

## **Katara's Authenticity in *Avatar: The Last Airbender***

Klarissa Yohanna  
Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia  
klarissa.18030@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Pratiwi Retnaningdyah\*  
Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia  
pratiwiretnaningdyah@unesa.ac.id  
\*corresponding author

### **Article History**

Received: 01 June 2022  
Reviewed: 29 July 2022  
Accepted: 09 September 2022  
Published: 30 September 2022

### **Highlights**

Katara's authenticity is shown, not only by her awareness of her internal values, but how it's expressed by her decisions and actions.

**ABSTRACT:** Authenticity is an important quality every individual should have as it reflects self-understanding and healthy functioning. However, due to the societal norms, such as gender stereotypes, the idea of being authentic has become a challenge. Oftentimes, when it comes to gender stereotypes, women get the short end of the stick—underestimated, ignored, and sexualized. The uprising feminism movement indeed makes a great impact to how women are viewed, but the media is still lacking of authentic representation of a female character who isn't trying to fit into a certain role. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is able to provide that through Katara character despite it being a children's TV series. Using the theory by Kernis and Goldman, this paper explores the four multicomponent of authenticity—*awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, relational orientation*—which are all possessed by Katara; furthermore, proving her authenticity. This paper argues that Katara is able to maintain her authenticity by acting in accordance with her internal values, particularly in terms of equality and justice. In so doing, she manages to fight sexism and empower the oppressed.

**Keywords:** authenticity, gender stereotypes, female character

### **Introduction**

As a means to create order and structure in social relationships, most people conform to the social norms which govern an individual's behavior and beliefs based on several factors, including gender; consequently, men and women are compelled to certain stereotypes. For example, Javanese women are expected to be soft-spoken and well-mannered, and while men are often excused for loud behaviour, they are not supposed to cry and be vulnerable. This existing gender stereotype is one of many reasons we cannot be our authentic selves. By authentic, the writer

means a state where we become our true and genuine self; our individual existence, not as what we may present it to others according to their standards, not as any role we may play, but as it 'really is' (Handler, 1986). Someone is authentic when their external expression is matched with their internal values and beliefs (Lehman et al., 2018). However, as mentioned above, being authentic has become a challenge due to gender stereotypes.

We can see gender stereotypes being represented in many media, including in a film. As one of the most influential elements in our modern life, film has enough power to affect a lot of people's perspectives and the way they behave in real life, especially children. They tend to treat fictional characters as role models and adopt a film's concepts that might negatively affect their behaviour (Eagles & Demare, 1999; Ramadhan, 2019). For example, as the biggest children's film production house, Disney has affected a lot of female adolescents to believe that appearance is the most important quality a girl has. Their early princess films make the children obsessed with looking conventionally attractive rather than focusing on their other personal qualities (Earles et al., 2002). While men are typically portrayed as powerful, daring, adventurous, and self-sufficient, women are portrayed as helpless, dependent, emotional, and the eye candy of a story.

These gender stereotypes can lead to negative impacts such as sexism, which is discrimination based on gender and sex, especially against women. Sexism itself can take form in prejudices, demeaning and derogatory comments and behaviour, and sexual objectification (Swim et al., 1998). Gender stereotypes are so actively performed for a long time as a weapon to oppress and discriminate against women that they have been deeply embedded in women themselves. The constant restriction of full self-expression and self-actualization forced women to adhere to a twisted and limited version of themselves (Fenwick, 1998). Fenwick further explains that women are often caught up in values and motives that alienated them from being their authentic selves. Most times, to avoid being rejected and humiliated in some way due to defying the expectations, women have to change the way they talk or act according to what has expected, despite it being against their nature. This highlights the demand for female representations who rebel against the stereotypes in media, literature, or film, especially with children as the target audience, to educate them on the importance of authenticity.

Such efforts and attempts to bring awareness and criticize the stereotypes were made with the rising of feminist movements. We can see more women in film, particularly in animated tv series, as the lead character who actively defies the gender stereotypes of women being weak or dependent such as *Totally Spies!* (2001), *The Proud Family* (2001), and *Kim Possible* (2002). One of the films that is able to deliver this message is the Nickelodeon animated series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA).

Released in 2005, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* series became a breakthrough despite being a kids' show as it does not shy away from sensitive issues. The complex story makes ATLA still relevant and rings true even for adults. It raises the themes of genocide, imperialism, philosophical questions regarding destiny and free will, and most importantly, the theme of authenticity

portrayed by a female character that this study will focus on. Unlike other films, the female characters in *ATLA* is shown to be as important, powerful, and independent as their male peers.

