prehistoric days since the people still believe in Gods and magic, such as the ability of element bending.

4.1.2.3. Setting of Environment

The Last Airbender (Shyamalan, 2010) mainly focuses on the philosophy of the four elements; water, earth, fire, and air. It embodies the tale of the Spirit world and the belief of reincarnation. It delivers the idea that the Avatar is a divinity taking form of a human being. Martial art is also an important part in this movie as each bending uses different techniques and methods.

4.1.3. Conflict

4.1.3.1. Internal Conflict

Internal conflict in this movie is shown by Aang and his denial. In the beginning of the movie, Aang explains that he runs from home because he is upset. Later, it is found that Aang is upset for the fact that he is chosen as the next Avatar. He believes that he is not ready to take the role and the responsibility as he is only a child. Moreover, he cannot accept the requirements he has to meet to become the Avatar, including having no normal life and family. He thinks that being the Avatar is too much to take on for him. Yet, after seeing how the Fire Army oppresses other nations, he realizes that he has to follow his destiny to help other people and to defeat the Fire Army. In the end, Aang holds on to his ability and responsibility as the Avatar so that he can save the world.

4.1.3.2. External Conflict

The fight between Aang and Zuko as well as the competition between Zuko and Zhao are the external conflicts in this movie. Zuko has been trying to capture the Avatar to regain his pride and nobility. Each time these two warriors encounter each other, a battle is always fired. Zuko fights for his father's recognition while Aang fights for his life.

Zuko does not only engage in a fight with Aang, but also with Zhao. Zhao's ambition in catching the Avatar before Zuko does intrigues the competition. Zhao tends to underestimate Zuko's power and even attempts to eliminate him to win the race.

4.2. Extrinsic Aspects

4.2.1. The Forms of Whitewashing

The first character that has been whitewashed is Aang. In the original animation series *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* Aang is portrayed as a teenage monk with Asian physical features, such as yellowish complexion and dark-colored eyes. However, in *The Last Airbender* movie which is based on the animation series, Aang is played by a Caucasian actor.

Picture 4.48 Aang's depiction in the animation series (Season 1, Ep.1, 00:13:09)

Picture 4.49 Aang in the movie version played by Noah Ringer (00:28:25)

It can be seen that Aang's skin tone in the animation version is slightly tanned and pale brown, indicating that he is originated from East Asia. In addition, Aang's portrayal in the animation series is based on a Kung-Fu performing Shaolin team known as *Shaolin: Wheel of Life* as explained by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Di Martino (2010:14), the original creators of the characters in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Meanwhile, in the movie, Noah Ringer, a Caucasian Dallas-born actor, is cast to portray Aang.

In addition, the clothing style both in the animation series and the movie resembles Shaolin attires, which means that the Airbenders are indeed influenced by East Asian cultures. Moreover, the bending technique is based on Chinese
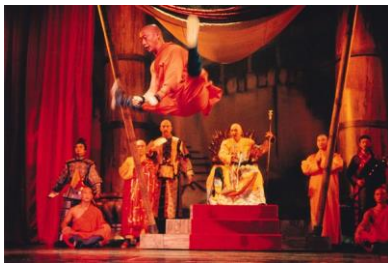
martial arts. By casting a Caucasian actor to play a character that is majorly inspired by East Asian cultures is then a practice of whitewashing.

Picture 4.50 The Air Nomads (01:28:36)

Picture 4.51 The Air Nomads (01:28:27)

Picture 4.52 Shaolin: Wheel of Life (From http://www.shaolinwheeloflife.com/show/perform.html)

Picture 4.53 Shaolin: Wheel of Life (From http://www.shaolinwheeloflife.com/show/default.html)

Katara and her brother Sokka have also been whitewashed. As mentioned before, the Southern Water Tribe is predicted to be placed in a small Inuit Tribe village. This assumption is drawn from the clothing and the housing styles used by the Southern Water Tribe. Both aspects share similar looks with the ones known as part of the Inuit cultures. Hence, Katara and Sokka's depiction in the movie is expected to resemble the people of the Inuit tribe.

Picture 4.54 Katara and Sokka in the animation series (Season 1, Ep. 1, 00:08:09)

Picture 4.55 Katara and Sokka in the movie version (00:04:54)

Picture 4.56 Katara in the animation series (Season 1, Ep. 1, 00:02:03)

Picture 4.57 Katara in the movie version (00:08:33)

Picture 4.58 Sokka in the animation series (Season 1, Ep. 1, 00:02:20)

Picture 4.59 Sokka in the movie version (00:05:12)

In the animation series, both Katara and Sokka have darker skin tone that signifies they are indigenous people, particularly from the Inuit Tribe. Again, Konietzko and Di Martino also explain that the characters of Katara, Sokka, and the entire member of Southern Water Tribe are inspired by the Inuit Tribe (2010:42).

Picture 4.60 An Inuit woman (From https://www.windows2universe. org/earth/polar/inuit_image_gal lery.html)

Picture 4.61 The people of Inuit Tribe (From https://www.windows2universe. org/earth/polar/inuit_image_gal lery.html)

Moreover, in the beginning of the movie, it is shown that Katara and Sokka are outside to go hunting for food. Their main transportation is the boat. It can be seen from the boat at the river bank. People of the Inuit tribe similarly used boat to transport or fishing. Sokka's weapon, which is a boomerang, is very much similar to Native American traditional weapon. Konietzko and DiMartino specifically state that Sokka's boomerang is indeed designed based on the one used by Native Americans (2010:19). However, two young Caucasian actors, Nicola Peltz and Jackson Rathbone, are given the opportunity to play the roles.

