

The Realism of Avatar the Last Airbender

Instructor: Michael Thomas

HNRS 1120.

Avatar the Last Airbender is a children's show that aired on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008. The show is set in a fictional world where a 100-year war seems to be coming to a close. In this fictional world, the Fire Nation is a growing colonial empire that is on the verge of world domination. Our main protagonist, Aang, is the Avatar: a being capable of bending the four elements and tasked with bringing balance to the world. He has been sleeping for 100 years and in this time the world has fallen into chaos. This show is special because of its ability to keep a light atmosphere while handling dark topics of war. This show should be thought of less as both a fantasy cartoon and war series. The show explores many topics related to war including topics include genocide, nationalistic superiority, historical revisionism, conspiracy, and police states. However, I think one of the most profound aspects of war this show handles is the way war damages the lives of civilians.

War is a force that destroys any place it goes. When conflict reaches people's homes they are forced to either become a part of the conflict or flee the area. Those who can escape are refugees: displaced peoples of war. Many people are not lucky enough to escape. Those who don't escape are often forced into slavery or submission. War causes regions and populations to be engulfed in chaos leaving many children destitute. War is all these children know, so it's little surprise when they continue the cycle of destruction and become child soldiers. *Avatar* explores all these perspectives and shows the scary reality of warfare for civilians.

Refugees are seen in many places throughout the series. The first main mention of them comes in season one episode 11 ("The Great Divide") where Aang is tasked with guiding two groups of refugees through a dangerous canyon filled with large beasts to escape the Fire Nation (DiMartino et al., 2005). From the very beginning we see how even though refugees can escape war, they cannot escape danger. Many times, the path to escaping war is very deadly. In season

two episode 12 (“The Serpent’s Pass”); Aang finds a secret refugee fairy port that goes to the walled city of Ba Sing Se (a city divided into three regions separated by walls). This port is filled with refugees who hope that by escaping to the city they will be safe. However, once they get to Ba Sing Se, the only place they can go is the vast ghetto filled with all the other refugees (DiMartino et al., 2005). While the middle- and upper-rings of the city are unaffected by the crisis, the lower ring of the city is filled with poverty. What is disturbing is that people aren’t allowed to acknowledge the refugee crisis because it goes against the social order that the city government tries to maintain.

These examples of refugees seen in the show accurately depict reality. Trying to escape conflict, refugees face many dangers. During the Syrian refugee crisis, many women tried paying transporters to smuggle them out of the country (Alwani, F 2016). However, a lot of the routes out of the went through active war zones (Alwani 2016). Many of these women may have been kidnapped. As seen in the show, many of the cities and places that take refugees usually confine them to ghettos and higher crime areas. Amina Alkorey, of the UNHCR Egypt, describes her journey into one of the camps for Sudanese refugees in Cairo:

“Santino led us down a crooked, bumpy road until we reached a single-level building. As we entered I realized this was not the entrance to a single home but to the homes of 10 families.”

Before she arrived at the camp, Alkorey described how she was driving through beautiful buildings in Nasr city (Alkorey 2004). She went from driving by “Mercedes and posh houses” to makeshift schools and building overcrowded with refugee families (Alkorey 2004). Similar to *Avatar*, real-world cities try to maintain normality in the face of a crisis by sectioning off the refugees and ignoring the conditions.

In Avatar, the writers show the exploitation of occupied territory and people. Season one episode 6 (“Imprisoned”) shows an earth kingdom mining village that is captured by the Fire Nation. The Villagers are forced into mining resources for their Fire Nation oppressors through the threat of violence. Those who try to practice earth bending, a cultural tradition, are taken away to prison camps. This serves as a form of cultural suppression and a way of keeping the people weak. We see later in the series that this same sort of exploitation occurs within the Fire Nation itself. In season 3, episode 3 (“The Painted Lady”) we see a fire nation village that is downstream from a weapons factory. This village is taxed into poverty and poisoned by factory waste. Any sort of perceived rebellion from the town is met with violence. The great hypocrisy within these situations is that the reason for the war is to spread the greatness and prosperity of the fire nation to all areas of the world.