*ATLA* is set in a world where selected people can manipulate (or known as a practice called “bending”) one of the main elements—air, fire, water, earth. The world falls into chaos after Fire Lord Sozin launched a world war to expand the empire of Fire Nation. The main character is a 12-years-old airbender, Aang—the only person who can bend all four elements acts as the mediator between humans and spirits and is responsible for maintaining the balance of the nations—a figure called “Avatar”. In order to defeat the Fire Lord, Aang travelled with his friends (which will be referred to as Team Avatar), including Katara, to master the other elements.

The writer chose Katara as the main focus of the study because of her significant role in the series as an authentic woman representation. Throughout the whole series, she is faced with many challenging situations, from sexism to conflicts caused by the Fire Nation’s tyranny. However, Katara never backs up. She always voices her opinion loudly and repeatedly breaks the stereotypes. She also bravely stands up for others in need. However, despite her strong values, Katara’s character shows that defying the gender stereotypes does not mean she is not able to do anything typically associated with a woman’s nature. Katara follows her intuition to be caring, nurturing, warm, and loyal. She is the mom of the group and is still the typical teenage girl who seeks romance, but she is also fierce and bravely fights anyone who oppresses others. Her strong principle of not following anyone’s expectations and staying true to her inner values proves her authenticity. Thus, the writer is intrigued to analyze further how Katara portrays authenticity in the series of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and what external factors make Katara’s authenticity feels so important in the story.

A previous study that analyzed the gender aspects of *ATLA* states that both the female and male characters show incredibly diversified results that aren’t confined to the standard gender stereotypes, demonstrating that *ATLA* offers a wide range of representation, especially females, in favour of third-wave feminist theory and debunks the gender binary (Jackson, 2013). This is supported by other studies on Katara’s characteristics. Katara is said to be a nuanced, well-balanced, and multidimensional character who exhibits feminine attributes without being stereotypically feminine, as well as masculine qualities. She also believes in feminist values, which she reflected through her efforts to break gender stereotypes and make equal treatment, equal opportunity, and equal rights (Marlasari, 2021; Poizner, 2019). Aside from that, *ATLA* has become a subject of several other studies that cover its themes of racial, cultural, and political issues (Bhattaru, 2021; Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero 2012; Visnawath 2014).

In 2014, a study on authenticity in literary work was conducted, namely “*Authentic Female Characters in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*”. The study shows that as an Indian English novelist, Shashi Deshpande portrays women characters who rebel against the social expectations in their male-dominated society to seek self-identity and independence—even within marriage. However, the character’s virtues are not glorified, which is ultimately what makes Deshpande’s female characters authentic. The study further states this is due to Shashi Deshpande’s belief in

showing the reality as it is and not as it should be (Sharma, 2014). A chapter entitled “*Authentic Existence and the Characters of Katherine Mansfield*” in a book called “*Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*” also studies how authenticity is represented in literature. While it’s not directly related to gender stereotypes, the study shows how Katherine Mansfield’s personal life experiences and her desire to find self-truth and authenticity on existence itself, are reflected through her characters who have to deal with roles, which the society has imposed on them. (Kubasiewicz, 2011).

The writer has noticed the lack of studies on character authenticity in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and studies that relate female characters who defy gender stereotypes with authenticity values. Therefore, this study is intended to provide a new perspective to analyze the particular work and contribute to future research on related discussions. Using the theory suggested by Kernis and Goldman in their research entitled “*A Multicomponent Conceptualization of Authenticity: Theory and Research*” (2006), this study will elaborate on Katara’s authenticity into four interrelated components. The writer argues that Katara is able to maintain her authenticity by acting in accordance with her internal values, particularly in terms of equality and justice. In so doing, she manages to fight sexism and empower the oppressed.

## **Method**

This study on film elements falls under the approach of feminist criticism, since it concerns with the significance of a female character and how it criticizes the notion of a woman’s role. In this research, the data is taken from selected episodes of the animated television series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA). ATLA first aired on February 21, 2005. The series was created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, and produced by Nickelodeon Animation. It runs for three seasons and concluded its journey in 2008. The data is collected through a close-viewing of the complete series of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The transcript of important scenes that contain relevant information to the discussion, such as dialogues and monologues, are identified and collected. The spoken data is interpreted and classified using Kernis and Goldman’s authenticity theory (2006) into four separate categories; *awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and relational orientation*.

