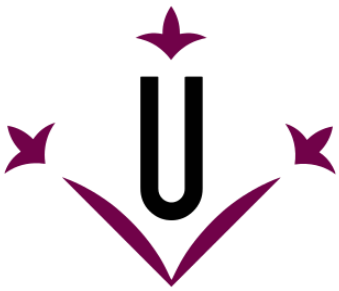

Universitat de Lleida

END-OF-DEGREE DISSERTATION

UNVEILING COLONIAL IDEOLOGIES

AN ORIENTALIST, FEMINIST, AND ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER*

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ABSTRACT

Summary: *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005), created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Brian Konietzko, has been receiving attention and positive critiques to this day. The story of the show is set in an imaginary world based on Asian and Native societies of our world. The merging of cultures and the apparently orientalist aesthetics of the show contrast with the clear anti-colonial message that the series conveys. The current end-of-degree dissertation aims at analysing *Avatar*'s portrayal of colonialism using the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism, Feminism, and Ecocriticism. It focuses on the portrayal of Asian and Native peoples, in the female characters, and in the dynamics of power between human and non-human nature. This essay argues that the creators of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, despite remarkable effort, fall into some colonial stereotypes, such as the lack of cultural diversity, the villainization of violent women, and the perpetuation of the colonial notion that nature is there to be controlled by humans.

Key words: *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Colonialism, Orientalism, Feminism, Ecocriticism, children TV shows.

Resumen: *Avatar: El Último Maestro del Aire* (2005), creada por Michael Dante DiMartino y Brian Konietzko, sigue recibiendo atención y críticas positivas a día de hoy. La historia se desarrolla en un mundo imaginario basado en sociedades asiáticas e indígenas de nuestro mundo. La amalgama de culturas y el aspecto aparentemente orientalista de la serie contrasta con el mensaje claramente anticolonialista de la historia. Este trabajo de fin de grado tiene como objetivo analizar la representación del colonialismo en *Avatar* desde los encuadres teóricos del orientalismo, el feminismo y la ecocrítica. Sus objetos de análisis son la representación de pueblos asiáticos e indígenas, la representación de personajes femeninos y las dinámicas de poder entre la naturaleza humana y la no-humana. Se razona que, pese a los esfuerzos considerables de los creadores, *Avatar: El Último Maestro del Aire* sucumbe ante algunos estereotipos coloniales, como por ejemplo la falta de diversidad cultural, la representación de mujeres violentas como descontroladas y la perpetuación de la idea colonialista de que la naturaleza únicamente existe para ser controlada por los humanos.

Palabras clave: *Avatar: La Leyenda de Aang*, Colonialismo, Orientalismo, Feminismo, Ecocrítica, series infantiles.

Resumen: *Avatar: L'Últim Mestre de l'Aire* (2005), creada per Michael Dante DiMartino i Brian Konietzko, segueix rebent atenció i crítiques positives a dia d'avui. La història es

desenvolupa en un món imaginari basat en societats asiàtiques i indígenes del nostre món. L'amalgama de cultures i l'aspecte aparentment orientalista de la sèrie contrasta amb el missatge clarament anticolonialista de la història. Aquest treball de fi de grau té com a objectiu analitzar la representació del colonialisme a *Avatar* des dels marcs teòrics de l'orientalisme, el feminisme i l'ecocrítica. Els objectes d'anàlisi són la representació de pobles asiàtics i indígenes, la representació de personatges femenins i les dinàmiques de poder entre la natura humana i la no-humana. S'argumenta que, tot i els esforços considerables dels creadors, *Avatar: L'Últim Mestre de l'Aire* sucumbeix a alguns estereotips colonials, com ara la manca de diversitat cultural, la representació de dones violentes com a descontrolades i la perpetuació de la idea colonialista què la natura únicament existeix per a ésser controlada pels humans.

Paraules clau: *Avatar: L'Últim Mestre de l'Aire*, Colonialisme, Orientalisme, Feminisme, Ecocrítica, series infantils.

For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the maid circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer.

Orientalism (1979) by Edward Wadie Said, p. 19

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1. Introduction

Avatar. The Last Airbender is a TV show from the USA directed and created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, two white creators. This fact is relevant because the series is set in an Asian- and Native[1]-inspired world in which imperialism and colonialism are threatening the wellbeing of the people and the environment. This consciously made decision was based on the fascination of DiMartino and Konietzko for Asian cultures, cinema, and Japanese animation.

The fans of the series have noticed parallelisms between certain societies in *ATLA* and countries or peoples in our world. An archipelago of volcanic origin, an emblem associated with fire, a people who started a huge empire, and who are well-known for their technological advances; this evokes comparisons to Japan and its imperial era, with the rising sun as their flag. The inhabitants of the South and North Pole bring to mind the Inuit, who are the most widely known people to live in these areas. The expansive Earth Kingdom, covering a significant territory, reminds us of the biggest country in Asia after Russia, China. Lastly, we encounter a group of people amongst whom there are monks who practise vegetarianism, meditation, and believe in the notion of "chakras", clearly a reference to Indian culture and Hinduism.

Nonetheless, throughout their book, *Nickelodeon Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Art of the Animated Series*, DiMartino and Konietzko are not only influenced by these non-Western countries, but they amalgamate them with elements of other cultures, the clearest case being the Fire Nation. A notable example is in the instruction that the creators gave to an architecture graduate to design the Fire Lord's throne room: "Egyptian, Chinese, scary" (DiMartino et al. 61). This blend of influences is also exemplified in the design of the Sun Warriors that appear in the episode named "The Firebending Masters", which, to the Western eye, would appear to be more rooted in Mesoamerican cultures than in Asian ones.

These inspirations from various origins and amalgamation of diverse cultural references by two white creators lay the foundation for the series of questions that fuel this essay. Does *ATLA* present stereotyped representations of Asian and Native cultures? Are women characters stereotyped, following an orientalist fashion, as sensual and submissive characters? On another note, what are the dynamics of power between humans and nature?

[1] Though indigenous communities go by different names depending on their origins (e.g., in Canada they are called First Nations, in Australia, Aboriginal people), in this paper the umbrella term "indigenous" and its synonym "native" will be used to refer to the indigenous groups that inspired the Water Tribes: the Inuit and the Sirenik.

Is the latter presented as a passive entity that can only be “bent” under the characters’ hands? If the answers to those questions are affirmative, could it be that, beneath the overarching anti-colonial message that *Avatar* tries to convey, there are some colonialist ideologies and stereotypes lurking? The goal of this essay is to tackle each of these questions using three different critical approaches: Orientalism, Feminism, and Ecocriticism. The present study’s structure is as follows: first, it will provide a theoretical background for the three literary approaches listed above. It will then present a multidisciplinary analysis of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* using the three theoretical frames, delving into the representation of Asian and Native people of the show, the female characters, and the relationship between human and non-human nature. This study will conclude by answering the question: Are there colonialist ideologies and stereotypes present beneath *ATLA*’s anti-colonial message?

2. Avatar: The Last Airbender: The Franchise, the World, the Plot

Avatar: The Last Airbender is a multimedia franchise from the United States that has produced two cartoon shows, one live action, comics, books, and videogames, among others. It started with the release of the TV series with the same name, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, also known as *Avatar: The Legend of Aang* and abbreviated as *ATLA*, which is the focus of this study. The show is divided into three books (Water, Earth, and Fire), each of which has 20 episodes, excluding the last, which has 21[2]. The story of *ATLA* was co-created and produced by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, and written by Aaron Ehasz, with the help of Nickelodeon Animation Studios in California. The animation production involved collaboration with South Korean studios, including JM Animation, DR Movie and MOI Animation. Though the two creators first conceptualised the story in 2001, the series did not see the light until the 21st of February 2005, and spanned three seasons until July 2008. It is worth remarking that *ATLA*'s target demographic was children between the ages of 6 and 11.

Avatar had significant success throughout its airing time; upon its first release, each episode garnered an average of 1.1 million viewers (Bynum, "AVATAR: Season III"), it ranked among the top 10 animated series on commercial television among kids between 2 and 11 years of age (Bynum, "Nick: 'Secret of the Fire Nation'"), and its finale, "Book 3: Fire, Sozin's Comet", averaged 5.6 million total viewers, securing the first place on broadcast and basic cable television during its release week (Moody). Translated into more than 150 languages, the series is now available in various streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. In Rotten Tomatoes, the show scores a 100%, and in IMDb a 9,3 out of 10. According to PlumResearch, 17 years after the release of the show, in 2022, *Avatar* was one of the series with the most total hours watched in the United States, as well as in Germany, Belgium, and Canada (Weyna).

I am explaining this for two main reasons. First, because it makes the reader wonder what can this children's show be about that calls the attention of both children and adults around the world, even 18 years after its release? And secondly, because it provides a strong argument justifying why this research is important, and it is because children's shows have a great impact on how their audiences see and interact with their surroundings. Hence, if *ATLA* perpetuates colonial stereotypes, they can be pinpointed and criticised in order to prevent them in future children's series.

