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**Decoding the Politics of the Whitewashing Phenomenon in Hollywood through M. Night Shyamalan's "The Last Airbender"**

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**Abstract:**

Hollywood has churned out several films over the years that have been criticized for whitewashing characters. Some of the popular films in this list include *Dragonball: Evolution* (James Wong, 2009), *Prince of Persia: the Sands of Time* (Mike Newell, 2010), *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016), *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017) and *Death Note* (Adam Wingard, 2017). M. Night Shyamalan's *The Last Airbender* is another example of a film that was criticised for its casting choices. In this paper, I will be focusing on how the film through its whitewashing reinforces ideas of Orientalism. I will be studying how by casting white actors as heroes and brown actors as villains, the film ends up perpetuating a system of othering that binaries white and colour, and blends it with the concepts of Good and Evil. Consequently, the paper will look at the effects and implications of the whitewashing phenomenon on viewers, and how glorifying whiteness and vilifying colour distorts the understanding of the West and the East.

**Keywords:** *The Last Airbender*, Whitewashing in Hollywood, Orientalism, Occident and Orient, Minority Representation

*The Last Airbender* is a 2010 action-adventure fantasy film directed by M. Night Shyamalan. The film, a live-action adaptation of the Nickelodeon animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, became one of the most anticipated films of the decade in the wake of its official announcement. However, when news of the cast of the film was finally made public, the filmmakers received severe criticism from across the world. The reason behind such a large scale negative reception of the film stemmed from the filmmakers' choice to whitewash the cast of *The Last Airbender*.

Whitewashing is a term used to refer to a casting practice in the film industry in which film producers seek and cast white actors into roles that were

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originally meant for people of colour. Several Hollywood films over the last two decades have faced criticism owing to their decision to whitewash characters. Popular examples include Ben Affleck playing a Hispanic character in the Oscar-winning 2012 film *Argo*; Angelina Jolie portraying a character who is originally African-American in the 2008 film *Wanted*; and Johnny Depp being cast as a Native American in the 2013 film *The Lone Ranger*. Similarly, *The Last Airbender* was accused of whitewashing its characters, and its casting choices were panned by fans of the original show and film critics alike.

In this paper, I will look at how the whitewashing of characters in *The Last Airbender* reinforces oriental's ideas and will problematic this prevalent practice. I will be studying how the casting of white actors as heroes and brown actors as villains, pushes the film to perpetuate a system of othering that not only binarises white and colour but also seeds it with the concepts of Good and Evil. Consequently, the paper will explore the effects and implications of the whitewashing phenomenon on viewers, and how the glorifying of whiteness and vilifying of colour affects the understanding of the Occident and the Orient, and the lives of the people who belong to both cultures.

**The Whitewashing Problem in *The Last Airbender***

There is a widely accepted notion in the Western entertainment industry that 'white' is the default race. Most of the cast in films, books, and television shows generated in the West, are white people. Usually, characters of colour in these narratives are just for token representation. There is a tendency to fit these characters into age-old stereotypes and are often marginalised with flat and uninteresting character arcs (Nelson 03). Nickelodeon's *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, was a show that broke this mould and presented a tale that was free from established trends. The series, which is notable for being heavily influenced by Eastern Asian art, culture and mythology, garnered worldwide critical acclaim and popularity for telling a story that was free of anything Occident.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the animated series on which the film is based, is set in a world where human civilisation is constituted of four cultural formations or communities. These communities, each of whom is named after the classical elements, are the Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation and the Air Nomads. Each faction consists of people called "benders" who possess the ability to "bend" or telekinetically control and manipulate the element that corresponds to their faction, i.e. the Water Tribes – Water benders; the Earth Kingdom – Earthbenders; the Fire Nation – Firebenders and the Air Nomads – Airbenders.

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The Avatar is a title given to the person who is born with the ability to bend all four elements. The Avatar has to maintain balance and harmony in the world and act as a mediator between humans and spirits. The Avatar is born into one of the factions in a sacred sequence called the Avatar Cycle: Fire Nation, Air Nomads, Water Tribes and finally the Earth Kingdom. There is only one Avatar in every generation, and once the Avatar dies, he or she reincarnates in a new body, into the next nation in the Avatar Cycle.

The series follows the trials, tribulations and adventures of Aang, the current Avatar, who has to usher in an era of peace in a world marred by war and strife. *The Last Airbender* is based on the first season of the show, referred to as *Book One: Water*.

The film whitewashes several characters from the show without paying any attention to the cultural context of these characters.

Aang, the protagonist of the series, is an Air Nomad. The Air Nomads are modelled after Tibetan Buddhist culture. Their attire, practices and lifestyle reflect the same. However, in the film, Aang is portrayed by Noah Ringer, a white American actor. While the characterisation of Aang in the film slightly varies from that of the series, his core characteristics remain

the same. Aang is kind, compassionate and is destined to be the saviour of the world.

There is a sequence in the film when Aang visits the ruins of an Air Temple, and we see flashbacks of the place from before the genocide of the Air Nomads. What makes Aang's whitewashing jarring is the fact that the other monks of the temple are portrayed by non-white actors, and in their midst, Aang stands out as a "white" boy.