## **Analysis**

### **Katara’s Authenticity**

Katara was born in the Southern Water Tribe and is the only waterbender there. During her childhood, she witnessed how her mother died during a Fire Nation raid and was left by her father, who joined the battle against Fire Nation in the war. Growing up, she naturally filled the mother role and took care of many things around their camp because of the sense of responsibility she felt, even to her older brother, Sokka.

She quickly became independent and strong-willed—or even stubborn at times. Her traumatizing experience and the loneliness she often felt helped her develop a strong sense of

justice and compassion for others. Because of Katara, Aang and his bison who had been frozen inside an iceberg for one hundred years get discovered. She became Aang's waterbender instructor during their travel and improved her own ability during the process, eventually becoming the strongest waterbender despite being only 14-years-old.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* provides multidimensional, authentic female characters by showcasing brave characters with strong values which aren't free of flaws. Because of her role as the female lead character, Katara gets the most screen time and becomes the most prominent female character. Using the theory of authenticity's multicomponent by Kernis and Goldman, this chapter will break down Katara's authenticity by analyzing her actions and behaviour in the selected episodes of *ATLA* into four different components; *awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and relational orientation*. It is worth mentioning that although they are different, these components are interrelated. Katara's particular action or statement that reflects her authenticity might involve overlapping components.

### ***Awareness***

Awareness refers to knowing and accepting one's characteristics, tendencies, and internal values. It entails being motivated to learn about one's power and shortcomings, desires and ambitions, dispositional traits, and emotional states among other things (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). People who operate with greater authenticity become more aware of their multiple self-aspects and attempt to integrate them into a unified self-structure.

Katara's awareness is often shown by her decision to stand up for herself. She knows her worth and has strong beliefs. Katara doesn't let anyone talk down to her and underestimate her. From the first episode, the audience can already watch her inner value in the first four minutes into the first episode entitled "The Boy in the Iceberg". In that scene, only two characters are involved, Katara herself and her brother Sokka. They are sailing across the south pole sea to catch some fish. However, after a few failed attempts, their boat crashes into one of the icebergs and accidentally gets trapped in an area full of icebergs.

Sokka, in charge of steering, is having trouble directing the boat despite Katara's clear instruction. The boat eventually gets destroyed by the icebergs and the siblings end up being trapped on top of an iceberg. After the incident, they get into an argument. Sokka is somehow blaming Katara even though she has done nothing wrong.

*SOKKA: "I knew I should have left you home. Leave it to a girl to screw things up."*

*KATARA: "You are the most sexist, immature, nutbrained— Ah! I'm embarrassed to be related to you! Ever since Mom died, I've been doing all the work around camp, while you've been off playing soldier."* ("The Boy in the Iceberg," 3:37)

This early dialogue explains how Katara is against gender stereotypes. Earlier in the scene, Katara is shown to be able to catch a fish. Nevertheless, her success is completely disregarded, and instead,

Sokka blames her when he fails to catch anything. Sokka's complete ignorance has already irritated her since the beginning, so when he commented how a girl can only screw things up, she becomes furious. She can not easily let the comment slide since she's the one who has been taking responsibility around the camp after their mom died. She calls out Sokka's biased view and calls him a sexist. Katara is aware that a girl is so much more than what her brother makes it seem to be.

Katara is also aware of her limitations and weakness. However, her awareness does not signify instant acceptance. At one point in their travel, Katara offers to teach Aang a few waterbending tricks since they're still miles away from the North Pole, where Aang can meet a waterbender master. Being the Avatar, Aang is naturally more gifted and catches up to Katara quickly. He's even able to do one of the tricks that Katara is still struggling with in a single try. Her awareness of her weakness translates to frustration and annoyance, and when Aang tries to help her learn a trick from a waterbending scroll and gives her a piece of advice, she snaps at him.

*AANG: "You've just gotta shift your weight through the stances. There. See? The key to bending is—"*

*KATARA: "Will you please shut your air hole! Believe it or not, your infinite wisdom gets a little old sometimes!—" ("The Waterbending Scroll," 12:53)*

After being called out by Sokka, Katara immediately apologizes to Aang. She tells him that she no longer needs the waterbending scroll. However, still having the desire and ambition to master the trick, she decides to take the waterbending scroll and practice in the middle of the night when everyone is asleep. As the story goes by, the Team Avatar has to fight a group of pirates whom Katara stole a waterbending scroll from, and the Fire Nation soldiers, along with Zuko who has been trying to catch the Avatar. While fighting one of the pirates, she tries to do the waterbending trick once again and succeeds. Katara's awareness of her limits once again shows, now in a more positive note, by acknowledging Aang's help.