[2] From this moment on, episodes from the series will be quoted in the following way: "BX, EY", in which B refers to "book", X to 1 (Water), 2 (Earth), or 3 (Fire), E stands for episode, and Y for a number from 1 to 21.

So, what is *ATLA* about? To answer that question, I would like to quote the cartoon's intro.

> Water. Earth. Fire. Air. Long ago, the four nations lived together in harmony. Then, everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked. Only the Avatar, master of all four elements, could stop them, but when the world needed him most, he vanished. A hundred years passed and my brother and I discovered the new Avatar, an airbender named Aang. And although his airbending skills are great, he has a lot to learn before he's ready to save anyone. But I believe Aang can save the world.

In *ATLA*'s world, the nucleus around which everything orbits are the four elements: Water, Earth, Fire, and Air. Each of these elements is associated with specific peoples and societies, namely the Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation, and the Air Nomads. Amongst each of these peoples, there are individuals who can manipulate the elements through distinct movements; they are referred to as benders. However, there exists an exceptional being called the Avatar, the only person who can master all four elements, and whose shoulders carry the weight of keeping balance amongst the people of this world.

ATLA's narrative begins a hundred years after the Fire Nation declares war against the rest of the world. The story kicks off with two siblings from the Southern Water Tribe, Katara and Sokka, who, in their course looking for food, stumble upon a giant iceberg. From inside that oddly-shaped ice ball, there appears a 12-year-old kid who introduces himself as Aang, who sneezes flying 6 metres in the air, and who wears a visibly different clothing from the traditional South Pole garments. Later on, the two siblings discover that Aang is the Avatar that supposedly disappeared 100 years ago but has kept his young appearance due to the preserving qualities of ice. Aang, unaware of the war that the Fire Nation started a century ago, also known as the 100 Year War, discovers that he, as the Avatar, has been missing during the time in which the world needed him most.

Simultaneously, the Fire Nation has been searching for the Avatar continuously ever since he disappeared. Eventually, the Fire Lord, leader of his nation, commands his own son, Prince Zuko, with the duty of finding the Avatar, vanishing him until the mission is accomplished. From that moment on, the stories of these four teenagers, Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Zuko, tangle with each other. As the narrative progresses, new characters, such as Toph, are introduced, leading to an adventure around the world in which Aang masters all bending arts and defeats the Fire Lord, restoring balance and peace to the world.

In essence, *ATLA* narrates the story of the colonised from their perspective, shedding light on the many injustices that happen around the world due to the Fire Nation's imperialism. The series portrays the struggle of the main characters against the empire, their efforts to raise awareness about the dire situation faced by the oppressed people, and their ultimate goal of

liberation. The storytelling of *ATLA* denotes an anti-colonial message, emphasising resistance against oppression and the pursuit of freedom from the coloniser.

3. The state of the question

Very few studies have been devoted to analysing *ATLA* from a literary approach, however there are myriad studies from different fields, such as history and philosophy, which have scrutinised the cartoon from other perspectives. For instance, Jared M. Christian in his 2021 study "When the Fire Nation Attacked: A View of Colonialism and Imperialism Within Avatar: The Last Airbender" takes a historical approach towards the show with the aim of assessing *ATLA*'s historical accuracy in portraying certain colonial realities. Christian focuses on four different colonizing actions used by the Fire Nation —genocide, environmental imperialism, propaganda, and imprisonment— and relates them to historical events that took place throughout the world's history of colonialism. In the case of, for example, genocide, Christian brings up the elimination of Air Nomads. Only three episodes into the series the viewer is exposed to the fact that Aang's family and the entirety of the Air Nomads had been annihilated by the Fire Nation in the attempt to kill the Avatar, their only possible enemy. Christian connects this with the assassination of Native Americans back when the Spanish colonists first arrived in the Americas. Justifying this mutiny with their "Right to Conquest", events such as "the Indian Removal, Trail of Tears, the California genocide, and the American Indian Wars, the killing of Native Americans was used to remove their culture and traditions" (Christian 12) with the aim of not only making room for the colonists' traditions and culture, but also to exploit their land and resources freely. After providing several more examples, Christian concludes that the depiction of colonialism in *ATLA* is similar to many real-world historical events.

Another telling example of a study that puts *ATLA* under the magnifying glass is the short article by Peter Wood, "Reframing Sympathy for Indigenous Captives in Avatar: The Last Airbender", published in 2018. Wood refers to what is called "captivity narratives", which he describes as "a genre in which one 'captive' character or group is emotionally or physically constrained by a "captor"" (Wood 176). He then goes through several tropes linked to captivity narratives, and analyses *ATLA* with the objective of proving that the cartoon critiques and reshapes the captivity narrative and its tropes. One of the many tropes that Wood looks at is the representation of Indigenous people as a monolithic group, which erodes their inner diversity. In order to prove that the animation series does not follow this stereotype, Wood keenly explains the case of the two sister Water Tribes. While the Southern Water Tribe, which was attacked by the Fire Nation and deprived of all its water benders, is depicted as a small and poor society, the Northern Water Tribe, free of colonising actions, shows its power through the complex architecture of its buildings and its strong social organisation. This huge difference between the two groups of indigenous people is personified through Sokka and Yue, both children of their respective Tribe's chief, who nevertheless live in completely

opposite realities. The creators of *Avatar* could have chosen to portray these two societies as culturally identical, yet they chose to challenge the monolithic portrayal of indigenous peoples. Wood goes on to offer examples found in the series that do not abide by the stereotypes of captivity narratives. He wraps up by arguing that *ATLA* works within the captivity narrative but simultaneously critiques it by supplying diversity in indigenous representation and avoiding the portrayal of these peoples as victims.

Philosophy student at the New York University of Shanghai, Yao Lin, in her 2022 article "The Bending World, a Bent World: Supernatural Power and Its Political Implications", looks at the political implications of bending abilities in the Bending World. Her analysis of both *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* encourages the reader to ponder on the following question: if there existed a natural ability that rendered only a reduced number of people more powerful, would that not have political implications? Lin explains that, despite the noticeable difference in number between benders and non-benders, benders have a clear advantage when it comes to power due to their natural abilities. She exemplifies such an advantage by explaining the case of Fire Lord Ozai, who is said to be able to burn an entire city to the ground with just one movement. His power is hence indisputable, leaving the rest of not-so-skilled benders as well as their non-benders counterparts helpless in the face of such threat. In that situation, can democracy persist? It is the symbol of the Avatar that helps equate this clear difference of power, as the Avatar represents an objective and altruistic figure whose only purpose is to protect humanity from any danger (Lin). In fact, Lin adds, in order to persevere through the clear superiority of power of the Fire Lord, in *ATLA*, Aang receives a new kind of power that only the "pure of heart" are able to use; that is energy bending, an ability that allows those who master it to revoke bending powers from others. In other words, and according to Lin, if it were not for the Avatar and his power-revoking abilities, the Bending World would probably be dominated by tyrants who abuse their power. All in all, by analysing *ATLA* and *ATLK*, Lin concludes that the political implications of bending are clearly portrayed throughout the two series.

In conclusion, *ATLA* has been analysed from different perspectives: the historical accuracy of the depiction of colonialism and imperialism in the show, the representation of native people in the show, and the philosophical implications of bending on *Avatar*'s world. Nonetheless, no study has been found that analysed the Nickelodeon show through a feminist, ecocritical, nor orientalist lens with the aim of determining whether or not the show perpetuates certain colonial ideas. In that way, the current study can provide new, additional insight into the way colonial situations are portrayed in *ATLA* keeping in mind the subtleties of colonial reality.

4. Theoretical background

4.1. Orientalism

The roots of Orientalism can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, when it emerged as a field of study focused on what was known as the Orient, a territory far away to the east of Europe inhabited by “savages, sensual women, and exotic cultures”. An orientalist was someone who devoted their lives to the study of cultures, languages, and ways of life in the Orient. They were renowned professionals, the work of whom was respected and had significant impact on various domains. Keeping that in mind, the words “orientalism” or “orientalist” seemingly carried a positive connotation. However, roughly two centuries after the inception of Orientalism, Edward Said, a professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University, published a book that unveiled the Eurocentric prejudices that sustained this field of knowledge.

Orientalism (1978), by the Palestinian American literary critic, Edward Wadie Said, was a ground-breaking publication that had profound intellectual impact on various disciplines, namely literary studies, cultural studies, and history. Moreover, it is also one of the books that helped establish the basis for postcolonial studies. Throughout this seminal critical work, Said builds his arguments by providing evidence retrieved from textual examples written by Orientalists such as Edward Lane and Ernest Renan. Having analysed a considerable sample of texts, Said argues in his introduction that:

> Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (11)

In other words, the study of the Orient, Orientalism, is intrinsically correlated with the imperialist societies which created such knowledge and, furthermore, it is useful to justify and perpetuate their imperialistic practices. According to “Chapter 1, Part 1: The Scope of Orientalism (Knowing the Oriental)”, Orientalists were regarded as knowledge producers, since they were in a position of power that allowed them to make statements about the Orient. By creating a dichotomy between “us” and “them”, “civilised” and “uncivilised,” or even “savage”, their influence extended beyond the way that Orientalist literature readers perceived the Orient and its peoples. Not only did it have an impact on politics and policy making, but it also shaped the perception that the colonised peoples had of themselves.