To see real-world examples of this situation, look no further than the practice of colonialization. During the British colonization of China, the British would routinely exploit the Chinese people; taking much of their resources and poisoning them with opium (Kerrigan 2019). When the Chinese government tried to end the sale of opium, the British went to war. The British easily won and forced the Chinese to make concessions that supported the British power in the region, continuing the exploitative relationship (Kerrigan 2019). Similar to the motivation of the Fire Nation, the British were colonizing many parts of the world under the idea that it was their responsibility to impart their culture onto “uncivilized” societies.

Avatar is a series that shows how children of war end up perpetuating the cycle of warfare. One of the unique aspects of this show is that many of the main characters are very young, and yet they are warriors and soldiers. after his dad and all the other men leave to fight in the war, Sokka is forced to be the protector of his village (DiMartino et al., 2005). Zuko and

Azula, prince and princess of the Fire Nation, were trained to be soldiers from a young age. In season one episode 10 (“Jet”) we are introduced to a group of child soldiers called the Freedom Fighters. They fight against the Fire Nation in the forest where their homes used to be. This episode shows the main reasons children are willing to become soldiers: food and protection (DiMartino et al., 2005). The freedom fighters can feed their members because they plunder Fire Nation camps. Being a member of the group also offers a level of protection they wouldn’t have on their own. For children who are orphaned by war, the prospect of food and protection becomes a key motivator in becoming a soldier. This episodes shows how children end up perpetuating the violence around them. The Freedom Fighters, led by their role model leader Jet (also an orphan), try to kill Fire Nation civilians (DiMartino et al., 2005). They trick Aang into filling a dam so they can blow it up and drown the village below. It is only because Sokka warns the village that the people are saved.

As seen in the show, child soldiers often come from areas that are heavily affected by conflict or occupation. The number of child soldiers has grown significantly (Achvarina et al. 2006). Between 1988 and 2002, the number of child soldiers increased from 200,000 to 300,000 (Achvarina et al. 2006). These rising levels of child soldiers are associated with rising levels of poverty. Another factor of child soldier recruitment is the protection offered to them in refugee camps (Achvarina et al. 2006). In Palestine, we see many children who have lost their parents becoming soldiers. They join militant groups and try to fight the Israeli forces.

The creators of the show made Avatar into a complete exploration of war and its effects yet were able to convey a positive message. As a show meant for children, it explores many adult topics in a way that is not only effective but accurate to the real world. The show highlights noncombatants and explores their situations in ways not seen in many other pieces of war media.

The accurate ways in which the show depicts the conditions faced by refugees and those living under colonial rule highlights the human suffering experienced by civilians in war. The exploration into child soldiers and their motivations for fighting provides a scary reflection of the modern world. Remarkably, they were able to make it palatable for people of all ages. That is because all of these subjects are underlined by one key theme: hope. Hope is the theme that connects the developments in the show. Aang himself is the last hope for the world. The hopeful outlook of the show makes the humor and sarcasm, which are so vital to the feel of the show, overpower the dark subjects. It is a wonder that a show that is so dark in subject can masterfully maintain a tonally light feel. It is due to the contrasting subject and tone that makes this show so powerful and one of the best epics on war.

Work Cited

- Alwani, F. (2016, March 24). *Escaping Syria: The dangerous journey from Damascus to Turkey*. HuffPost. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/journey-from-syria-to-turkey_n_56f3eb3be4b04c4c37615a26.
- Kerrigan, M. (2019). *China: A dark history*. Amber Books.
- Alkorey, A. (2004, March 1). *Glimpses of a refugee ghetto*. UNHCR. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2004/3/404363ab4/glimpses-refugee-ghetto.html>.
- DiMartino, M. D., Konietzko, B., & Ehasz, A. (2005, February 21). *Avatar the Last Air Bender*. whole, Los Angeles, California; Nickelodeon.
- Vera Achvarina, Simon F. Reich. No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers. *International Security*. 2006;31(1):127-164. Accessed October 26, 2021. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.unm.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.4137541&site=eds-live&scope=site>