*AANG: "Hey! You did the water whip."*

*KATARA: "I couldn't have done it without your help." ("The Waterbending Scroll," 20:13)*

Another major example of Katara's awareness is shown in an episode entitled "The Southern Raiders," where she finally faces the man who killed her mother. Throughout the series, it can be seen that Katara's hurt and resentment towards the Fire Nation stems from her childhood trauma of having her mother murdered during a Fire Nation raid. So when Zuko tells her that he knows who killed Katara's mother and will help her find him, Katara doesn't need a second thought to do it. On the other hand, Aang realizes that finding the person responsible isn't about getting closure

but getting revenge. He tries to tell Katara that revenge will only poison herself and that forgiveness is the correct way to do it, but Katara still insists that she needs to do it.

Katara and Zuko eventually manage to find the responsible man named Yon Rha and decide to finally confront him after spying on his daily life for a while. Katara yells at Yon Rha, who does not remember her at first. She reveals that her mother was only protecting Katara by pretending to be the last waterbender in that tribe. Filled with rage, Katara uses her great skill to make the rain around them stop and turn them into ice spears. But right before it pierces and kills Yon Rha, she stops the spears in mid-air.

*KATARA: "I always wondered what kind of person could do such a thing. But now that I see you, I think I understand. There's just nothing inside you, nothing at all. You're pathetic and sad and empty."*

*YON RHA: "Please, spare me."*

*KATARA: "But as much as I hate you.. I just can not do it." ("The Southern Raiders," 21:39)*

Her true awareness is shown when she's back with the whole Team Avatar and talks with Aang, who has been told what had happened.

*AANG: "Zuko told me what you did. Or what you didn't do I guess. I'm proud of you."*

*KATARA: "I wanted to do it. I wanted to take out all my anger at him, but I couldn't. I don't know if it's because I'm too weak to do it, or if it's because I'm strong enough not to."*

*AANG: "You did the right thing. Forgiveness is the first step you have to take to begin healing."*

*KATARA: "But I didn't forgive him. I'll never forgive him..." ("The Southern Raiders," 22:32)*

Awareness is the first sign of authenticity as it reflects one's acceptance of multiple self-aspects. People are bound to be multifaceted, and contradictions within ourselves might happen (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 295), like what Katara is experiencing. Having a balance between internal and external awareness, means knowing one's self and wants while still valuing other's opinions (Eurich, 2018). While Katara had a hard time accepting opposing opinions at first, she eventually accepts the reality that killing Yon Rha isn't a wise decision. Despite not killing him, she still understands herself so well that she knows she will never be able to forgive him.

### ***Unbiased processing***

The second component of authenticity is unbiased processing which entails not denying, manipulating, or inflating externally derived evaluative data (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). This

component demands the objectivity of one's positive and negative self aspects, characteristics, and information. Kernis and Goldman argue that people's natural dispositions are open and non-defensive regarding self-relevant data. Unbiased processing could lead to an accurate sense of self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 297).

Katara is not a perfect character. From time to time, she's shown to make mistakes due to her emotional and clouded judgment. However, she always eventually apologizes and admits that what she did is wrong. On the episode entitled "The Painted Lady", Katara and her friends arrived in a struggling fishing village. Despite the name, the river of the village is heavily polluted because of the fire nation's factory. In effect, a lot of people are sick and starving. The village's economy is also negatively impacted. Wishing to help them, Katara disguises herself as the local myth of river spirit, the Painted Lady. She secretly aids the people late night and makes Appa, a flying bison which has been their main transportation, look sick so the Team Avatar can stay another night at the village despite their tight schedule. But Aang eventually catches Katara in action, which followed by her immediate apology.

*AANG: "So you've been sneaking out at night? Wait, is Appa even sick?"*

*KATARA: "He might be sick of the purple berries I've been feeding him, But other than that he's fine."*

*AANG: "I can not believe you lied to everyone so you could help these people."*

*KATARA: "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have."*

*AANG: "No, I think it's great. You're like a secret hero." ("The Painted Lady," 12:50)*

Then, she proceeds with asking Aang to help her destroy the Fire Nation factory. However, this action has consequences. Not only did she delay the Team Avatar's schedule, but her decision to destroy the factory also backfires to the people of the village. The fire nation's army starts destroying the village's homes since they believe it's the villagers' fault. Her unbiased processing is shown by how Katara handles these consequences.