However, an important question is left unresolved; how did Orientalists exactly portray Orientals and their cultures? As hinted at earlier, Said observes that they create a Manichean dichotomy between Occident and Orient, in which the West is always placed in the positive extreme of the spectrum. While the Occident represented reason, progress, moderation, and order, the Orient was on the other end of the scale, "a place of violence and sensuality, where the passions and desires of the natives were unrestrained" (Said 14).

It is also crucial to highlight the fact that one of the tenets of Orientalism that Said disputes is the mere existence of the distinction that sustains this field of study, the assumption that “the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident” (20). This assertion stems from the notion that the Orient is a monolith, a vaguely and abstractly defined group of people who behave the same way, have the same culture, and follow the same radical religious beliefs. This monolithic representation of Orientals is also at the core of Orientalism, an overgeneralisation and simplification of a huge amalgam of peoples and cultures that justifies the spread of imperial ideals by ruthlessly simplifying the Orient.

Although Said mainly tackles colonialist texts, in the last chapter of *Orientalism*, “Chapter 3: Orientalism Now”, he vindicates that the ideas and stereotypes that the field of Orientalism prompted continue to influence the contemporary imaginary of the East and the perception of Eastern Lands by the Occident, especially Arab and Muslim countries. Though *Orientalism* mainly focuses on literary texts and academic discourse, Said’s arguments can be extended to analyse current visual media, such as movies or television series.

A scholar who has broadened Said’s ideas to fit visual media is Jane Iwamura, who further explores the effect of Orientalism nowadays in her book *Virtual Orientalism* (2011). Focusing more on the further East, Iwamura indagates on the fascination for Asian spirituality and religion that is currently palpable in Western media. There are two ways in which Iwamura enquiries into Orientalism differently from Said: first, she pays attention only to U.S. cultural domains while Said focuses mainly on French and English literature; and second, rather than looking into canonical literary, historical, and philological texts, she investigates the U.S. mass media culture. Building on Said’s argument in *Orientalism*, Iwamura analyses U.S. media and focuses especially on the figure of what she calls the “Oriental Monk”, a literary device used mostly in Occidental media during post-World War II and contemporary periods. This icon serves to portray a male solitary character who shares his wisdom with the West and renders Asian religiosity psychologically, socially, and politically manageable for popular culture consumption. According to Iwamura, the term “virtual” is relevant since it includes a dimension that literature did not, which is visual media; through this multi-sensorial experience, privileged

images are perceived and, consequently, they have an effect on mass media, and in the U.S. social and political worlds.

To sum up, the orientalist approach, based on Said's explanations, seeks to critically read and interpret texts paying especial attention to the representations of the unknown Other, the native. Through the analysis of colonialist and orientalist texts, Said detects the perpetuation of a Manichean dichotomy and proves that there is a tendency to commend white colonisers as reasonable and morally good individuals and downplay natives as chaotic and savage. Iwamura supports and strengthens Said's arguments in looking at the presence of orientalist stereotypes in TV media post-World War II. By analysing the West's fascination for Asian religiosity, Iwamura focuses on the image of the Asian Monk, the one figure amongst the many natives that allows the western viewer to think that they understand Asian spiritual insights.

4.2. Feminism

Feminism is commonly understood as the social movement that seeks to reach gender equality in economic, political, personal, and social rights. Western feminism is divided into four different waves, the first of which began in the late 18th or early 19th century, a period of time when British women started fighting for upper-class white women suffrage, better female education, and better work conditions. Second wave feminism, spanning from the 60s until the 80s, made space for further debate on issues such as sexuality, domesticity, reproductive rights, and legal inequalities. All in all, it criticised male-dominated institutions and cultural practices. However, the two first waves did not encompass the rights of *all* women, excluding from its fights women of colour. It was not until third wave and fourthwave feminism that all women, including transwomen, were made participant in Western feminism. This inclusion resulted in the revision of past feminist theories, as well as in the study of women's situations around the globe, not only in the U.S. and Europe, some of which were under colonial rule or were suffering the consequences of its past. Consequently, Western feminism entered the field of colonialism, as they both deal with questions of representation, voice, marginalisation, and the relation between politics and literature (Bahri 196). The two fields of study were from then on intertwined and gave birth to a new branch of feminist studies: postcolonial feminism.

Feminism and postcolonialism come into conflict for two main reasons. First of all, feminists observed that postcolonial readings of colonial or postcolonial texts did not consider gender issues adequately. Secondly, feminists shifted the perspective and criticised feminism itself, revisiting Western feminism and raising awareness of the lack of incorporating racial issues and the tendency to "stereotype and over-generalise the case of the "third world

woman"" (Bahri, 2009: 197). Scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty dedicates her most famous essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1984), to the representation of 'Third World' women by Western feminists. In her analysis, Mohanty identifies five ways in which Western feminist discourse represents women in the third world: victims of male violence, dependent, victims of the colonial process, repressed under religious ideologies, and stuck in the development process. Through these five means, women in the third world are portrayed as a homogenous and "powerless" group, often presented as victims of a certain socio-economic system (Mohanty).

In *Colonialism/Imperialism*, and to be more precise, in the chapter named "Colonial and Postcolonial Identities", Ania Loomba points out that colonial literature tended to oversexualise native women. During colonial times, Loomba explains, continents were metaphorically represented as female bodies with more or less garments, implying that conquering a territory was equivalent to conquering a female body. Native women in conquered places were depicted as passive, submissive, and sexually insatiable figures, while their native male counterparts were portrayed as homosexuals or "lusty villains from whom the virile but courteous European could rescue the native (or the European) woman" (Loomba 129). Similarly, Said's *Orientalism*, as Jane Chi Hyun explains in her book *Yellow Future*, argues that Orientalism is in itself gendered, since the West is portrayed as the masculine figure which exists to know, penetrate, and subordinate the East, —and, by extension, native, colonised peoples,— which is the figure of the eroticized and feminised Other (Park).

Other than the oversexualisation of non-European women and the feminisation of men, Loomba also reflects upon the victimisation and passivity associated to native women. She highlights how "European colonialism often justified its 'civilising mission' by claiming that it was rescuing native women from oppressive patriarchal domination" (144). In the same chapter, she cites a fragment of Josephine Butler's[3] 1898 editorial, "The Storm-bell", in which the author depicts Indian women as 'helpless', 'voiceless', and 'hopeless', suggesting that they do not have the same power to resist as western women do.

It is worth noting how some scholars have dedicated studies to the effect of colonialism also on the female colonisers, an example being "Gendering Colonialism or Colonising Gender?", by Jane Haggis. In this article, Haggis analyses two books dealing with white women in colonial societies, Claudia Knapman's *White Women in Fiji*, published in 1986, and Helen Callaway's *Gender, Culture and Empire, European Women in Colonial Nigeria*,

[3] Josephine Butler (1828-1906) was an English feminist and activist who is best known for having worked in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act in the Victorian era.

published in 1987. Haggis analyses the characters of *memsahibs*, a term used to refer to white women in colonial India. These women were often characterised as “the indolent, pampered socialites of literary fame, neurotically possessive of their men and overly concerned with maintaining racial superiority through petty distinctions and segregation” (Haggis 105). Not only that, but the author notes that the British blamed the *memsahibs* for the loss of the British Empire, attributing it to the women’s exclusion of the friendly natives with their snobberies and sexual jealousy. This perspective brings awareness to the seldom-studied damaging effects that colonialism had on women from the colonising societies.

In summary, the intersection between feminism and colonial or postcolonial studies have given rise to the field of research named postcolonial feminism. This approach not only condemns Western feminism’s failure to include and its over-generalising of the situation of non-Western women, but it also criticises postcolonial analysis’ lack of regard toward gender issues. Loomba, Said, Jane Chi Hyun, and Jane Haggis devote part of their research to bring awareness to the representation of women in colonial texts by highlighting, on the one hand, the portrayal of native women as over-sexualised, passive, and helpless, and, on the other hand, white women as overly possessive and concerned, even held responsible at times for the loss of empire.

4.3. Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism acts as an umbrella term that encompasses different critical approaches that analyse the human-nonhuman relationship portrayed in literature and other cultural forms, mainly stemming from the perspective of anxieties caused by humanity’s damaging impact on the biosphere (Marland). Despite the many disagreements within the field of ecocriticism, there are two broadly accepted truths: the first one is that humanity is currently living an environmental crisis that is urging us to review the ways in which humans interact with the world, and the second is that these “ways” are normally culturally taught. Lawrence Buell, a renowned scholar in the ecocritical world, eloquently noted that the environmental crisis we are going through is a “crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it” (as quoted in Marland, 2013: 847). In other words, the way in which humans conceive ourselves and our relationship with the environment has a significant effect on our damaging effect on the planet.