Picture 4.62 Katara and Sokka use boat (00:02:56)

Picture 4.63 Inuit people use boat (From https://www.windows2universe. org/earth/polar/inuit_image_ga llery.html

In addition, it becomes quite bizarre to see part of the Southern Water Tribe in the movie version actually show similar characteristics to the Inuit people.

Picture 4.64 A child from Southern Water Tribe (00:07:53)

Picture 4.65 Children from Southern Water Tribe (00:09:31)

Picture 4.66 People from Southern Water Tribe (00:09:22)

The similarities between the Southern Water Tribe and the Inuit Tribe indicate that Katara and Sokka are indigenous descents. Thus, by casting Caucasian actor and actress to play the characters, the practice of whitewashing is once again found in the movie.

Another factor drawing the argument that the Avatar universe is mainly located in East Asia, except the Water Tribes, is the fact that all four of the element bending is derived from Chinese martial arts. Konietzko and Di Martino mentioned that the concept of the Avatar universe is "an Asian-influenced fantasy world". Thus, it is only appropriate if Chinese martial arts are adopted into the

animated series and the movie as the bending techniques. This shows that Asian influences in the story are too thick to be made invisible and replaced by casting actors who are not Asian descends.

As explained before in the previous chapter, one of the essential aspects of whitewashing is cultural representation. The representation of minority groups in Hollywood movie industry is not significant compared to the portrayal of white actors and actresses. It is also explained that characters played by the members of minority group are frequently depicted based on not so appealing stereotypes, and are diminished with unexciting storylines.

Dev Patel, an Indian-British actor, was casted to play Prince Zuko, Aang's mortal enemy. Following Dev Patel, there are Shaun Toub and Aasif Mandvi who also play as Fire Benders. Shaun Toub's character, Uncle Iroh, may not be that vicious, but he is still a part of a nation that wishes to conquer the world, which makes him become one of Aang's enemies. Meanwhile, Aasif Mandvi plays as Commander Zhao who is recognized for his evil deeds and cruelty. To also be noted, the people of the Fire Nation are played by Indian actors, including the Fire Army. This creates a controversy as the only remarkable Asian representation in the movie is depicted as villainous and immoral.

Picture 4.67 Dev Patel as Prince Zuko (00:14:57)

Picture 4.68 Shaun Toub as Uncle Iroh (00:12:05)

Picture 4.69 Aasif Mandvi as Commander Zhao (00:22:44)

Picture 4.70 Indian actors as Fire Army (00:23:02)

Other Asian and Non-White representations in the movie are played by extra actors, who are only shown for a couple of minutes. Black actors that are involved in this production play as the people from one of the nations—there is no certain explanation regarding which nation they represent. They are on the screen for a split minute, from 00:32:58 to 00:33:21. The only Black actor who has the most screen time is Damon Gupton as Monk Gyatso. Despite his appearances, Gupton has no dialogues from the beginning until the end of the movie.

Picture 4.71 Damon Gupton as Monk Gyatso (01:28:57)

Picture 4.72 Black actors and actresses in the movie (00:33:14)

Similar case happens to East Asian actors. They are casted to play as the people of the Earth Kingdom. However, the earthbenders here are portrayed as weak and helpless.

SOKKA : That's the Fire Nation's plan, suppress all other bending.

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AANG              :  How did this happen to your village?
EARTHBENDER       :  Fire Nation sent soldiers. We fought them and
                     defeated them. Then they sent their machines, huge
                     machines made of metal. There was nothing we
                     could do. Those who could not bend were allowed
                     to live in peace, if we were imprisoned.
AANG              :  Earthbenders! Why are you acting this way? You
                     are powerful and amazing people! You don't need
                     to live like this! There is earth right beneath your
                     feet. The ground ... is an extension of who *you* are!
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(Sokka, Earthbender, and Aang, *The Last Airbender*, 00:27:08—
00:28:07)

They have no will to fight against the Fire Army for their own freedom when

they are surrounded by earth, which is their main source of power. They finally

master up the spirit and courage to attack the Fire Army only after Aang, who is

played by Caucasian actor, gives words of wisdom and starts the attack first. By

shaping the roles played by minorities as undesirable and uninteresting characters,

this practice can be considered as an aspect of whitewashing.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Based on the writer's observation on the casts of movie *The Last Airbender*, it is found that the practice of whitewashing in the movie does exist. The first whitewashing practice is identified on the character of Aang, who is inspired by East Asian child monk, but played by Caucasian actors. Other practices of whitewashing are recognized in the characters of Katara and Sokka, the siblings of the Southern Water Tribe who are inspired by the Inuit Tribe. These characters are also played by Caucasian actors. This founding also signifies that the lead characters in the movie are played by Caucasian actors. Moreover, the non-white actors in the movie played as the villains and the extras.

The practice of whitewashing in the movie is indicated by the Caucasian actors who are cast to play the non-white characters, in this case, Aang, Katara, and Sokka. Another aspect that manifests the whitewashing notion in the movie is how non-white actors are given the roles with undesirable stereotypes. South Asian actors are cast to play the Fire Army who are depicted as cruel and evil, and East Asian actors are cast to play the Earthbenders who are portrayed as weak and hopeless. In addition, non-white actors are also marginalized with no significant roles or influencing storylines, such as the portrayal of Monk Gyatso by Damon Gupton and the people of unspecific kingdom by Black actors.

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