When confronted by her friends, she admits that she should not have done that despite her strong desire to help. Being fully aware that what happens to the village is her responsibility, she decided to go back to protect the village and fight the fire nation's army with the Team Avatar's support. However, when the villagers discover that Katara is actually a waterbender, they get angry at Katara for claiming their local myth. Katara once again apologizes straight away and reveals that she genuinely only wanted to help and proceed to motivate the villagers

*KATARA: "...I shouldn't have acted like someone I wasn't and I shouldn't have tricked you. But I felt like I had to do something..." ("The Painted Lady," 21:24)*

Not only with how she acts, Katara's unbiased processing is also shown with how she evaluates her way of talking. In the episode entitled "The Chase," the Team Avatar starts travelling with a



new member called Toph. Although she's blind, she is a great earthbender who will be Aang's teacher.

The problem starts when Toph refuses to help the team prepare and set up their camp. Katara tries to explain that everyone must contribute to helping around, to which Toph responds by saying that she carries her own weight and doesn't need help with anything. Hence, why should she help others? This offends Katara, who believes that being in the team means working together. Because of this, they begin to make snarky comments to each other and get on each other's nerves. For example, the dialogue below.

*KATARA: "That's not the point. Ever since you joined us, you've been nothing but selfish and unhelpful."*

*TOPH: "What? Look here, sugar queen. I gave up everything I had so that I could teach Aang earthbending. So don't you talk to me about being selfish."*

*KATARA: "Sugar queen!?" ("The Chase," 4:47)*

Besides that, the whole team hasn't been able to get enough sleep because of a strange vehicle that is constantly chasing them. Due to exhaustion, they aren't able to think clearly. The situation escalates quickly when they begin blaming each other for not being able to rest. Katara starts the argument by blaming Toph for not helping out earlier. Toph then blames Appa, who sheds, for leaving a trail everywhere they go. Aang, who is very defensive when it comes to Appa, shifts the blame again to Toph by saying, "*He never had a problem flying when it was just the three of us*" ("The Chase", 11:39). Aang's last remark leaves Toph speechless that she decided to leave the team.

Katara's unbiased processing is shown a moment later when she agrees to Aang that both of them are wrong for the way they treat Toph.

*AANG: "What did I just do? I can not believe I yelled at my earthbending teacher. Now she's gone."*

*KATARA: "I know. We're all just trying to get used to each other. And I was so mean to her."*

*SOKKA: "Yeah, you two were pretty much jerks."*

*KATARA: "Thanks, Sokka."*

*SOKKA: "No problem."*

*KATARA: "We need to find Toph and apologize." ("The Chase", 12:01)*

Even though Katara knows that telling Toph how everyone should help around is not wrong, she understands that she does not need to be mean about it. She evaluates how she talks and realizes that her way of communicating could've been better, especially to Toph who just starts traveling with them.

### ***Behaviour***

The third component of authenticity, behaviour, is portrayed by how Katara doesn't hesitate to do something, especially when it comes to standing up for both her own beliefs and the sake of others. This choice of action is taken by Katara due to her self-awareness, that reflects in her sensitivity of her surroundings which might not incline with her values.

Essentially, this component displays the behavioural output of the previous two components, awareness and unbiased processing (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 298). Katara has never been the type of 'all talk, no action' character. When she knows something is not right, she will either speak up or take action to prove her point no matter whom she faces. Her bravery is shown in an episode entitled "The Waterbending Master."

In this episode, the Avatar Team finally arrives at the North Pole where a waterbending master resides. Eventhough the search of a waterbending master is mainly for Aang so he can achieve his full potential as the Avatar and defeat the Fire Lord, Katara also has been hoping to be taught by a master for a very long time. She wants to get stronger and better at waterbending for fighting purposes, so she was excited when Aang brought her to Master Pakku. But that hope is quickly trampled when the waterbending master refuses to teach her since it's a rule in Northern Tribe that women waterbenders are only allowed to use their bending to heal instead of to fight.