Like Western feminism, ecocriticism’s timeline is divided into different waves. Its first wave, which is commonly considered to have started during the 1960s in the U.S. and the UK, emphasised wilderness and nature writing more than political and theoretical issues. The shift of focus took place during the second wave, in which the theorisation of the field began to

develop in different directions, mostly deconstructing and reviewing human-centred studies through an ecocritical lens. Hence concepts such as imperialism, gender, and race were put under the magnifying glass to see their relation to ecology. The third wave received the baton from its predecessors and broadened its territorial scope to include more than Western societies and concerns.

Ecocriticism tangles its branches with feminism and postcolonialism, as they all deal with the complicated dynamics in the unfair treatment of different entities —women, colonised people, and nature. This results in the overlapping of postcolonial and feminist studies and ecocriticism. On the one hand, colonisation was deeply connected with the exploitation of natural resources and nature was merely seen as an object at the coloniser's disposal. On the other hand, as explained in the previous sections, women's bodies were used as symbols of the land, they were seen as intrinsically more connected to nature; just as nature fell in the hands of the coloniser, women were put in those of men. Consequently, it is difficult to study ecocriticism without referring to postcolonialism and feminism, given their significant impact on ecocriticism's evolution.

Ecocriticism encompasses diverse perspectives, namely the anthropocentric and the ecocentric attitudes towards the environment, as described by Suzzane Thompson and Michelle Barton in their article, "Ecocentric and Anthropocentric Attitudes Toward the Environment." Anthropocentric individuals believe that the environment should be protected because of its utility to preserve or improve human's life quality, perceiving nature only as a means to serve mankind. On the other hand, ecocentric individuals recognise an intrinsic value to nature, and therefore think it should be protected. According to the ecocentric perspective, no organism on this earth is master of another, and each and every one of them has a value of itself (Thompson and Barton). Ecocriticism gives room to consciousness toward an ecocentric perspective through its analysis of discourse in literature and denounces the ways in which humans tend to position themselves above any other natural entity.

Due to growing interest and concern towards the environment, ecocriticism has substantially grown as an academic field and a critical discourse, along with feminism, postcolonialism and new historicism (Lubina). It has gone beyond analysing literature and its ways of representing nature, reaching films and animations. Though making the case that cartoons are worthy of critical attention was not easy, some scholars from Film Studies have gained interest in the matter, which led to the emergence of a new subgenre of criticism called Ecoanimation, also referred to as "enviro-toon", a term coined by cultural critic Jaime Weinman (Pike).

Enviro-toons are animated films that deal with and help depict the complexities of environmental issues (Murray and Heumann, as quoted in Lubina, 2022). One of their characteristics is that they do not force viewers to agree with the ecocritical message they convey, but rather create room for discussion. In the introduction of her book *Enviro-Toons: Green Themes in Animated Cinema and Television* (2012), Deidre Pike explains that enviro-toons tend to include comedic portrayals of complex environmental discourse, "provid[ing] a safe zone for exploration of environmental facts, ideas, images, and perspectives" (2012: 13). Daniela Lubina, in her description of enviro-toons, keenly elaborates on the ecocritical issue of "simplified portrayals of environmental issues, beautified depictions of nature, [and] adorable representations of wildlife" (2022: 9). These exaggerated depictions of nature are commonly found in, for example, the 60s and 70s' Disney animated movies, where animals were anthropomorphised and given the ability to behave and act like humans, as well as deprived of their animal instincts and real appearance.

In conclusion, the rising interest in ecology and nature has given attention to the critical field of ecocriticism, an ensemble of critical approaches that question the representation of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in different cultural practices. Ecocriticism is guided by the moral objective of achieving equity between nature and humans, as it recognizes humans as integral components of nature. Ecocritical texts depict nature as an active agent, avoiding the portrayal of it as an object to be exploited by humans, and should there be such a portrayal, it reflects upon it. Though ecocriticism has been used mostly to look at literature, it recently widened its limits to include Film Studies, where it gave birth to Ecoanimation or enviro-toons. As Pike explains, enviro-toons tend to address environmental issues and discourse in balance with humour so as to guarantee a safe space for the audience to maintain ecological discussions.

5. Analysis

Once the three critical approaches that sustain the current study have been explained, what follows is an analysis of *Avatar*. This section will first provide a brief contextualization on the way the Fire Nation's colonialism functions in the series. After that, the analysis of the audio-visual text is presented through the lenses of Orientalism, Feminism, and Ecocriticism focusing on the representation of Asian and Native peoples, the representation of female characters, and the relevance of non-human nature in the series.

5.1. The Fire Nation's Colonialism

To begin with, I would like to probe into the reason why Fire Lord Sozin decided to conquer the rest of the world. In B3, E6, "The Avatar and the Fire Lord", spectators are allowed to see what happened before the colonising era started. Avatar Roku and Lord Sozin were childhood friends, until one day Sozin confesses his deepest thoughts to his best friend: "Our nation is enjoying an unprecedented time of peace and wealth," referring to their technological advances, and goes on to say, "we should share this prosperity with the rest of the world." This proposition, reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden", infers that the Fire Nation's justification for empire was to share their "superior" technological knowledge with the poor, helpless rest of the world. In reality, the Fire Nation's actions contradict this altruistic façade. Instead of spreading knowledge, they declared war against the other nations with the aim of colonising them all. They annihilated an entire culture, the Air Nomads, because that was the people amongst which the Avatar, the only person who could stop their empire, was to be born. Also, they attacked the Southern Water Tribe, capturing or killing all their water benders so that they could not fight against the Fire Nation in the war. Their colonising actions went as far as establishing colonies in Earth Kingdom territory in order to exploit their raw materials and peoples for their own benefit. These actions contradict the alleged altruism, revealing the Fire Nation's true imperialistic ambitions.

After clarifying the justification for the empire, one is left with the question of how the Fire Nation managed to colonise part of the biggest country in the world, the Earth Kingdom. This achievement can be attributed to a combination of factors. Firstly, the corruption of the Earth Kingdom's capital, Ba Sing Se, played a pivotal role. The Dai Li, the Earth's elite secret police led by the Grand Secretariat Long Feng, were responsible for capturing citizens aware of the political situation of the world and brainwashing them into believing that there was no war. Such was the situation that not even the Earth King knew of the conflict that had been taking place throughout his entire life. Since the Dai Li, and especially Long Feng, had the

power over the Earth Kingdom and wanted to maintain it, they did nothing to stop Fire Nation troops from invading Earth Territory.

Secondly, the Fire Nation employed propaganda to gain support from its own people. As Christian (2021) argues, without convincing their people and earning their undoubting support, the Fire Nation would not have been able to proceed with the expansion towards the Earth Kingdom and the destruction of the Air Nomads. In the episode “The Headband” (B3, E2), Aang and his friends visit a Fire Nation village where Aang, disguised as a Fire Nation student, attends school. Its curriculum is biased, teaching distorted historical narratives, such as the false idea that Fire Nation’s Army fought against the Air Nomads’, when in reality, the Air Nomads did not have a formal army to fight against. When Aang confronts the teacher about this historical inaccuracy and asserts that “Sozin defeated them [the Air Nomads] by ambush”, the rest of students turn their horrified gazes at Aang, not with confused or angry expressions, but rather concerned, as if something terrifying would happen to anyone who dared say something of the sort. This propaganda is further highlighted in “The Ember Island Players” (B3, E17), an episode which showcases colonial literature through a theatre play that tells the story of Aang and his friends, mocking, shaming, sexualising some of the protagonists, and representing the superiority of the Fire Royal Family. These factors, the corruption of the Earth Kingdom’s government and the strategic use of propaganda by the Fire Nation, facilitated the colonisation of the world with full support of the Fire people and minimal resistance from the Earth Kingdom.

Another characteristic of the Fire Nation’s colonialism is the control over the colonised. An interesting fact about the *ATLA* universe is that there exists no language distinction amongst its different peoples, a choice made by DiMartino and Konietzko for simplicity and efficiency purposes. This is relevant because, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o pointed out in “The Language of African Literature”, the first chapter of his famously acclaimed *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), language is the key to the colonisation of the mind. He goes on to assert that “economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control” (wa Thiong’o 16). According to Ngũgĩ, it is through the control of both *language* and *culture* that the coloniser is able to control the colonised and their wealth, because if the oppressor controls those, they have power over how the oppressed perceive themselves, others, and the world around them. In *Avatar*’s world, there might be no language difference, but there is a clear distinction between the cultures of the four nations, notably exemplified in their bending styles. Much like the British ban on the native languages in Kenyan schools, the Fire Nation controls the colonised by prohibiting their bending, an integral part of their culture. If the people break the rules, they end up being

enslaved in coal mines, as presented in B1 E6 “Imprisoned”, or captured and taken away to prisons far away from the elements they can control, as shown in B3 E8 “The Puppetmaster”. This draws a parallel between the control of language and culture in historical colonialism and the Fire Nation’s tactics, showcasing how control over bending becomes a means to control the colonised.