The next site of whitewashing is the portrayal of the characters of Katara and Sokka. Together with Aang, Katara and Sokka constitute the trio around whom the narrative of the series is built. Katara and Sokka are siblings who belong to the Southern Water Tribe. The Water Tribes are modeled on the Arctic Inuit tribes. In the series, these characters even have a dark complexion.

In the film, however, these characters are portrayed by white actors. Nichola Peltz plays Katara, and Jackson Rathbone plays Katara's elder brother, Sokka. The defining traits of these characters are that they are helpful, intelligent, resourceful and brave. They take it upon themselves to protect and aid the Avatar in his quest to save the world.

Katara and Sokka are not the only Water Tribe people who are whitewashed. Princess Yue, leader of the Northern Water Tribe and Sokka's romantic interest, is played by Seychelle Gabriel in the film.

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Gabrielle is again a white actor. Yue becomes a significant character in the story who meets a tragic end when she chooses to sacrifice herself to save her tribe and the balance of the planet.

Another central character in the story is Zuko, the banished prince of the Fire Nation. The Fire Nation is modelled after Imperial Japan. Zuko is a cruel, cold and violent person whose only goal in life is to capture the Avatar to regain his lost honour in the eyes of his father, Fire Lord Ozai. In every sense, Zuko is everything that Aang is not. In the film, Dev Patel, a non-white actor, plays Zuko.

Fire Lord Ozai's brother and Zuko's uncle, Iroh is another important character in the story. Iroh is a famous General known across the land for his strategic brilliance and his legendary firebending prowess. He is wise, kind and is often seen giving essential life lessons to Zuko. A far cry from the evil Ozai, Iroh is a paragon of virtue. In the film, Iroh is played by Shaun Toub, again an American-actor.

The role of Admiral Zhao, the primary antagonist in the film, is played by Aasif Mandvi, a non-white actor. Zhao is a ruthless and cruel Fire Nation military leader who is in pursuit of the Avatar. He is known for his brutal war tactics and his obsession for more power. He is Zuko's rival and is always willing to go to any extent to prove his superiority to Zuko.

**The Implications of the Whitewashing**

The whitewashing of selected the characters in *The Last Airbender* ends up furthering ideas of Orientalism. Orientalism can be understood as to how the West perceives the East. The concept deals with how the West perceived the Orient as exotic, seductive and mystic, which we know today as a gross and reductive generalisation of the Orient.

The idea of the Orient is a European invention and had since antiquity been perceived as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 9). Orientalism as a way of thinking generally involves the grouping of the Orient as the "other" by the West. The Orient was conveniently imagined as everything the Occident was not. This dichotomy between the East and the West can be seen playing out at multiple levels in the film's narrative.

Looking at the cast of *The Last Airbender*, it becomes evident that white actors have been cast into the roles of positive characters in the story while the actors who portray the antagonists and other malicious characters are all people of colour.

On the one hand, positive characters like Aang (whose actual ethnicity should be Tibetan), Katara and Sokka (whose are originally Inuits) are all played by white actors. On the other, negative characters

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like Zuko (the anti-hero of the story) and Admiral Zhao are all played by people of colour. Funnily, Zuko's uncle Iroh, another positive character, who should ideally have been the same ethnicity as Zuko, is played by a white man.

Characters like Aang, Katara and Sokka are given sequences wherein they are shown rescuing innocent people from the bad guys, mounting resistance against injustice and inspiring people to find the strength to fight for what is theirs. Conversely, a majority of the sequences involving Zuko and Zhao follow the characters scheming or working towards a conflict scenario. For instance, Zuko is always focused on defeating and capturing the Avatar, and Zhao primarily wants to besiege the capital of the Northern Water Tribe to kill the moon spirit and bring the Water Tribe under the Fire Nation's dominion.

There is also a sequence involving a farmer from the Earth Kingdom. This character lures Aang into the Northern Air Temple and betrays him, which leads to Zhao capturing the Avatar. The Earth Kingdom is modeled on the federal monarchy of China, and this time, the character is not whitewashed and is played by an Eastern actor. An overtly negative character, one characterized by the trait of betrayal and greed, is pushed into the territory of a coloured actor. The trope of a "duplicitous and untrustworthy Oriental

man", a common trope as far as Hollywood films are concerned, surfaces yet again through this sequence in the film (Zhang 321).

Through such representations "white" becomes a marker for goodness, honour, dignity, courage, integrity and strength, while "colour" becomes a marker for evil, dishonour, immorality, indecency and violence. This is problematic because it furthers the oriental notion of perceiving the East as a land of moral and cultural depravity, and as a dark and unregenerate counterpart of the West.

Apart from eliminating roles and opportunities for non-white actors, the practice of whitewashing also generates negative consequences within the entertainment industry for its consumers. One such consequence is perpetuating the idea of white superiority. When filmmakers continually cast white actors in favour of non-white actors, they reinforce the notion that white actors are the 'better' choice than people of colour. Since white actors have historically been the dominant race within the film industry, they are often perceived as the preferred standard within the industry. Consequently, people of colour are deliberately portrayed to be less appealing to audiences and often overlooked or substituted by white actors within a story (Starling 3-4).