*MASTER PAKKU: "I'm sorry. I think there's been a misunderstanding. You didn't tell me your friend was a girl. In our tribe, it is forbidden for women to learn waterbending."*

*KATARA: "What do you mean you won't teach me?! I didn't travel across the entire world so you could tell me no!"*

*MASTER PAKKU: "No."*

*KATARA: "But there must be other female waterbenders in your tribe."*

*MASTER PAKKU: "Here, the women learn from Yagoda to use their waterbending to heal. I'm sure she would be happy to take you as her student despite your bad attitude."*

*KATARA: "I don't want to heal. I want to fight!"*

*MASTER PAKKU: "I can see that. But our tribe has customs, rules."*

*KATARA: "Well, your rules stink!" ("The Waterbending Master", 8:40)*

This upsets both Katara and Aang, but they decide to continue Aang's lessons because of how important this is for him. A few days later, Katara comes up with an idea to satisfy everyone's needs. She tells Aang that at night he can teach her whatever moves he learns from Master Pakku. That way, Aang gets someone he can practice with, and Katara gets to learn waterbending. However, this idea becomes a boomerang when Master Pakku catches them in action. Because Master Pakku feels that they have disrespected him, his teachings, and his culture, he no longer wants to take Aang as a student anymore.

Feeling responsible, Katara comes to the chief of the Northern Tribe to persuade Master Pakku so he would teach Aang again. The chief then tells Katara to admit she was wrong. At first, she is going to apologize for Aang's sake. But after Master Pakku says something in a demeaning tone, Katara retracts her intention and challenges him to a duel instead.

*CHIEF: "I suspect he might change his mind if you swallow your pride and apologize to him."*

*KATARA: "Fine."*

*MASTER PAKKU: "I'm waiting, little girl."*

*KATARA: "No! No way am I apologizing to a sour old man like you! I'll be outside if you're man enough to fight me." ("The Waterbending Master", 16:23)*

Instead of apologizing and acting "untruthful" to please others or escape sanctions, Katara takes offense and insists to defend her belief by challenging the person who is against it, which ultimately shows her authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 298).

It is worth to mention that the waterbending master is an elder who probably has decades of experience, while Katara is still a 14-years-old girl. Even Katara herself is aware that her chances of winning is slim, but she still insists on fighting him because, "*Someone needs to slap some sense into that guy*" ("The Waterbending Master", 17:48). She proceeds to provoke Master Pakku first when he doesn't seem to answer her challenge.

Katara is so adamant to fight him because she opposes enforced gender role prejudice and stereotyping. Master Pakku is a sexist because of his mindset and commentaries that men have greater ability in gender-stereotypic domains (Swim et al., 1998), which in this case is fighting. However, Katara truly believes that women waterbenders have the right to choose how to use their bending ability to fight included. She doesn't back down even though there's a great chance she will lose in order to prove her point, which she did by the end of the episode.

Not only she's against biased gender roles, Katara also strongly opposes oppression and discrimination. Katara's values of equality and empowerment are shown in the episode entitled "imprisoned." While searching for food, the Avatar Team found an Earth Kingdom mining town where earthbending is forbidden by the Fire Nation troops which have occupied that area. They met an earthbender called Haru, and because of Katara's encouragement, he uses his earth-bending ability to help an old man for whom he is consequently imprisoned. Hearing about this, Katara devises a plan to get into the prison and free him. Getting herself arrested itself is already a kind of action that takes much courage. After meeting the other imprisoned earthbenders, she gives a motivational speech to ignite a spirit of rebellion and inspire the other prisoners to fight back, but they ignore her.

*KATARA: "...Some of you may think that the Fire Nation has made you powerless. Yes. They have taken away your ability to bend. But they can not take away your courage. And*

*it is your courage they should truly fear... The time to fight back is now!...*  
("Imprisoned," 14:37)

Katara's action of speaking up and motivating others to rebel is both brave and risky. Despite being in a disadvantaged position where she's at risk of putting everyone and even herself in danger, she stays true with her belief of the right to be free. The unsupportive reaction from the other prisoners could have easily turn off her spirit, but she insists and even refuses to go with Aang and Sokka who came to rescue her, until everyone can be free.

*AANG: "Katara, what's wrong?"*

*KATARA: "I'm not leaving. I'm not giving up on this people."*

*SOKKA: "What do you mean you're not leaving?"*

*KATARA: "We can not abandon these people. There has to be a way to help them."*

("Imprisoned," 16:17)

In this episode, Katara can be easily seen as someone who's stubborn. From the prison warden, Haru's Father, to Sokka has tried to tell her that what she did is useless and crazy. Nevertheless, Katara decides to stand firm in what she believes. She could have taken the easy way out, which is only rescuing Haru. But after seeing the harm the Fire Nation has caused to an entire Earth Village, she becomes determined to set the earthbenders free. Her strong beliefs and values translate well to her action and behaviour, which signifies authenticity. She doesn't care how others see her and what kind of consequences awaits as long as she believes that what she did is the right thing.