Lastly, we can compare the Fire Nation’s colonial strategy with other empires, especially the British. On the one hand, according to Elleke Boehmer, in *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, in the peak of imperialism, Arabic, Indian Ocean, Chinese, and British colonisers flattered themselves conquerors and teachers of their colonies (Boehmer: 23). However, she explains, there were two traits that distinguished the British mentality: their “industrial and military power”, and “the often, explicit ideologies of moral, cultural, and racial supremacy” (24). Hence, the British Empire has three main characteristics that distinguished its ideology according to Boehmer: they took pride in being conquerors and civilisers of their colonies; in comparison to other empires, they were more powerful in terms of technology; and, furthermore, they believed to be morally, culturally, and racially superior.

Applying these criteria to the Fire Nation and basing the fact only on information obtained from the *ATLA* series, we find two significant similarities and one notable difference. Sozin’s justification of empire aligns with the British perspective, seeing themselves as “civilisers” of the world, the only people capable of sharing their advanced knowledge with others. That same statement verifies that, like the British, the Fire Nation possessed superior industrial and military power. Nevertheless, the show does not explicitly showcase ideologies of superiority in morality, culture or race among Fire Nation peoples.

5.2. The Asian/Native Aesthetics: Appreciation or Appropriation?

From a postcolonial perspective, one of the main characteristics of *Avatar* that strikes as possibly problematic is the “Asianness”, “Nativeness” or, plainly put, the “non-whiteness” of the design of the world. That includes the different people’s clothing, their hair styles, their appearance, the architecture, the art style, and the bending styles. On top of taking cues from the physical embodiment of each element, the designs of the show are inspired by different Asian and Native cultures of the real world. The Air Nomads, a society of saffron-robed monks of all genders, are based on Tibetan culture, with influences of Hinduism and Buddhism. The two Water Tribe sisters are akin to Arctic and Siberian native groups, specifically the Inuit and the Sirenik. The Earth Kingdom, speculated to represent all of Japan’s colonised territories, is most noticeably shaped after Chinese and Korean cultures. Finally, the Fire Nation has clear Japanese and Chinese characteristics, with a mark from Incaic native groups.

The two creators, being non-Asian and non-experts on Asian cultures, had consultants for various aspects of the show. For instance, the Chinese calligraphy expert Dr. Siu-Leung Lee was consulted for the Chinese characters featured in the series. He allowed for the show to have various styles and types of Chinese calligraphy with his deep insights into the matter. Another area where consultancy was crucial was in the martial arts that became the inspiration for the four bending styles present in the show. Sifu Kisu, an expert in various Chinese martial arts, advised the creators selecting four martial arts and modelling after each of the bending styles; Baguazhang for airbending, Hung Gar for earthbending, Northern Shaolin for firebending, and Tai Chi for waterbending. Consultancy went beyond cultural representation, as Nickelodeon hired two South Korean animation studios for the animation process of the show. In a behind-the-scenes documentary, the Korean animators explain that, contrary to many other projects, in *Avatar* they experienced a considerable degree of freedom in the artistic process. This creative margin allowed them to actively participate in making decisions and shaping the details of both the action and the aesthetics of the scenes (*Behind The Scenes Of Avatar's Animation*). Through these consultancies, the ethos of collaboration of the Avatar franchise with Asian and Asian diasporic advisors is made unmistakable, and therefore proving that there was no intention to pigeonhole real-world cultures.

However, one may unintentionally convey stereotypical messages. An example is the indisputable fact that, in order to create the cultures of the *Avatar* world, different aspects of several real-world cultures, which are never explicitly mentioned, have been combined. This choice may be seen as controversial, as the real-world cultures that have been merged in the show are not necessarily directly related to one another. Nevertheless, the creators have justified this choice by claiming that the mixing of cultures prevents the show from misrepresenting real cultures. In an interview with the head writer, Aaron Ehasz, he elaborates on this, stating, "You want to be inspired without appropriating. You don't want to accidentally say something about a culture. For example, early on a lot of the designs for the Fire Nation were inspired by designs from Japan, which was a problem—you have a bad nation, and if all of their designs were Japanese, you'd project a poor message about their culture. We completely reworked the art so that it would be more broadly inspired" (Clark). Subsequently, this culture-mashup was a decision consciously made by the creators of *ATLA* in order to create imaginary peoples, and in doing so, avoiding the stereotyping of real-world societies.

Even if there is no stereotyping of any particular culture, the show might possibly portray Asian and Native ethnic groups in a disrespectful manner. One way in which the creators could have done that is through the monolithic representation of ethnic groups. As previously explained, there are cultural traits specific to each of the peoples in the *Avatar* world depending

on the element with which they are associated. At first, that sounds like a very simplistic representation of a fourth of the *Avatar* world's population. Nonetheless, throughout the show, the audience is exposed to cultural differences within those elemental groups. The peoples related to Earth and Water are the ones whose ethnic variety is most amply portrayed.

In the case of the Earth Kingdom, the vastest region of the imaginary world, many cities and villages are explored by the protagonists. During their adventures in the wide continent, Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Toph, also known as the Avatar Gang, encounter peoples that live in different environments. For instance, Earth benders who live in the desert have very different garments and the unique ability of bending sand, something of which others are not capable of (B2, E10, "The Library"). Furthermore, the show emphasises that cultural biases and stereotypes exist even within the same communities. In B1, E11, "The Great Divide", two neighbouring villages which are looking for asylum from Fire Nation troops are placed under the Avatar's protection to cross a dangerous canyon. All along the journey, the constant rivalry and judgement of one group to another is made evident through their generalisations of and stereotyping of each other.

These differences that make the peoples of *Avatar* not monolithic, can be highlighted in the case of the Water peoples as well. The Water peoples are broadly categorised into two sister tribes: the Northern and the Southern Water Tribe. In the first season of *ATLA*, huge differences are portrayed between the two sisters, which clearly stems from the Fire Nation's constant attack on the Southern Water Tribe at the beginning of the war, until they achieved the annihilation of all water benders. This, however, did not occur in the Northern Water Tribe, hence its society was able to protect themselves and thrive.

This distinction is made apparent when comparing the two sister tribes. In the first episode, Sokka and Katara's village in the Southern Pole is presented as small and humble, housing only 18 people, mostly children and mothers. The inhabitants' houses are constructed of animal fur, and the defence mechanisms consist of unstable snow constructions. In contrast, when the Northern Pole is shown for the first time, the architecture is imposing, made of intricate ice and snow structures that provide comfort as well as defence. These differences hint at which of the two tribes is considered more "civilised," a notion evident in the dialogues between the daughter of the Northern Tribe's chief, Princess Yue, and the son of the Southern Tribe's chief, Sokka. Despite their identical rank in their respective societies, princess Yue has experienced a life of royalty, with palaces and excess, while Sokka "grew up in a cube of ice" (B1, E19: "The Siege of the North, Part 1").

Even though the two Water Tribes are the best known groups of people related to water, *Avatar* gives room to the representation of minorities; other groups of people who bend water and live outside the extremes of the world. The prevalence of diversity within Water-related groups is exemplified by the people of the swamp, in the middle of the Earth Kingdom, people who have very different attires and ways of living compared to those in the Sister Tribes. By including waterbenders in an unexpected location, the authors open the door to possibilities that there might be more unknown societies related to other elements, who have not yet been revealed in the series. In conclusion, and using Wood's words, *Avatar* "recognizes pluralistic identities among indigenous people instead of a more rigid, monolithic representation" (176). Nevertheless, it must be remarked that Water and Earth societies are the ones which showcase most ethnic diversity, including two or three ethnicities, which may be considered insufficient.

There are two other ways which I would like to discuss and argue that the creators could have misrepresented Asian and Native people: by implying that there is an intrinsic and special connection between these ethnic groups and nature, a stereotype known as the 'Noble Savage', and by simplifying and "Western-ising" Hinduist and Buddhist beliefs in the series.

Indigenous peoples have historically been portrayed as having a special connection with nature, they were (and still are) portrayed as 'part of nature' in contrast with their white counterparts. In *Avatar* this special connection with non-human nature is pervasive. One of the *Avatar* world's characteristics is the existence of the Spirit World, a realm in which some entities of nature have a representation with agency. For example, the Moon's Spirit takes the form of the Northern Water Tribe Princess, Yue, in the Spirit World (B1, E20, "The Siege of the North: Part 2"). The only one able to go into the Spirit World is the Avatar, who is the bridge between both worlds; this alone makes the intrinsic connection between the characters and nature evident. Characters such as the inhabitants of the swamp accentuate this relation with nature, as one of them proclaims, "I protect the swamp from people who want to hurt it," and "This whole swamp is just one tree […], one big organism, just like the world" (B2, E4, "The Swamp"). Katara can also be connected to nature through her bending, which she enhances to fight as well as to heal.