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Also, the body erasure that such whitewashing precipitates influences how the audience constructs and perceives body images. It is tough to live in a world that perceives one's body and skin as undesirable (Nelson 07). Whitewashing perpetuates, either directly or indirectly, the demented notion of light skin being 'good' skin and dark skin being 'bad' skin. Selective whitewashing (as seen in *The Last Airbender*) leaves little room for misinterpretation.

The original animated series is set in a world where there is no sign of the Occident or its culture. Through a narrative that is purely rooted in Oriental philosophy and culture, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* succeeds in offering a powerful critique of colonialism, imperialism, genocide and the evils of war (Vishwanath 29-30). However, because of the selective whitewashing in *The Last Airbender*, the film ends up reiterating the white savior narrative instead.

Aang is the Avatar destined to usher in an era of peace in the world. He is the prophesied savior that all victims of the Fire Nation's expansionist regime await. When Aang is whitewashed into a white character, the role of a saviour that was initially meant for someone of color is occupied by the white man. *The Last Airbender* ends up reinforcing the age-old notion of the white man saving the world against all odds and

showing the non-whites the right way forward.

Another instance where we notice the white saviour narrative play out is in the sequence involving Princess Yue. Admiral Zhao kills the moon spirit, and as a result, the water benders lose their ability to bend water. Just when all seems lost and the Fire Nation soldiers seem to be gaining the upper hand in the final battle, Yue decides to sacrifice herself so that the moon spirit could be revived. Yue's sacrifice bears fruit, and the water benders manage to repel the Fire Nation forces. Yue, originally a non-white character, is whitewashed and becomes a beacon for courage and sacrifice.

Aang and Yue become white mascots for virtues like bravery, courage and sacrifice, while characters like Zuko and Zhao are reduced to caricatures of Oriental warmongers.

The film is replete with sequences wherein Aang, Katara and Sokka are seen facing off against Zuko and Zhao. In all the instances of an altercation between these characters, Aang and team display exemplary skills and finesse in battle despite their opponents being more seasoned warriors. They prove to be superior to Zuko and Zhao often forcing these characters to retreat.

In the show, all sequences of similar altercations between the two sides are handled differently. Aang and team almost

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always find themselves in a tight spot with Zuko and Zhao, and it is only by teaming up or due to some lucky plot intervention (like a wall crumbling or a bridge collapsing) that they succeed in repelling their foes. In the film, however, the superiority of Aang and team is evident.

Such a representation demonstrates the inferiority of non-white characters in their own cultural context. There is a repetitive framework of superiority observable in Hollywood films, wherein the white character achieves and/or comes to possess skill, mastery, and recognition, enough to displace his/her coloured counterpart. This displays a colonialist attitude that reinforces Western hegemony by “producing the East discursively as the West’s inferior ‘Other’, a man oeuvre which strengthens—indeed, even partially constructs—the West’s self-image as a superior civilisation” (Tierney 614). This means that a non-white culture is automatically assigned to an inferior status in relation to the dominant white race, which is one of the core features of Orientalism.

### Conclusion

Not only does the whitewashing of characters in a film create a lack of minority representation, but it also spawns an issue of self-identity and self-worth for viewers who are people of colour. According to Social Identity theory,

group membership plays a vital role in one’s self-concept. People are strongly motivated to maintain a positive self-concept and thus tend to favour groups they are a part of and discriminate against other groups (Weaver 370).

This implies that a continued preference for white actors to be represented in films creates a scenario of positive self-esteem for viewers who relate to or identify with being “white”. On the other hand, those people who do not identify with white actors, do not have the scope to gain the same sense of positive self-esteem, simply because they do not see themselves adequately represented in the popular media (Starling 06). Non-white communities end up without any role models or positive figures from their communities to look up to and identify with as a result of such whitewashing. This brings us to an ethical and moral issue, the effects of which non-white communities experience every day.

Apart from being just a bad adaptation of an excellent series, what one finds unsettling about *The Last Airbender* is that, through its whitewashed cast, the film takes a callous approach in its representation of the Orient. The oversimplified and reductive representations of people from and conditions of the Orient are a common sight in the Hollywood landscape. Innumerable films have followed similar approaches and

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have contributed to the creation of a skewed understanding of the Orient in the minds of Western audiences (Nicha 4). It is images of this kind that continue to be perpetuated by such a whitewashed cast. These images end up being absorbed by a passive audience, giving them distorted representations of reality.

It is crucial to identify Orientalist thoughts and the subsequent manifestations of these thoughts to nurture a discourse that is built on inclusivity and appreciation for differences and diversity rather than choosing to look at differences in other cultures and spaces with contempt.

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**Filmography:**

*The Last Airbender*. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan, performances by Noah

Ringer, Dev Patel, Nichola Peltz and Jackson Rathbone, Paramount Pictures, 2010.