### ***Relational orientation***

The last component is relational authenticity which entails appreciating and pursuing openness, genuineness, and honesty in personal relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). While Katara has experienced interpersonal conflicts with the people around her, she always tries to maintain genuine and sincere relationships by being honest. Fundamentally, relational authenticity conveys the sincere attitudes toward the other people in one's relationship. Furthermore, it entails recognizing the necessity of allowing close friends and family members to see the "true" you and relating to them in ways that allow them to do so (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 300).

Katara's deepest trauma and hurt is the loss of her mother. Throughout the series, she tells her loss to relate to other people and shows that she trusts them by being vulnerable. This action becomes more impactful during her short conversation with Zuko in the "The Crossroads of Destiny" episode. From the very first episode, Zuko is painted as the antagonist. His only goal was to capture the Avatar so that he could regain his honour and acknowledgment back from his Father, who is the Fire Lord himself. Every time he encounters the team Avatar, a battle always happens.

So it's very understandable for Katara to immediately get angry at Zuko when they accidentally meet in an Earth kingdom's prison.

She yells at Zuko and reveals how much pain Zuko's action has caused, especially because he is the son of the Fire Lord, the nation that had taken away Katara's mother. She is filled with anger, but when Zuko apologizes and calmly replies that he had also lost his mother, Katara calms down.

*ZUKKO: "You don't know what you're talking about."*

*KATARA: "I don't? How dare you?... The Fire Nation took my mother away from me."*

*ZUKKO: "I'm sorry. That's something we have in common." ("The Crossroads of Destiny," 8:30)*

*KATARA: "I'm sorry I yelled at you before...It's just that for so long now, whenever I would imagine the face of the enemy, it was your face." ("The Crossroads of Destiny," 13:11)*

Despite their many battles, Katara can sense Zuko's change of heart, so she genuinely sympathizes with Zuko and apologizes for yelling earlier. She even offers to heal his scar, which he considers a curse, with a very rare water from the North Pole. Proving her sincerity towards the new relationship dynamics between them.

Apart from being vulnerable, Katara also shows her relational authenticity by how honest she is about how she feels. She wants a genuine connection with others, which is why she always lets other people know if they have hurt or disappointed her. We can see this in an episode entitled "The Awakening," where she finally reunites with her Father, Hakoda.

This episode takes place after Aang almost died from a critical hit but was saved by Katara. At this point, they're on a stolen Fire Nation ship with the other water tribe men, including Hakoda. This is the first time Katara meets her Father after he left to fight in the war a long time ago, but she's strangely distant and resentful towards him. Back to Aang, he's been passed out for several weeks, and the world thinks he's dead. Even though Sokka think this secret can be a great weapon, Aang is very upset. He feels that he has failed and needs to redeem himself. So one night, he decided to sneak out from the ship to face the Fire Lord alone.

When this happens, Katara rushes to Hakoda and angrily rants about Aang's stupidity in believing that he has to bear the responsibilities alone without thinking twice about the people he left behind. However, this is a projection of Katara's hurt towards Hakoda, and he catches that.

*KATARA: "Aang. He just took his glider and disappeared. He has this ridiculous notion that he has to save the world alone, that it's all his responsibility."*

*HAKODA: "Maybe that's his way of being brave."*

*KATARA: "It's not brave. It's selfish and stupid. We could be helping him, and I know the world needs him, but doesn't he know how much that we need him too? How could he just leave us behind?"*

*HAKODA: "You're talking about me too, aren't you?" ("The Awakening", 16:32)*

After being asked that, Katara quickly burst into tears and let all her buried resentment out. Being vulnerable isn't easy, but she wants her Father knows how his decision has affected her deeply hurt.

*KATARA: "How could you leave us, Dad? I mean, I know we had Gran Gran, and she loved us, but... but we were just so lost without you."*

*HAKODA: "I'm so sorry, Katara"*

*KATARA: "I understand why you left. I really do, and I know you had to go. So why do I still feel this way? I was so sad, and angry, and hurt." ("The Awakening", 17:00)*

Instead of continuing to resent her Father in silence and sending him mixed signals, she opens up. Even though she does not quite understand why she feels that way, Katara decides to tell her Father anyway since she truly seeks a genuine relationship with him. She is aware that if she wants to reconcile and get the father-daughter connection back, she has to confront him and her own feelings.