However, not all characters share this bond with non-human nature. On the one hand, there are those who think of nature as a resource that is there to be exploited for human's benefit, which is the case of various Fire Nation high-ranking officers who have used nature to build factories and to destroy societies entirely. On the other hand, there are those who demonstrate respect to non-human nature, but who do not present a special connection to it either. Sokka, a native representative who is interested in sciences and engineering,

challenges the stereotype of the “Noble Savage”. Xine Yao writes that “Katara and Sokka illustrate that there is no contradiction between Native practices of traditional and scientific knowledge” (Yao 490). Despite the presence of the ‘Noble Savage’ stereotype in *ATLA*, the creators introduce characters who defy this mould, highlighting that Asiannes, Nativeness and nature do not always go hand in hand.

From an orientalist perspective, another noticeable feature of *Avatar* is the Buddhist and Hinduist influence. This religiosity is most present in the different guiding figures that help the protagonists throughout their journey, which can be directly related to the icon that Iwamura calls the ‘Oriental Monk’. Iwamura defines the archetype of the Oriental Monk as a “critical concept and is meant to cover a wide range of religious figures (gurus, bhikkhus, sages, swamis, sifus, healers, masters) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Tibetan)” (Iwamura 6). The key characteristics of this icon are a calm demeanour, a spiritual commitment, and an Asian face. Typically portrayed as a lonely figure without visible family, The Oriental Monk seems to possess unique wisdom, Oriental wisdom, which he passes on mostly through the form of aphorisms, a short saying that seems to communicate ancestral truths. The Oriental Monk takes under his wing a parentless child, normally a boy from the predominant culture, who has an ambivalent relationship with it. The ‘Oriental Monk’ figure passes on his knowledge to the child, which leads to a transmission of wisdom: “Oriental wisdom and spiritual insight is passed from the Oriental Monk figure to the West through the bridge figure of the child” (20). Eventually, the pair are saved from values commonly related to the West, namely capitalist greed, brute force, or uncontrolled technology. Iwamura argues that, instead of offering insight into Asian religiosity, the Oriental Monk rather reveals the Western perception of Asian spirituality and religion.

The icon of the Oriental Monk is embodied in many *ATLA* characters, including Iroh, Pakku, Pindao, Guru Pathik, and Monk Gyatso. Just like the prototype of the Oriental Monk, these five characters are calm, have a spiritual commitment, and all of them have Asian features, with the only exception of Pindao, who is the darker-skinned character in all the series. Each and every one of these men guide one of the protagonists: Monk Gyatso was the head Monk in the Southern Air Temple, where he acted as the father-figure of Aang before he knew he was the Avatar; Guru Pathik also teaches Aang how to dominate a special ability through the cleansing of the chakras; Pakku guides Katara toward the mastery and improvement of her water bending abilities; Pindao is Sokka’s swordsmanship instructor; and finally, Uncle Iroh is Zuko’s main source of support and guidance, but he also helps the rest of protagonists in times of struggle. Interestingly, all these men use aphorisms at some point in the show to transmit wisdom, for instance, Iroh says: “Pride is not the opposite of shame,

but its source. True humility is the only antidote to shame" (B2, E9, "Bitter Work"), and "Sometimes life is like this tunnel. You can't always see the light at the end of the tunnel, but if you keep moving, you will come to a better place" (B2, E20, "The Crossroads of Destiny"). They also are presented as family-less men, with the exception of Uncle Iroh who, despite being part of the Royal Family, finds his family in his nephew, Zuko, and his deceased son, Mako. Overall, though there are some details about these masculine characters that escape the Oriental Monk's features, like the kid being a girl in the case of Katara, or none of the children being white, we can say these five men fit in the archetype of the Oriental Monk. Through these characters, instead of offering a true insight into Asian religion and spirituality, the creators of *Avatar* project their own idea of it.

All in all, *ATLA* demonstrates both appreciation and appropriation of Asian and Native cultures. The show was created with genuine effort to appreciate and respect them by conducting research and consulting experts during the creative process. Furthermore, they included different ethnicities within the same groups of people, and thus beginning a fight against the monolithic representation of Native peoples. However, it is suggested that more ethnic variety could have been included, as the show portrays 3 ethnicities at the most within one larger group of people. This section also discussed the stereotype of the "Noble Savage", an intrinsic and special connection between Natives and nature. It has been concluded that, while *ATLA* does connect the two in some cases, it also introduces the audiences to characters such as Sokka, who break away from this stereotype demonstrating a diverse range of interests. Finally, the analysis of how the show tackles Asian religions and spirituality through the icon of the Oriental Monk revealed that the creators used masculine guiding figures that fit perfectly in the mould of the Oriental Monk. Consequently, this decision did not provide an accurate portrayal of Asian religiosity, but rather DiMartino and Konietzko's own perception of it.

5.3. Women in ATLA

ATLA has been deemed as a feminist show by a variety of scholars, who have mainly analysed the body or verbal language of female characters, concluding that they break from linguistic and behavioural stereotypes associated with women (Halttunen). However, these characters have not yet been analysed from a literary feminist postcolonial and ecocritical perspective. This section aims at shedding light on the representation of ATLA's female characters' connection to nature, their defiance of colonial sexist stereotypes, and their villainization.

In the section called "Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Discourse" of Loomba's book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, she explores the historical connection between women's bodies

and conquered lands. This connection started from the beginnings of the colonial period, in which countries were personified as attractive women. In “Feminism, Nationalism and Postcolonialism”, she further argues that this connection, which converts women into national emblems, assumes that women, just like nations, are merely breeders of future generations. In a similar line, Marland exposes differing opinions among ecofeminists regarding the depiction of women as closer to nature. Some celebrate it as a means to defy patriarchal domination over both women and the environment, while others have highlighted the statement’s implication of biological essentialism, reducing women to the role of mothers.

In *Avatar*, as argued in the previous section, there exists a connection between nature and the people of the *ATLA* world due to its design. In the particular case of women, varying degrees of closeness to nature can be observed. Katara and Toph exemplify female characters who are deeply connected to nature through their bending. Katara’s water control not only allows her to fight, but it also gives her healing skills. Her strength is drawn from natural elements such as the moon, tides, and the overall presence of water. Toph, who is blind, uses her earth bending to orient herself and perceive her surroundings. She learnt formidable earth-bending abilities from the ancestral and original earth benders; badgermoles, enormous blind mammals native to the Earth Kingdom. In relation to motherhood, the topic is not mentioned by any of the characters, including Katara and Toph, their cases being of particular interest. The two teenagers were born in powerful families in their respective contexts, from which pressure to have children is expected. Katara is the last water bender of her tribe and the daughter of the chief, while Toph is the daughter of a wealthy family almost considered royalty. Despite their situations, none of them show concern about motherhood and are not related to it at all, challenging traditional norms. As for female characters who do not share a bond with nature, Mei is an example. One of Princess Azula’s best friends, Mei represents the complete opposite of Katara and Toph, since she has no bending abilities and avoids nature at all costs.

The connection between men and nature also needs to be explored. It has already been argued that there are characters such as Sokka, who do not feel a special bond with non-human nature but who, nonetheless, respect it. Another male character who would follow Sokka’s steps is Zuko, who uses his fire bending mainly to fight and release his repressed feelings. Conversely, Aang, as the Avatar, vegetarian, and bridge between the human and the spirit worlds, represents a male character who is deeply in touch with nature. In the same line, and challenging assumptions about powerful fire benders, Iroh also displays an attachment to nature. This is made evident when he sides with the Avatar Gang, his enemies, and fights against the Fire Nation general who kills the moon spirit in “The Siege of the North: Part 2”

(B1, E20). Iroh also conveys a natural-aware message when he explains each of the elements to his nephew Zuko, stating, “It is important to draw wisdom from many different places” (B2, E9: “Bitter Work”), and, in this manner, he is emphasising that learning about every bending style and their elements is crucial. In summary, most of the women in *Avatar* present a special connection with nature, but it is insignificant compared to their male counterparts.

The female characters in *Avatar* not only defy the expectation of having a special connection with nature and being tied to motherhood, but they also challenge colonialist and sexist moulds that define women as passive and submissive. To begin with the protagonists, Katara and Toph perfectly exemplify a departure from conventional stereotypes. Though Katara possesses traits associated with traditional femininity, such as being nurturing and caring, she never falls into passivity or submission. At the beginning of the series, when she is presented a chance to improve her water-bending abilities, she leaves the place and the people around which she grew up with the aim of learning and returning as a stronger person. Upon her arrival in the Northern Pole, she realises that their Sister Tribe is under a sexist system that restricts women from learning water bending, limiting them to healing practices. Frustrated by the injustice of the situation, Katara challenges Pakku, the Water Bending Master, teacher of bending, to a fight, proposing that her victory would result in Pakku becoming her tutor. Although Katara demonstrates impressive skills during the battle, she loses and her necklace, a precious memento from her grandmother, goes missing. Pakku finds it, leading to the realisation that Katara’s grandmother was part of the Northern Water Tribe, forced into a marriage with Pakku, and thus flew away to the South Pole. Ultimately, when the Avatar Gang decide to leave the North Pole, Pakku verbalises his intentions to go to the South Pole and help rebuild their Sister Tribe. He then reassures Katara that she can be in charge of teaching Aang water bending, since she is a master now. This episode not only showcases Katara’s agency and determination to fight against unjust systems, but also highlights her grandmother’s role in challenging oppressive norms.

Toph’s life experience is very different from Katara’s. Toph was born into a wealthy family, the Beifong, whose fortune positions them very close to the Earth Kingdom’s royal family. She was born blind, which caused her parents to be overprotective of her, projecting their own perception of weakness and fragility on their daughter. Contrary to her parents’ beliefs, Toph is presented as a self-sufficient person who can take care of herself, which is proven when she gets lost and encounters the badgermoles. Despite being scared, young Toph immediately becomes comfortable with the animals and learns earth bending from them. Eventually, she becomes such a good earth-bending master that her abilities allow her to perceive her surroundings through vibrations. Though Toph showcases her incredible bending

style in front of her parents, they never stop viewing her as weak and in need of salvation. That is why Toph runs away with Aang and becomes his earth-bending teacher. Around her friends, she behaves in a tough and free-caring manner, far away from the well-behaved and helpless persona that she impersonated in front of her parents. Throughout the series, she continues to display independent traits, such as discovering a new dimension to the art of earth bending in metal in order to escape a cage, but she also is allowed to be a vulnerable teenager who wants to be perceived as pretty and misses her parents. All in all, Toph represents a well-rounded character that departs from stereotyping ideas of her gender.

There are two more women characters worth analysing. They both break from stereotypes encapsulating women in passivity and submission; however, they end up being depicted as crazy monsters; these characters are Azula and Hama. Azula is the Fire Lord Ozai's second youngest child, sister of Zuko, and second to the Fire Nation's throne. Since the vanishing of Zuko, she has been given hopes of succeeding her Father, who entrusts her with tasks such as capturing the Avatar and his friends, and finally conquering the Earth Kingdom's capital, Ba Sing Se. Along with her non-bending yet skilful friends, Mei and Ty Lee, Azula does whatever is necessary to achieve her goals, ranging from impersonating Earth Kingdom allies to bringing down the capital from its inside, to manipulating her own brother into lying. Her fire bending abilities are stunningly remarkable, as she showcases physical strength since the beginning, the colour of her flames is blue and she is able to create lightning, two skills unique to fire bending masters. In simple terms, Azula is an assertive and determined teenager, characterised by her strength and leadership. All these characteristics build her into the perfect villain. However, her last scenes in the show can be perceived as problematic. In the last episodes, before her coronation as Fire Lord, Azula begins to doubt her entire court's loyalty, and starts hallucinating about her mother, by whom she felt neglected. When she loses the fight against Katara and Zuko, one cannot help but feel pity for the teenage girl who failed the battle that gave her purpose in life and assured her father's approval of her.

Though villains in *Avatar* tend to come from Fire Nation, other nations are not exempt from people with evil intent, and that includes the Water Tribes. In the episode "The Puppet Master" (B3, E8), the protagonists are in Fire Nation town where there is a rumour that, every month, with the full moon, some villagers disappear. Then, a mysterious figure, an elderly lady, is presented to the audience: Hama. She is early on revealed to be one of the water benders from the South Pole who was captured by the Fire Nation and imprisoned for many years, handcuffed so that she could not bend the water near her. Her heart-breaking story leads to a terrifying possibility within water bending; blood bending. Hama explains to Katara that water can be found everywhere, including living things. In days when water bending is boasted by

the full moon, a skilled water bender can control a person just like a puppet. That is how Hama escaped the Fire Nation's prison, and how she has been kidnapping people from the village to avenge what the Fire Nation did to her. Katara, who at first refuses to, ends up blood bending Hama and handing her in to Fire Nation guards, essentially bringing her back to where she was all those years ago.

The development of these two characters brings to mind two scholars' work: Haggis' "Gendering Colonialism or Colonising Gender?", and Kristy Campbell's "Taking Women Seriously: A Feminist Approach to the Study of Colonial Violence" (2023). Haggis' essay concentrates on the figure of the *memsahibs*, a term used in colonial India to refer to white women. As explained in previous sections, one of the characteristics of *memsahibs* was their exaggerated obsession with "maintaining racial superiority through petty distinctions and segregation" (Haggis 105). According to Haggis, these women were blamed for the loss of empire. This brings to mind the character of Azula, a woman from the colonising society. Her continuous efforts ending in failure when she cannot defeat her enemies can be considered the cause of the loss of empire. The consequences of such a responsibility on the shoulders of a sixteen-year-old can be interpreted as the trigger of her mental breakdown.

On the other hand, Campbell's study focuses on the historical tendency to distance women from violence, deeming them as "beautiful souls", innocent, and incapable of evil. According to Campbell, the concept of "beautiful souls" can be used as a means to villainise women who do not fit the feminine stereotypes, namely violent women. These women who use violence as a form of agency are not taken seriously and are categorised as either mothers, whores, or monsters, among which the category of monster is of particular interest to the current study. Campbell explains that "the category of monsters relies on the belief that violent women are breaking with the idealised image of women as innately peaceful and virtuous and thereby constructing them as unnatural and monstrous" (Campbell 66). It can be argued that both Azula and Hama are placed in this category. By the end of "The Puppet Master", Hama is perceived as an evil person whose years in prison affected her mental well-being, and forced her to learn blood bending in order to escape her imprisonment and take revenge on innocent Fire Nation civilians. In the case of Azula, though her evil intentions and methods have caused harm to many people, which she reflects on when she says, "My own mother thought I was a monster… She was right of course, but it still hurt" (B3, E5, "The Beach"), the decision of turning her into a mentally ill character deprives her from full self-control over her own decisions. These two stories perpetuate the idea that women cannot

voluntarily act with violence, but their decisions are rather influenced by external factors such as a social circumstance or mental illness[4].

The evolution of the masculinity of the male characters in the show is also worth mentioning. Sokka's sexist ideas are exposed from the beginning when, for example, he says to his sister, Katara, "Leave it to a girl to screw things up" (B1, E1, "The Boy in the Iceberg"), or when he asserts that "girls are better at [sewing] things than guys, and guys are better at hunting and fighting…" (B1, E4, "The Warriors of Kyoshi"). These perceptions are soon disproven by the many strong women who appear in the series, namely, the Kyoshi Warriors. The Kyoshi Warriors are a group of non-benders trained female fighters who are distinguishable by their use of metal fans when fighting and their traditional garments. As soon as the Avatar Gang sets foot on Kyoshi Island, the trio are captured by the Warriors, which makes Sokka upset because "there's no way a bunch of girls took us down." Upon learning that the Avatar is with them, the Kyoshi Warriors release the Avatar Gang and teach Sokka that women can be as strong as men. In the case of Aang and Zuko, they do not present sexist ideologies as evident as Sokka's, but they both, and specially Zuko, repress their emotions and use fire bending to unleash their anger. It is not until they visit the Sun Warriors ancient civilisation that they learn that the fuel of fire bending is not anger, but life and energy. This can be seen as a metaphor of a masculinity very different from the patriarchal definition; being a man is not necessarily linked to anger, but to vitality. The three male protagonists experience a change in the perspective they have on both femininity and masculinity, accentuating the vital role of men in the feminist movement.

In conclusion, while ATLA breaks from some colonialist and sexist stereotypes, it clearly perpetuates others. It is made evident that the show provides with a varying degree of connection between women and nature in different characters, namely Katara, Toph and Mei. The stereotype of women being submissive, and passive is also debunked on myriad occasions. However, women who use violence are not enabled to take full responsibility for it, as their actions are fuelled by external actions, and not themselves, which contributes to the idea that women cannot be engaged in violence.

5.4. The Presence, Relevance, and Agency of Non-Human Nature

Nature plays a huge role in *ATLA*, not only because of the magical design of the world which allows people to bend natural elements, but because nature and, more specifically, non-

[4] Encapsulating women who do not fit the patriarchal mould into madness belongs to a long history in literature, which the scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore in their book *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

human nature is the nucleus of many plotlines. Animals, forests, swamps, and meteorological phenomena are integral to the story of *Avatar*, and their mistreatment and pollution, mostly by colonising powers, are recursive themes.