## **Conclusion**

Katara is an authentic character because she possesses all four components of authenticity, as suggested by Kernis and Goldman. She portrays the awareness and behaviour components by fighting the sexism and biased gender roles as depicted by her own brother and waterbending master. She hates unfair treatment, not only the one she experienced first-hand, but also the unfair treatment others experience, such as oppression and discrimination resulting from the Fire Nation's colonialism. She will speak up and take action, even if it puts her in a vulnerable position.

On the other hand, Katara is also a multifaceted and multidimensional character who is not perfect. With that being said, her authenticity is shown by her always willing to reflect her behaviour and admit her mistakes, reflecting the unbiased processing component. She's also very honest about how she feels in any relationship, reflecting her relational authenticity. She seeks genuine connection and is easy to forgive.

Even though *ATLA* is a children's tv series, it commits to portraying authentic characters with elaborated plots and issues. Depiction of authenticity in children's tv series is very important since the audience might make the characters into role models. Katara teaches the young girls to be authentic. Even though Katara is a great fighter and very vocal about any issues in *ATLA*, she still has feminine values and is mother-like. This portrayal wants to show that in order to be

authentic, women don't have to abandon one of the gender-associated virtues. This is what it means to be multifaceted; women should embrace every part of themselves like Katara did.

This study analyses Katara's authenticity through her own perspective and experiences. With that being said, this study doesn't delve deep into the external factors that might determine the importance of Katara's authenticity in ATLA's setting, such as imperialism and colonialism. Therefore, the writer would like to suggest future researchers to explore the topic of authenticity by putting ATLA's cultural and political setting as main considerations. Comparison between the characters in ATLA can also help further researchers to reveal the different manifestations of authenticity, and distinguish which characters are inauthentic. Lastly, to support the premise that ATLA has great impact on children as its target audience, interviews and surveys on ATLA's audience can be conducted to collect definitive data.

## References

- Bhattaru, S. (2021). *Exploring the Philosophical and Cultural Significance of Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Brannon, L. (2016). *Gender: psychological perspectives*. Routledge.
- Eagles, P. F. J., & Demare, R. (1999). Factors influencing children's environmental attitudes. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 30(4), 33–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958969909601882>
- Earles, K. A., Alexander, R., Johnson, M., Liverpool, J., & McGhee, M. (2002). Media influences on children and adolescents: Violence and sex. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 94(9), 797–801.
- Eurich, T. (2018). What self-awareness really is (and how to cultivate it). *Harvard Business Review*, 1-9.
- Fenwick, T. (1998). Women composing selves, seeking authenticity: A study of women's development in the workplace. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 17(3), 199–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260137980170306>
- Handler, R. (1986). Authenticity. *Anthropology Today*, 2(1), 2–4. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972000085715>
- Jackson, M. (2013). (Gender)Bending in the Animated Series Avatar: The Last Airbender. *Film Matters*, 4(2), 11–16.
- Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (2006). A Multicomponent Conceptualization of Authenticity: Theory and Research. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 283–357. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)38006-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38006-9)
- Kubasiewicz, M. (2011). Authentic Existence and the Characters of Katherine Mansfield. *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*.
- Lehman, D., Lockwood, C., O'Connor, K., Carroll, G. R., Kovacs, B., Negro, G., Schultz, M., & Suddaby, R. R. (2018). The Dark Side of Authenticity in Organizational Life. *Academy of*

*Management Proceedings*, 2018(1), 12113.

<https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2018.12113symposium>

Lopez-Zafra, E., & Garcia-Retamero, R. (2012). Do gender stereotypes change? The dynamic of gender stereotypes in Spain. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2), 169–183.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.661580>

Marlasari, G. Y. (2021). *The Impact of Katara's Liberal Feminism Values on Her Struggle to Break Gender Stereotype in Selected Episodes of Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Universitas Sanata Dharma Yogyakarta.

Poizner, D. (2019). *Avatar: The Last Airbender as a Moral Educator*. 10(1), 22–29.

Ramadhan, Y. Z. (2019). Gender Stereotypes in Moana (2016): A Film Analysis of The Main Character. *Passage*, 7(1), 140–162.

Sharma, N. (2014). Authentic Female Characters in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande.

*International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 2(10), 13–15.

Swim, J. K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., & Ferguson, M. J. (1998). Everyday Sexism: Evidence for Its Incidence, Nature, and Psychological Impact from Three Daily Diary Studies.

*Prejudice, December*, 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-012679130-3/50037-5>

Visnawath, G. (2014). Power and Resistance Silence and Secrecy in Avatar: The Last Airbender. *SubVersions: A Journal of Emerging Research in Media and Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 26–47.