As ~~it~~ has been previously mentioned, the world of *Avatar* includes the Spirit World, a parallel plane of reality to the one inhabited by humans. The Spirit World is home to paranormal and supernatural creatures which often embody different entities of life and nature, also known as spirits. Though this realm is their home, some spirits also live amongst humans, and their physical embodiment gives agency to its natural one. Throughout the show, spirits show their physical form many times, which tends to happen when their natural form is in danger or has been damaged.

The embodiment of natural elements gives agency and presence to them. For example, in B1, E7, “The Winter Solstice, Part 1: The Spirit World”, a forest which has been burnt down to its roots by Fire Nation troops is embodied as its spirit, Hei Bai. At first, Hei Bai is presented as a monster who torments a village by kidnapping a villager every night. However, once Aang realises that Hei Bai is the spirit of the burnt forest, he understands the fury of the creature. Aang, then, proceeds to show him that the forest has a chance to revitalise itself thanks to all of the acorns that still remain in the soil, which will eventually grow into trees. The spirit then returns to its natural form and releases the abducted villagers.

There are other cases in which spirits and, hence, their natural forms show the power they hold and their equality of value with human beings. In B1, E20, “The Siege of the North: Part I”, the natural form of the spirit of the Moon is killed by a general of the Fire Nation. Immediately, the spirit of the Ocean helps Aang protect the Northern Water Tribe from the Fire Nation Troops that were attacking it, preventing any further damage to the Tribe’s inhabitants and the spirits living there. In its gigantic form, the Ocean spirit goes down from the centre of the city towards the ocean, where the Fire Nation navy is waiting. On its way, it ignores the people who bow to it, the Water Tribe people, and retaliates against those who aim to harm it, the Fire Nation soldiers. This narrative conveys the message that those who disrespect nature in the *Avatar* world are punished. This embodiment of non-human natural elements gives them agency and representation, showing that nature has inherent power and value.

ATLA also raises awareness on the impact that colonisation has on the environment. For example, in the South and North Pole, the approach of Fire Nation troops is signalled by the presence of soot in the snow. Perhaps a more telling instance of this negative effect on nature is vastly dealt with in B3, E3, “The Painted Lady”. In this episode, a Fire Nation village which lives off of a river is directly impacted by an artillery-building factory. Day to day, the

factory pollutes the river, killing its fish, depriving the villagers of potable water, resulting in poor health and living conditions for the inhabitants. This river is said to be protected by a spirit called the Painted Lady, however she does not appear, so Katara decides to dress up as the spirit and help the villagers overnight. After Katara, along with her group of friends and the villagers not only clean the water, but also destroy the source of the problem, the Painted Lady appears herself in front of Katara and thanks her for helping the people. All of these examples related to spirits highlight the importance of environmental preservation. Consequently, it can be asserted that *ATLA* is an ecocentric show, since it stands for the notion of nature having a value of its own, and rejects the idea that humans are superior to other natural entities.

The show also pays attention to the treatment of animals, most obviously through the Avatar Gang's two companion animals: Appa, a flying bison, and Momo, a flying lemur. These animals are central to the story of *Avatar*, altering the course of the plot and providing new plot lines. Appa, for example, is portrayed as Aang's best friend, as they have spent their whole lives together. In B2, E11, "The Library", Appa is abducted by a group of sand benders, leaving the Avatar Gang devastated for their loss. The episode "Appa's Lost Day" (B2, E16), is dedicated solely to show the struggles that Appa goes through from the moment he is kidnapped until he reaches the city of Ba Sing Se. This episode provides the viewer with a glimpse into Appa's perspective, from his memories with Aang in the Southern Air Temple, to the abuse by the owner of a circus that he, along with other animals, go through. A subtle yet telling instance in which the treatment of animals is relevant is portrayed in the episode "The Firebending Masters" (B3, E13), in which Zuko, who has become Aang's fire bending teacher, takes his pupil to visit the ancient Sun Warrior civilization. During their journey, they discuss the extinction of dragons, which was caused by the glorification of the capturers of such creatures. This can be directly linked to the colonial practice of hunting of Kenyan and Indian tigers and lions carried out by Europeans. The mention of such practice in the show brings awareness to the importance of animal welfare and the conservation of the ecological balance.

In *ATLA*, the difference in the ways in which animals are treated between colonised and coloniser are evident. On the one hand, the protagonists demonstrate respect and care for animals, with Aang showcasing the strongest bond. In the episode "Tales of Ba Sing Se" (B2, E15), Aang builds a wide and comfortable environment for a group of animals that were living in an unsuitable, small zoo inside the city, exemplifying a commitment to their well-being. This is further noted in the treatment of Appa and Momo, who are integral members of the crew, Appa being not only their means of transportation, but also a friend who protects his human friends, and who is protected by them in return. According to Thompson and Barton's framework of environmentalism, the Avatar Gang would stand in a middle ground, leaning

towards ecocentrism. In contrast, the way the Fire Nation people treat animals is only for utilitarian purposes. Hawks, rhinos, and giant lizards are used for their special abilities, such as speed or strength, for intimidation or warfare. The wellbeing of animals is neglected, reflecting the Fire Nation's lack of concern for environmental preservation. This seemingly deliberate choice serves to villainize and condemn the poor treatment of non-human nature. Once again, the way in which both protagonists and antagonists treat animal-nature makes evident the intention of the authors to make *Avatar* an ecocritical show.

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the basis of *Avatar* is the bending of elements, in other words, the control of nature by humans, something that is tightly related to colonialism. The show barely discusses environmental implications of bending in the *ATLA*'s world and environment. A detail worth considering is that only fire benders and water benders gain power from different astral events. If their powers during these phenomena could destroy entire civilisations, like the Air Nomads, the destruction of entire ecosystems such as forests, oceans or rivers could also be at risk. This could have a tremendous impact on the environment of the *Avatar* world and it is, however, ignored completely and given no representation. Hence, the core of the series, the bending of natural elements, is directly linked to colonialism. The show could have delved deeper into these possibilities, and the colonial and environmental repercussions that bending has the potential to imply.

In summary, *ATLA* can be categorised as an enviro-toon, an animation show which tackles complex environmental issues without forcing its ecocritical ideas on the audience. The series highlights the consequences that colonialism has on the environment in two episodes, denounces animal abuse, and vindicates animal welfare on multiple occasions. An aspect that *Avatar* has completely ignored is the environmental implications of the design of the world that allows for characters to bend elements. Except for that, *ATLA* has proven to be an ecocritical show that gives room for discussions on the environment, its preservation, and the effects of colonialism on non-human nature.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine whether the children show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* had hints of colonial ideology through the frameworks of Orientalism, Feminism, and Ecocriticism. Throughout the analysis it can be concluded that, despite great efforts by the two creators, DiMartino and Konietzko, to decolonize, there are certain aspects of *ATLA* that are still contingent on colonial stereotypes.

In regard to the representation of Asian and Native communities, the creators of the series present a very limited ethnic variety within larger social groups. From the people associated with the element of Water, the show gives room to the representation of only three ethnicities: the Southern Water Tribe, the Northern Water Tribe, and the people from the Swamp. In the case of the Earth-related societies, the ethnic variety relies mostly on the people from the Desert, who, acclimated to their living environment, present different attires to the rest of the Earth Kingdom, and possess the unique ability of bending sand. It is worth noting that some more variety is presented in the episode B1, E11, “The Great Divide”, in which two very different Earth villages join forces to cross a dangerous canyon despite their disagreements and hate towards each other. Furthermore, *Avatar* also explores Asian spirituality and religiosity in a stereotypical manner. Through the many male guiding figures who fit the mould of what Iwamura calls the “Oriental Monk”, a fake notion of Oriental wisdom is conveyed from the series to the (Western) public.

The feminist nature of the show was also put to the test, and two main lines of criticism can be highlighted. On the one hand, some women are intrinsically related to nature, examples being Katara, Toph and Yue. On the other hand, two women who break the colonial and sexist stereotype of being passive and submissive, Azula and Hama, are given an ending that pigeonholes them as crazy people. Though Azula and Hama’s actions deserve punishment due to the harm caused to other people, the decision of depicting them as monsters who have lost their sanity wrenches the two female characters of the possibility of taking complete agency and responsibility for their violent actions.

In regard to ecocriticism, the show provides a safe space to talk about the effects of human action and colonialism on the environment bringing to the forefront non-human natural beings like animals, forests, and oceans. However, it does not explore the ecological consequences that element-bending has in the world. Element bending, which lies at the core of the series, is a very colonial-coded invention which could have been explored more deeply in relation to non-human nature and ecocriticism in general.

Giving constructive criticism on *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s lurking colonial ideologies provides a set of values that DiMartino and Konietzko can use in further creations, as well as to other creators who are interested in representing colonial situations. Nonetheless, it is also paramount to commend their choices and values; the importance of having expert consultants in the creative process, the diversity and power embodied by female characters, the strength and vulnerability of male characters, the space for representation of environmental issues and the hope to cooperate with one another and overcome them. The case of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is an example of a show that showcases effort and will to convey colonisation in its truest forms, yet this essay has found that there is still room for improvement.

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